

## POETRY “FOR LIFE” IN ESL CONTEXTS

**Dr. Samson Thomas**  
Department of English  
The English and Foreign Languages University,  
Hyderabad, India

### ABSTRACT

This paper argues that interpreting a literary text is as well-defined and rigorous an activity as any other interpretive exercise. It works with the assumption that the two aims of the English literature curriculum in ESL contexts are: a) giving the learners the confidence to deal with literary texts in English, and b) helping them experience the cognitive and affective pleasures of reading literature. It argues that the process of interpreting a poem can be made transparent through graded and well-sequenced questions, while ensuring that reading literature is an exciting activity.

“...Poetry, even that of the loftiest and, seemingly, that of the wildest odes, had a logic of its own, as severe as that of science; and more difficult, because more subtle, more complex, and dependent on more, and more fugitive causes. In the truly great poets, he would say, there is a reason assignable, not only for every word, but for the position of every word...”

S.T. Coleridge, **Biographia Literaria** I: 4

Teachers at the secondary level are operating in a postmodern world – a world where their professional practice is marked by lack of clarity and absence of agreement on the nature and function of literature, and by student reluctance, if not apathy, to engage with literary texts (Bloom 2000). In specific terms, the paradigm-shift in literary studies—from reading literature as an exercise in sensibility to reading as uncovering the ideological process of meaning-making, has left the teacher confused. In fact, learner apathy to poetry has compelled teacher trainers and curriculum planners to call for desperate remedies, including, in Sir Andrew Motion’s words, “...choosing a poem about football for a football loving boy, a rap for a fan of Eminem and so on.” (Garner 2010). Motion’s wry comment implies that while the choice of literary texts may have been made based on the sole criterion of appeal to the students, the choice suggests a literary value to these texts. This trend is likely to be boosted by the postmodern tendency to de-idealize poetry as yet another discursive field.

To those who are concerned with initiating the learner into the process of reading serious literature ‘for life’, in the two senses of the phrase, going back to the basics appears to be the

only sound option. Coleridge, perhaps the greatest philosopher-poet-critic the Western culture has ever produced, is a worthy guide to this community of teachers. The above extract

from *Biographia*, which, incidentally, is part of Coleridge's discussion of his revered teacher's method of teaching poetry, is reassuring to teachers of literature. It is reassuring because in underscoring the severe logic in poetry, it implies that poetry can be taught and 'learnt' systematically, just as science is taught and learnt. But it does not stop with that. Coleridge's stern warning to those readers of poetry who prepare to approach poetry without the deepest sense of respect this unique human activity suggests by implication, the right attitude to the study of poetry. The words of another famous reader of poetry, Stanley Fish, help us define this attitude to reading poetry:

I like being brought up short by an effect that I have experienced but do not yet understand analytically.... I like uncovering the incredibly dense pyrotechnics of a master artificer, not least because in praising the artifice I can claim a share in it. (Fish 1995: 110)

Coleridge's definition of poetry and his description of the process of reading poetry helps us arrive at a working definition of poetry without getting involved in the messy contemporary debates on the uses of poetry. For a teacher who has been persuaded by Coleridge's argument, all that is left to work out are the details: strategies to introduce a poem, and to inculcate the right attitude to poetry in the classroom.

This, however, is easier said than done. "How do we get our learners engage with a poem, enjoy it and eventually get hooked on poetry?" is a question that remains to be answered. In the ESL context, this question gets accentuated by the linguistic nuances that students of poetry have to cope with as well as the conflicting demands the English language curriculum makes on them. While Coleridge does not provide any one-stop solution to our teaching problems, he does lay down the principles underpinning a sound approach to teaching poetry. As teachers we can safely extrapolate the aims of a poetry course from the cited extract: building learners' confidence to deal with poetry, and instilling in learners a profound sense of respect, if not admiration, for poetry.

An approach driven by such goals carefully avoids the follies of viewing literature as a mere source of information about the culture of its origin, and treating literature as an experience that contributes significantly to the personal growth of the learner (Carter and Long 1991).

The challenge that we have to overcome in order to fulfill these aims, however, is getting our learners, whose response to poetry ranges from diffidence to apathy, involved in the process of reading and initiating them into the pleasures of poetry. This can only be achieved when the teacher and the taught participate in the reading process. Making the reading process transparent to the learner is the best way to get learners to participate in, and get addicted to, reading poetry. Getting learners to appreciate a particular poem, and teaching them the art and skill of reading a poem, therefore, are the twin teaching objectives of a poetry lesson in this process-based approach to teaching poetry. Asking them carefully *graded* and *sequenced* questions, both rhetorical and open-ended varieties, is one of the most effective methods of making the reading process transparent to our learners and getting them involved in the process of reading poetry.

Questions can be used to get learners to notice a particular technique a poem uses to communicate an aspect of experience: the arrangement of words on the page, the title, neologisms, word order, pun, wordplay, juxtaposition, rhyme, imagery, tone..... Questions can also help draw learners' attention to the absence of certain words, phrases, images, etc., that a

‘strong’ reader notices while reading a text. Questions can make learners realize that a poem is, to put it in a Wordsworthian vein, a “person talking to other people.” by helping learners appreciate the importance of biographical and historical information in interpreting a poem. In short, questions are an indispensable tool in facilitating an understanding of the meaning of a poem (See Appendix I).

The role of questions does not stop with helping the learners with what Rosenblatt calls the ‘nonaesthetic reading’ of a poem (Rosenblatt 1983). They can be used to encourage learners to compare the central experience in a poem with their own impressions and experiences. A carefully planned sequence of questions can lead learners from ‘meaning’ to ‘significance’, from appreciating the experience in a poem to appropriating it (“poetry for life”). They can help us take our learners from the plane of interpretation to that of evaluation.

The effort to lay bare the process of interpretation, the crucial stages and key decisions, can be extended to the summative evaluation stage of instruction through the use of multiple choice questions (See Appendix II).

Facilitating the reading of poetry through questions is perhaps a poor substitute (Duke 1984) for facilitating through discussions, group and pair work, and other creative activities. But in ESL contexts where large, mixed-ability classes, syllabus coverage, and system of examination are major issues, this technique is a boon to an intelligent and inspired teacher to make the poetry classroom more participatory and purposeful. It will enable the teacher to ‘tell’ the learners what literary interpretation is all about by ‘asking’ them. The other major advantage pertains to classroom logistics. Questions are the best way to ensure a process-based approach to teaching poetry that is learner-centred. The usefulness of this technique will become evident when one compares it with the techniques advocated by some of the leading ELT trainers, techniques that range from ‘suggesting’ the meaning of a poem to the learner through a parallel poem to getting the learner to compose a poem, with varieties of stylistics-inspired techniques falling somewhere in the middle of this spectrum of suggestions. (Maley 1985, Widdowson 1992, Lazar 1993). As Sir Andrew Motion points out “... unless we combine our appreciation of technicalities with our enjoyment of what is fundamental to the poem, we will have missed what makes it a poem in the first place.”(Garner 2010). It is this holistic approach to teaching poetry that is missing in the piecemeal suggestions in the handbooks on teaching poetry.

Of course, the holistic approach to teaching poetry is predicated upon the teacher having clear and distinct ideas about the nature and function of poetry. In the example in Annexure I, it is assumed that the central experience of the poem is the author’s own experience, real/imagined □ the virgule representing the complex relation between the real and the imaginary, mediated by his artistic consciousness that synthesizes the particular and the universal. In more concrete terms, every poem is a particular organization of experience that gives the reader a glimpse of the poet’s views on certain aspects life. This reflection on experience is valuable, even if it has no direct bearing on the reader’s own life. It is further assumed that form and content, theme and technique are so closely related that neither can be discussed in isolation from the other.

The ‘experience’ of reading a poem, rendered pleurably by problem-solving, participation, self-expression, and reflection, (Duke 1984) should help us teachers persuade our learners to read poetry ‘for life’!

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### Appendix I

The discussion of Yeat's poem with a group ESL learners of class X should is a good example of the kind of questions that could be used in class and the order in which they could be presented to the class to maximize discovery of the central experience of a poem through learner participation.

#### **When You Are Old**

When you are old and gray and full of sleep,  
And nodding by the fire, take down this book,  
And slowly read, and dream of the soft look  
Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep;  
How many loved your moments of glad grace,  
And loved your beauty with love false or true,  
But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,  
And loved the sorrows of your changing face;  
And bending down beside the glowing bars,  
Murmur, a little sadly, how Love fled  
And paced upon the mountains overhead  
And hid his face among a crowd of stars.

(From *The Rose*, a collection of Poems by W.B. Yeats published in 1893)

As a young man, William Butler Yeats was deeply affected by the idea of romantic love, or, as he called it, "the old high way of love." When Yeats was twenty-three years old, he met and fell in love with the beautiful Irish nationalist, Maud Gonne. Although she repeatedly refused to marry Yeats, Maud would become the object of his passion and his poetry. The emotional power in many of Yeats' early poems is shaped by the one-sidedness of his affair with Maud, but the poems themselves remain hopeful and bitter-sweet, pure in their language and attitudes about love.

Questions:

*a. Does the title of the poem help you predict what the poem is about?*

- Does it help you to understand the relation between the poet/speaker and the person addressed in the poem?
- Does it alert you to the fact that the person addressed is young, happy and full of life and not yet "old and gray and full of sleep"?

*b. Does the brief note at the end of the poem confirm your hunch that the person addressed is a woman, perhaps a woman the speaker/poet loves?*

- Does it help you change your assumption / expectation that the poem is a piece of advice, given by an elderly person to a young man or woman? If 'yes', how does it affect your response to the poem?

*c. Does the division of the poem into three stanzas help you understand the poem better?*

- Do you notice any difference in focus between the first and last stanzas, and the second stanza? What is the difference?
- Do you think that the poet's attempt to show his beloved's present condition as the past, and her future as her present is an interesting idea? Why? / Why not?
- Do you think that this strategy make it easy for the poet/speaker to underline the fact that her youth, beauty, and love are temporary and ephemeral?
- Would you say that this strategy help him present the one man (himself) who loves the beloved's "pilgrim soul" her true love?

**Let us re-read the poem.**

*D. What are the qualities in the poem that you notice while re-reading the poem?*

- Would you say that poem contrasts youth and old age very economically and precisely?
- Would you further say that the word `and` is repeated three times in the first line to both **show** and **tell** about old age, and not for meter alone?
- Would you agree with the view that the two rhyming words `book` and `look` help the speaker/poet effectively communicate the idea that the narcissistic youth has no time for books?
- How do you respond to the metaphor `pilgrim` to describe the soul? Would you say that it is an accurate description of the life of a good person that progresses from the innocence of childhood to the nobility and ripeness of old age, through the experience of youth?
- In your view, does this metaphor (pilgrim) also suggest the speaker's / poet's unending love for the person he is addressing, love that is without a trace of anger?
- Would you say that the speaker's/poet's ability to "love" the sorrows of the beloved's "changing face" makes him a pilgrim?
- What, in your view, is the significance of `Love` (line 10) with a capital "L"?  
Does it bring out the sorrow of a person left to live by herself in her old age, a state when love appears abstract and remote?  
Does it support the description of love as something in the far-away hills, its identity lost among the stars?  
What is the connection between this description of love and the one in the second stanza where love is a concrete and easy to experience emotion for the woman ("How many loved your moments of glad grace, And loved your beauty with love false or true")?

*E. Would you share the view that this poem is one of the greatest love poems in English in the modern era? Why? Why not?*

**Appendix II**

We can get learners to discover the central idea/experience of even a difficult poem like *The Red Wheelbarrow* by William Carlos Williams through multiple choice questions. A question like the one below will help the learner appreciate this experience even in the high-risk atmosphere of a test:

Read the poem below.

**The Red Wheelbarrow**  
 William Carlos Williams

so	much	depends
upon		
a	red	wheel
barrow		
glazed	with	rain
water		
beside	the	white
chickens		

**Study the following questions.**

1. Why does the poet/writer say “so much depends on a red wheel barrow”?
  - a. This is the only wheelbarrow left and without it a lot of important work will not be completed.
  - b. It is a special wheel barrow that can speed up work in the farm to an unimaginable extent.
  - c. It is a magical wheel barrow that will undertake and complete a variety of tasks that require a lot of human effort.
  - d. It is an ordinary wheel barrow, one among the many, that looks special to this speaker/poet because he has learnt to look at the everyday objects, and the world as a whole, very differently.
  
2. How do you know this is not a special wheel barrow?
  - a. It is described as a red wheel barrow, one among the many of its kind, and it is painted red like most farm implements.
  - b. There is nothing special about the location of the wheel barrow, which seems to be a farm.
  - c. The fact that the wheel barrow is left in the rain suggests that it is not considered as an object of great value by the owner.
  - d. All of the above
  
3. What impression does the description “beside the white chickens” help create?
  - a. The white chicken help create the idea that the wheelbarrow is an implement that one often finds in a farm / associates with a farm, like the cows, sheep and chickens.
  - b. The contrast between the white chicken and the red wheelbarrow helps us ‘see’ the wheelbarrow with our mind’s eye.
  - c. The vivid image of the wheelbarrow helps the reader spend a little time thinking about it and other ‘ordinary’ things, living and non-living, that he/she seldom notices.
  - d. All of the above
  
4. What are the interesting features of the poem?
  - a. It is actually a sentence that does not appear to be sentence at the first glance.
  - b. It does not seem to have a rhythmic pattern one associates with a poem.
  - c. The only pattern is the disyllabic words at the end of each ‘stanza’.
  - d. All of the above
  
5. How does the physical arrangement of the words on the page influence our reading of the poem?
  - a. The unconventional arrangement of the words in the sentence suggests the unconventional way the poet/speaker looks at ‘ordinary’ objects.

- b. The absence of capital letters and other punctuation marks, the unusual arrangement of words, the emphases on words like ‘upon’ and ‘beside’, make the poem resemble the poet/speaker’s thought.
- c. It captures the confusion of the speaker, who is learning to see the things around him as they are, and not as things that exist for him as a human being and as an individual.
- d. All of the above.

**Now re-read the poem to find the answers to these questions.**