Developing Critical Thinking through Practical Criticism and Stylistics in the Literature Class

Iqbal Judge

Introduction

Teaching English through literature at the undergraduate level in India is assumed to have two major goals: 1) to develop students' proficiency in the language and 2) to help them appreciate the "beauty of literature". In recent time, the goal of developing higher order thinking skills (HOTS) or critical thinking (CT) has also been added. However, these lofty aims remain nebulous concepts, unrealized in practice. The usual "explain and extol" method of line-by-line explanations of the prescribed poems and stories, interspersed with a "discussion" of "examination-type" questions and rhapsodies over the "beauty" of some poetic lines does not adequately address any of the three avowed goals. Targeted and sustained practice in the areas of grammar and vocabulary is still required to develop language proficiency. Exclamations about evocative writing in fact reinforce the notion of subjectivity, rather than a reasoned, objective analysis that would reveal the writer's craft. Further, the questions commonly asked by teachers mainly address the skills of comprehension, recall and understanding of the students. Their higher order thinking skills-application, analysis, evaluation-are hardly touched upon.

In this paper, I will attempt to suggest ways in which the principles of practical criticism and stylistics can be usefully applied in the teaching of literary texts, to achieve a clearer understanding of how writers use language dexterously to achieve certain stylistic effects or convey an idea. A close reading of the text, and categorization and analysis of the various linguistic features present in it, I believe the students would be able to develop their critical thinking (CT) skills. I have also presented a brief definition of CT, Bloom's Taxonomy of CT skills and the rationale for integrating CT skills in the classroom, followed by key features of practical criticism and stylistic analysis, with illustrations from texts generally prescribed at the undergraduate level.

What is Critical Thinking?

The intellectual roots of Critical Thinking go back to the times of Socrates and Plato, who established the importance of seeking evidence, closely examining reasoning and assumptions, analysing basic concepts and tracing the implications of what is said and done. Thinking was therefore driven by questions. Cornbleth (1990), speaks of CT as "raising and pursuing questions about the ideas one encounters". To quote Michael Scriven and Richard Paul (1987), "Critical thinking is the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skilfully conceptualizing, applying, analysing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action." This corresponds to Bloom's (1956) Taxonomy of educational objectives that presents CT skills in a hierarchical order, distinguishing the higher order thinking skills-evaluation, synthesis, and analysis-from the

lower order thinking skills of application, comprehension and knowledge.

Why are CT Skills Important?

Sumner emphasizes the need for CT in life and education, stating that "it is our only guarantee against delusion, deception, superstition and misapprehension of ourselves and our earthly circumstances" (1906, pp. 632-633). Siegel (1988), avers that the overall aim of education is to prepare students for adulthood, which entails developing in themself-sufficiency, self-direction and the ability to think for themselves. He adds that one cannot make sound judgements about important political, social and economic issues without the cognitive skills to analyse such issues critically. Further, subjects such as Mathematics, Science, Literature, History, etc., require students to use critical thinking skills.

El Fatihi (2017), lists philosophical, cognitive and meta-cognitive, pedagogical and socio-economic reasons for integrating CT skills with language/literature teaching. At a philosophical level, referring to Sapir-Whorf's hypothesis pertaining to linguistic determinism and linguistic relativity, and to Vygotsky's idea of "verbal thought", he posits that since language and thinking are interrelated, thinking skills can be developed through language and within language instruction. This cognitive perspective takes into account the transfer of information and knowledge from short-term memory to long-term retention through the CT processes of comprehension and analysis (Pollock, Chandler & Sweller, 2002; Krathwohl, 2002). Studies have shown that CT not only helps to understand how schemata are constructed, it also activates the schemata (Collins et al., 1980) and aids reading comprehension. Pedagogically, CT skills are important because current language teaching methods revolve around keeping the

learner actively engaged in information-processing, problem solving, decision-making and evaluation. Finally, as CT skills enable individuals to make informed, reasoned decisions and solve problems in their social and interpersonal domains, they are important from a socio-economic perspective in helping people to adapt successfully to the contemporary knowledge economy (Halpern, 2003; Ku,2009).

Practical Criticism and Stylistics in the Teaching of Literature

It is not difficult to perceive the value of CT in the study and the teaching of literature, as analysing, inferring, evaluating, etc., are cognitive activities integral to literary criticism.In Practical Criticism (Richards, 1929; Empson, 1930; Cox & Dyson, 1965), the focus of attention is on specific lexical/grammatical choices made in a particular text and the effect of those choices on the meaning of that text. For instance, a poem may be viewed as a self-contained verbal organization, coloured by feeling, tone and intention, as revealed through its diction and imagery. The rigour that this type of close reading requires, serves as a corrective to impressionistic criticism or the random undisciplined reading of texts. In fact Practical Criticism is often used to test students' responsiveness to texts, as well as their knowledge of verse forms and "technical language" while describing how poems create an impression.

Stylistics also brings in a more detailed, systematic investigation of literary texts, in contrast to the "perceived lack of method, reliance on unchallengeable authority and personal cultism" (Fabb, 2016) of literary theory. As Halliday (1971) stressed, stylistics is an "inquiry" into the nature of language itself, and the function of language in literature. It is an investigation into whether language is fulfilling a specific kind of function, particular in some way, or has been drawn from everyday life but

in a specialized context and discourse of literariness. Though Formalists often looked at literary style as a deviation from the norm, Halliday viewed it as the establishment of a textual norm, the way things are done in the world of the text.

A writer's stylistic choices are perceived as performing three broad communicative functions: communicating meaning beyond those linguistically determined; conveying attitudes, biases and ideological positions; and expressing a range of emotions (Verdonk, 2002, p. 68). Widdowson (1975), has shown how stylistics can be used in ELT, with specific reference to the use of literature to illustrate the nuances of language. In fact, the reflective evaluation of the effects of the stylistic choices helps to improve the students' ability to introspect, which is a goal of CT.

Some of the linguistic features that stylistics investigates are: genre, narrative structure, point of view and focalization, sound patterning, syntactic and lexical parallelism and repetition, metre and rhythm, mimetic and representational effects, meta-representation, irony, metaphor and other ways of indirect meaning, utilization and representation of variation in dialect, accent and historically specific usages, group-specific ways of speaking and examination of inferential processes. However, it is not as though every text has to be scanned for each and every feature listed above. A text is a complex web of stylistic choices, some of which are foregrounded, and it is these areas of markedness and salience that could be primarily investigated, especially when initiating students into the process of such analysis.

An Example of Stylistics in the Teaching of Literature

Frank (1966), presented a reflective report on the use of simple tools of stylistic analysis to raise her students' critical awareness beyond the subjective "I like it", or more "literary" pronouncements of a writer's "smooth flowing prose", to informed analyses that gave the students deeper insights into the writers' works. Choosing short excerpts from the writings of two authors, she made her students catalogue all the grammatical structures in the passages, and note the sentence patterns, position of sentence elements, modifiers, lexical details such as use of dialect, slang, colloquial or formal vocabulary, etc. Comparisons and contrasts were then drawn on the two passages, yielding much information that would otherwise have gone unnoticed. Frank states: "Then the student is on safe grounds in pronouncing value judgements and in speaking of the success or failure of the author in establishing a mood or tone, since he has given the text a close reading." (1966, p. 1052)

Frank demonstrated how through an analysis of two sentences taken from the beginning of Washinton Irving's "Legend of Sleepy Hollow" and Hemingway's "A Way you'll Never Be", she was able to explain why the prose of Irving seemed more polished and leisurely than Hemingway's. Though both sentences belonged to the same "adverbial prepositional phrase of "place+there+verb+noun subject" type, Irving's sentence construction had prepositional phrases in a nesting relation of modification, followed by relative clauses-a total of eleven modifying constructions before the subject. Hemingway's sentence construction on the other hand began with three co-ordinate phrases, with minimal modification, giving the impression of terseness. The detailed comparative analysis of the lexical, dialogic and syntactic features revealed the "author's artistic purpose and outlook." Thus, the students were drawn into a close examination of the story to prove their initial responses and hypotheses. This exercise grew from a grammatical analysis to an exploration of the writer's creative principles and philosophy, plus a deeper appreciation of literature and the craftsmanship involved in writing.

Integrating CT with Stylistics in the Teaching of Literature

A close look at Bloom's Taxonomy of CT skills and the prototypical question stems that teachers

could use to elicit responses that require the use of higher cognitive abilities, would show us how to integrate the tools of practical criticism and stylistics in the teaching of literary texts. To understand, let us look at "Anthem for Doomed Youth" a poem by Wilfred Owen, often prescribed in undergraduate courses on Literature. Question stems such as: Who? What? When? What happened before…/ after …? are of the simple "recall" type, which require a basic knowledge of the text. Here, the first step in stylistic analysis could be brought in, which is to list the nouns/verbs/adjectives/ instances of parallelism in the poem. The next step would be to see which words or their synonyms have been repeated? The subsequent step up in cognition would be that of understanding where question stems such as "Summarize/ State the central idea" are used. The list of nouns/ verbs/ adjectives/ instances of parallelism in the poem made on level 1 could now be used to note how the key words point to the theme of the text. For example, the majority of the nouns in Owen's poem maybe categorized into two different lexical fields: 1) a Christian funeral- passing bells, choir, pall, candles, prayers, and 2) a battlefield- rifles, guns, shells. Point out the alliteration and onomatopoeia, and the ironic play on the words, "pall" and "pallor", or the repetition of "choirs" and negatives which are foregrounded elements in the poem. Further, an examination of the grammatical structures reveals the preponderance of noun phrases as compared to verb phrases, with many noun phrases compressing a verbal element in the modifier ("wailing shells", "drawing-down of blinds", "stuttering rifles"), and most constructions being in the passive voice. This would lead to a level of analysis where these foregrounded elements, their semantic incompatibilities and unusual collocations can be studied in detail. Some question stems for this level of Bloom's Taxonomy are: Analyse, Distinguish, Examine, Compare Contrast, Investigate, Categorize, Identify Explain, Take apart, Differentiate, Subdivide, Deduce. Questions such as: "In what way can shires (inanimate) be sad"?; "What could be the reason for choirs to be shrill and demented"?; "Why are the orisons hasty?"; "What is implied by 'die as cattle'?" etc.; could be posed. These would help the students to delve deeper into their inquiry of the language of the poem and Owen's ideological positioning through an analysis of the referential and inferential meanings of the lexical items. According to Fabb (2016), the key problem in Stylistics is to work out the causal relation between style and effect, where "effect" includes various cognitive effects such as meanings, emotions, beliefs, etc. Students could also investigate the effect of rhetorical questions and passive and negative phrase constructions. Further, examination of the grammatical structures and contrasting adjectives (hasty/ slow, stuttering/ wailing, speed/ patient) could reveal numerous ironic contrasts-quick perfunctory funeral rituals in times of war, cessation of activity and movement after death and the wearied, depressed life of the grieving.

The question stems at the top levels of CT-Synthesis and evaluation-require a person to: Judge, Decide, Justify, Debate, Argue, Assess, Critique, Evaluate; and to Compose, Predict, Imagine, Hypothesize, etc. Equipped with the detailed analysis done earlier, the student would now have "evidence" to evaluate the effectiveness of Owen's skills in expressing the theme of the poem, his implied intention and anti-war stance, and "justify" or "comment upon the significance" of the poem's title. The opening phrases and the concluding lines of the poem could be triggers for imagining or hypothesizing about the gruesome deaths of the soldiers and the despairing existence of the grief- stricken living.

Conclusion

Through this paper, I aimed to explain the importance of CT and stylistic analysis in accounting objectively for the meaning of a text, and its usefulness in the teaching of literature. As Misra points out, "a rigorous and systematic study of the language of a text enables the reader to appreciate its meaning in its totality." (2009, 47).When a literary text is microscopically

analysed in this manner, it not only develops the higher order cognitive abilities of students, but also enhances their appreciation of the aesthetic qualities of the text, illustrating in concrete terms the "beauty of literature" and the basis for the readers' enjoyment of it.

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Iqbal Judge is Professor and Head, PG Department of English, PG Government College for Girls, Chandigarh. She has been teaching for 35 years and is keenly interested in ELT methodology and materials production, gender studies and the arts.

iqbaljudge_1@yahoo.co.in