

Literature: A Broader Definition

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Introduction

In view of the increasing interest in the use of literature in the ESL classroom, this article attempts to provide a broader definition of literature in order to make it more accessible to students. It would be difficult to suddenly expose students to literary studies without any form of prior preparation. In most instances, literature has been put on a pedestal and is appreciated and understood only by the few who have undergone special training and instruction to decode the hidden messages inherent in literary works. With respect to this, Durant and Fabb (1990: 2) indicate that " . . . when faced with the spectrum of academic subjects dealing with questions of history, society and communication, they are likely to see studying literature as a remote and apparently confused activity."

One of the aims of the Class Reader Programme (CRP) in the Malaysian English language syllabus at the secondary level is to prepare students for literary studies at the upper level. The use of class readers in this programme could provide an initial platform that would enable students to proceed to higher levels of literary appreciation. However, class readers alone are insufficient. As such, we need other forms of literature that are accessible to students in the Malaysian classrooms. Hence, this paper would like to suggest a more liberal outlook of what literature constitutes-one that would focus on: (1) our ESL classroom situation; (2) the students' cultural contexts; and (3) the act of reading rather than the text.

Literature: Traditional Definitions

Traditionally, literature is defined by genre (novels, plays, short stories, poetry, essays), by modes of discourse (narrative, expository, argumentative, descriptive), by time periods (Elizabethan, Restoration, Victorian, Twentieth Century), by nationality (British, Canadian, American), or by quality (traditional, classics). It is often regarded as an art and always has form. Hall (1961: 121) indicates that "like any form of art, literature involves communication of some type of meaning, through a particular medium."

It is widely acknowledged that literature has an essential relationship with life and derives some of its basic characteristics from language. The relationship between language and literature is best described by Wellek and Warren (1963: 22) by indicating that "language is the material of literature

as stone or bronze is of sculpture, paints of pictures, or sounds of music . . . language . . . is itself a creation of man and is thus charged with the cultural heritage of a linguistic group."

One way of defining literature is to limit it to "great books" which are notable for literary form or expression. The criterion here is either aesthetic worth alone or aesthetic worth in combination with general intellectual distinction. Wellek and Warren (Ibid.: 21) mention that "within lyric poetry, drama and fiction, the greatest works are selected on aesthetic grounds; other books are picked for their reputation or intellectual eminence together with aesthetic value of a rather narrow kind: style, composition, general force of presentation are the usual characteristics singled out." This expression of value judgement is a common way of distinguishing literature and how the canonical works of literature came to be realised.

In addition, virtually all literary topics may be subsumed under one of the following categories: (1) History: information about the times in which the work of literature is set; (2) Author: information about literary movements and about the life and times of the author; (3) Structure: matters of literary technique, form and types; (4) Ideas: ideas or information expressed in or provoked by the literature; and (5) Feelings: affective responses, positive or negative, evoked by the literature (Ellis 1987: 109).

However, these traditional definitions are inadequate in the application to the Malaysian academic environment. A broader definition which considers students' cultural background and the Malaysian classroom is necessary. At the same time, literature should be viewed as an approach to reading which includes the writer, the text and the reader.

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It is rather interesting to note that in the quest for defining literary language, Brumfit and Carter (1986: 6) assert that "there is no such thing as literary language. . . . We find it impossible to isolate any single or special property of language which is exclusive to a literary work." Thus, a clear distinction of what literary language constitutes seems impossible. Evidently, the difference between literary and non-literary language must then lie in the ways language is used. Perhaps, it is more enlightening to discover the literariness of language rather than a language of literature.

In view of the above perspective, literature should not be defined solely as a canon of texts which has been recognized throughout literary history. A broader perspective would view literature as an approach to reading which includes the writer, the text and the reader. The emphasis here is more on the transaction between the text and the reader in which personal experience with the work is of primary importance.

Hence, in its broadest sense, literature is not only restricted to print material or text. Purves (1972: 25) in his response-centred curriculum includes "a vast assortment of verbal (usually) utterances, each of which comes from some writer, who has a voice; and each of which in itself has some order" as literature. Among other things, this definition would include film and television drama. More importantly, the culture of the students cannot be ignored whenever literary considerations are implied. The literary forms of a culture may include oral narratives, folk songs, playground rhymes, pop songs, comics and popular novels.

Evidently, there is a growing need for a continual process of revision of curriculum content especially when the teaching of literature is concerned in order to give recognition to the students'

cultural contexts. In view of this need, a general statement on this issue was presented to the Literature Commission of the Third International Conference on the Teaching of English in Sydney, Australia in 1980 which states that "during the 1980's the study of literature in English courses needs to free itself from some of the traditionally restrictive implications of both terms, English and Literature" (Mallick et. al.. 1982: 30).

If the study of literature is seen as an active process of creation of meaning, the act of reading rather than the text should be the focus of attention. In this case, if literature can be considered as something more than the texts themselves, a more flexible approach to selection, organization and pedagogy is then permitted. This would allow the purposes of teachers and students to be considered. Consequently, students would be more encouraged to be active participants in the process of reading to discover meaning rather than being passive and to recognize tacitly the works of literary immortals.

In order to provide the reader with alternate ways of seeing the world and to place literature within a wider cultural context it is therefore necessary to confront mass mediated culture in the classroom. This is to suggest that texts such as newspapers, broadcasts of current affairs, political cartoons, talk-back radio discourse, magazine articles and popular fiction should be scrutinized alongside the treatment of literary works (Higgins 1982: 130-31).

Conclusion

A rigid definition of literature may restrict the manner in which literature is selected, organised, presented and taught in schools. This represents one of the barriers to the study of literature and can deny students the desire to learn or even understand literature. Moreover, the study of literature has always been viewed as something which is complex and unattainable. It is hoped that the broader definition of literature discussed in this paper would assist in the task of trying to make literature more accessible to students.

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