

Teaching Poetry at College Level



- A. Rayappan*

Abstract

All learned scholars will agree that the major part of all learning is autonomous learning. What promotes the learning process is interaction with the poem in their possession and interaction between them. The teacher mediates, makes his/her contribution, keeps the discussion on course. It is the perception of the individual reader, his/her thinking and feeling which ought to be taken into account. Consensus is not important.

Keywords: Scholars, Interaction, Teacher mediates, Consensus

Introduction

Is Poetry to be read or taught? This is a difficult question to be answered. When we talk about teaching poetry what we mean is sharing with our students the experience of reading poetry. The assumption is that our students lack experience. This very laxity invites us to make sure that they are exposed to poetry.

The exposure must be a conducive situation which is ripe to responding to poetry. Primarily the students must be provided with the opportunity to interact with a poem. The teacher's role is the wait just outside the sidelines and Provides help when it is needed. All learned scholars will agree the major part of all learning is autonomous learning.

What promotes the learning process is interaction – interaction with the poem in their possession and interaction between them. The teacher mediates, makes his/her contribution, keeps the discussion on course. It is the perception of the individual reader, his/her thinking and feeling which ought to be taken into account. Consensus is not important.

Lecture Mode

Lecture method is the established way of teaching at the college level. Whether it is chemistry or poetry, the

most widely accepted method of disseminating concepts and information at the tertiary level of studies seems to be lecturing to students – usually in a large classroom whether it is here in our country or abroad, that is how students are taught; the lecturer lectures and students take notes. At least, a large number of students do.

There are tutorials too. The tutorials remedy the imbalance of the one-sided situation in which interaction usually happens briefly at the end of the lecture, but during the lecture one person speaks and the other listen. The brief discussions at the end of the lecture can be frustrating. Unfortunately, the tutorials too are not beneficial. Most of our overcrowded colleges cannot afford to have many tutorials in which the teacher-student ratio has to be conducive to discussion and interaction. The prevailing situation in our colleges is not too idealistic.

The lectures in colleges where tutorials regularly take place can provide their students with the kind of information, assessment, literary criticism etc., which can be most conveniently conveyed through lecture mode. In the tutorials they can discuss the reactions of the students and through their interaction, they can achieve an understanding and appreciation of the poem which they are reading at that time. The point made by the lecturer should also come up for discussion at this particular point of time.

What happens in the absence of tutorials? Are the students denied to have the opportunity to ask and answer questions? Are they not going to find out what other students think of the poem and exchange notes? Has teaching got to be one-sided without the students ever having the opportunity of participation?

I would like to suggest that such a situation ought to be unacceptable for both the teacher and his students. For transmitting information, certain kinds of knowledge and ideas, specially for large audiences, the lecture-mode is both efficient and economical. I am not proposing that we should dispense with it. What I must insist on is that our students should have the opportunity of offering their teachers and the students their ideas and comments and criticism, not only on the poem but also on what the teacher and other students have said about the poem. It is the experience, I trust, of most teachers that in the beginning students do not have a lot to say. If that is the situation we encounter, we must not give up. We must activate their thinking and the linguistic process which will enable them to put their ideas into words.

Suggestions for Handling Large Classrooms

The teacher may introduce the poem, its poet and his works in his lecture. He can also comment on the age and the poet's contemporaries and provide any individual information which might be relevant for focusing the student's attention on the poem. But first of all, the students should listen to and read the poem.

It is usual practice for students to take lecture notes. The students should be given some guidance about note-taking. For example, they could evolve a kind of shorthand of their own to be able to take notes, a coded language which they could later decode.

The college may provide for tutorials where discussion can take place which ensures student participation. The lecturer may also encourage group work during the time allocated for his lecture. The group work could be held in the middle or at the end of the lecture. The students can also start with a discussion.

Group work in a packed classroom is not going to be easy. Students who sit together are usually those who get on well together. If a face to face situation can be organized by turning the furniture around, that will be ideal. But if that is difficult resulting in reducing the teaching time, let the students sitting together form groups. It is assumed that students by themselves can have serious discussion.

Let us consider the poem *Journey of the Magi*. Let us assume now that the teacher is addressing the students. The poem which I am going to present to you is *Journey of the magi* by T.S.Eliot. I would like you now to look at the poem and read it silently. After you have read the poem, I would like each group to discuss it and write down six fairly short

sentences about what you think the poem is about. Each group should produce one answer.

It is possible that not everyone knows who the magi were. Your not knowing this might interfere with the understanding of the poem. So let me brief you what I know about them. The magi were three wise men who paid a visit to infant Christ in the stable. One of them, now an old man, is narrating the experience of the journey. The magi were members of a priestly class or caste that came from Media. Media was a wonderful country about six to seven hundred years before the birth of Christ in what is now northern Iran.

The magi were well-known for their wisdom, supernatural powers and their ability to interpret omens and dreams. They are also great astrologers. It was also believed that the magi kept watch upon a mount of the Lord from generation to generation for a star which would signal the birth of a great savior of humanity. At last the star did appear. The members of the priestly community, the magi, travelled from the media to Bethlehem carrying gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. They were guided by the great star which appeared at the birth of the Christ.

The Religious Poet

T.S.Eliot (1888-1965) was born in St. Louis, Missouri. He was educated at Harvard, the Sorbonne and Merton College, Oxford. He was 27 years when his poem "The Love Song" of J. Alfred Prentiss first appeared and he was immediately taken notice of as a poet. In 1922 appeared his poem *The Waste Land* in print. This was soon considered a major contribution and disorientation of a very large number of people of his generation.

In 1927, Eliot became a British subject and a member of the Anglican Church. His religious belief plays an important part in his life and his poetry. His poems trace the evolution of his faith.

Content

In the opening lines of *Journey of the Magi*—the first few lines—Eliot uses the quotation marks. Why does he do that? He takes almost word for word these lines from a sermon preached before James I by Lancelot Andrews on Christmas Day, 1622.

A cold coming they had of it at this time of the year, just the worst time of the year to take a journey and especially a long journey in. The ways deep, the weather sharp, the days short, the sun furthest off, in solistitic brumali, "the very dead of winter". Even lines 6-20 are inspired by Andrews's account of the hardships of the journey in the same sermon. Therefore, the whole of the first part of the poem can be said to be derived from or inspired by Lancelot Andrews's Sermon on Christmas Day, 1622.

Imagery

In the second part of the poem, we find a whole host of highly evocative images, which had for him personal yet inexplicable meaning, images embedded in the depths of consciousness. He may have seen ruffians through an open window playing cards at night at a small French railway junction where there was a water mill. And this experience must have surfaced during the writing of this poem because it accounts, for two images, 'a water mill beating the darkness' and 'six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of Silver'.

'The three trees on the low sky' comes straight out of the Bible. The three crosses on calvary, the place just outside ancient Jerusalem, where Christ was crucified. Christ was in the middle and on either side of him were two 'malefactors'.

'And when they were come to the place, which is called calvary, they crucified him, and the malefactors, one on the right hand and the other on the left'.

Another picture in the poem which also comes out of the Bible is that of the white house. "And an old white house galloped away in the meadow". In revelation, Christ the conqueror rides on a white horse:

"And I saw, and behold a white horse; and he that sat on him had a bow; and a crown given unto him; and he went forth conquering and to conquer

Revelation : Chapter 6: verse 2

The image thrown up from the pit of his mind – six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver correlates with the Biblical accounts of the betrayal of Christ for 30 pieces of Silver and the soldiers dicing for the clothes of Christ at the crucifixion.

'The one of the twelve, called Judas Iscariot, went unto the chief priests

'And into them 'what will ye give me, and I will deliver him unto you?' And they Covenanted with him for thirty pieces of silver'.

Mathew 26:verses 14,15

'And they Crucified him, and parted his garments, casting lots; that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet. 'They parted my garments among them, and upon my vesture did they cast lots'.

Mathew 27: verse 35

Images of Life and death intermingle in these lines – the second part of the poem – just as in the first part of the poem the journey, a process of spiritual seeking, is riddled with existential problems and showed down as a result of fantasies of summer palaces and silken girls.

The intermingling of contrastive images is one of the characteristics of Eliot. He does it again and again. In lines 21 to 31 the down, the temperate valley, the smell of vegetation and the running stream are all associated with birth and life.

But the three trees on the low sky is not. It brings to our mind death, the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. And there are the kinds of death; gambling (six dicing for pieces of silver) and drunkenness (fact kicking the empty wine skins) and betrayal.

But what we call contrastive images became complementary images in Eliot's poetry. Death is implicit in birth. And in the life of Christ the nativity (the down, the temperate valley, the smell of vegetation, the running stream), the crucifixion (three trees on the low sky) and the resurrection (an old white galloped away to the meadow) seem to be images implicit in one another. There's no conflict in Eliot between birth and death.

'I tell you again it wont apply

Death or life or life or death

Death is life and life is death....'

Fragment of an agon

There was no information at the tavern so the magic continued and they arrived at the place of nativity in the evening. About their arrival there are two low key statements.

.....and so we continued

And arrived at evening, not a moment too soon

Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory.

Why is there no excitement? No jubilation? After all, it was the end of a long and hard journey and the arrival of the magi at the nativity ought to have been a joyful climax, a point of emotional upliftment.

One explanation is that Eliot's poetry often has three levels: the fictional, the entobiographical and the spiritual or religious and the emphasis often shifts from one to the other. Journey of the magi was written after Eliot's official conversion. Was his conversion something of a non-event? He was converted, presumably because his life was not a spiritual journey, a journey towards the interior, but the conversion had not brought him the enlightenment or the enrichment that he was looking for. Yet it was a new beginning, one little step in the right direction; it was.... Satisfactory.

It was also 'satisfactory' and not exactly an occasion for celebration, because the magi had lost their old world and had not found another. They were no longer at ease in 'like old dispensation' and yet the question which remained unanswered in their minds was

'...were we led all that way for

Birth or Death?

This experience had obliterated the line of demarcation for them between life and death.

....were we led all that way for

Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,

We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,

*But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our Death.*

Among all the uncertainties, there was one certainty; the magi were no longer spiritually comfortable 'in the old dispensation'. You must remember that the magus is now is an old man recalling what happened. Here new dispensation was Christianity but they still lived with old values and worshipped the gods they'd inherited. So they wanted 'another death' to escape from the spiritual decay which pervaded their world.

Eliot's Style

Eliot uses dramatic monologue but not delve into the speaker's unconscious. The magus narrates an experience, with the utmost resistance. The many dimensions of the experience are never dramatized or highlighted. The magus becomes the depersonalized voice of a commendation, much like the voice-over in a documentary film, very much in the background.

And because the narrator does not draw any attention at all to himself, the listener's mind is focused on what he has to say. And what he has to say is said in vivid images which linger in the mind long after the voice has faded.

It appears that Eliot wants us to look outwards so he uses strong visual images: camels lying down in the melting snow, the summer palaces on slopes, the silken girls bringing sherbet, camel men wanting liquor and women. But underlying everything is the questioning which turns our eyes inwards: why did we make this journey, such a long and rough journey? Why did the nativity of Christ not make the impact on the magi it ought to have done? Why was birth not different from death? Why was the birth hard and bitter agony for them?

The incantatory nature of the music of the poem gives the reader the feeling of religious ritual and makes it possible for the poet to create a sense of unity although diverse and desperate images and ideas are used by the poet, transforming for example, in lines 21-28, images from his preconscious mind into symbols of coming events: birth, betrayal, crucifixion, resurrection.

Even the list of temptations and hardships in the first part of the poem has a Biblical ring:

*There were times we regretted
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
And the silken girls bringing sherbet*

*Then the camel men cursing and crumpling
And running away and wanting their liquor and
women,
And the mighty fires going out, and the lack of shelters,
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
And the village dirty and charging high prices;
A hard time we had of it*

Journey of the Magi

Conclusion

In the foregoing pages an attempt has been made to give some idea of what form a lecture might take. For a complex poem like this one- journey of the magi – one lecture will not do, but how much the teacher puts into his lecture will depend very largely on how much the students can take and how much is expected of them by paper setters and examiners. As teachers of literature, we must consider it one of our primary responsibilities to engender in our students the understanding and appreciation of the poetry. But that apart, there is also the requirement of completing the syllabus and preparing our students for the examination.

It is hoped that the lecture suggested above is sufficiently comprehensive to do both – make students take an interest in poetry as well as help them to do well in their examinations. An important aspect of the teaching – learning situation is the participation of the students. If they become disengaged from the concepts and comments of the teacher, then much of the time that he spent talking to them must be considered a waste. The students will decide whether they wish to take notes or not, But we should require them to note points for discussion.

Reference

1. Spear, D.Helda., 1992. "The Poetry lesson: understanding and enjoying" in English Language teaching: theory and practice, 1992 madras, T.R. Publications.
2. Widdowson, H.G. 1975. Stylistics and the teaching of Literature, London. Longman
3. Widdowson, H.G. 1979., Exploration in applied linguistics, oxford.
4. Krishnaswamy, N. 1994 Teaching Poetry in Schools and colleges, T.R. Publications, Madras.