

The Mechanics of Teaching Poetry

Dr. S. Santosh Smitha

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Shri SSS Jain College for Women

ABSTRACT

In the years of English rule in India, English poetry in the course of studies was as easily accepted as any other aspect of English Literature. The Indians relished poetry beyond doubt. There was a time when poetry was recited by the common man, the common man recited epics in verses. It was a legacy that was inherited from the father to the son. To be able to recite the hymns in praise of God and nature, was itself a joy, a creation of heavenly ecstasy in one's own heart. It even inspired some of our Indian Literary writers to compose English poems like Toru Dutt, Tagore, Sarojini Naidu and Kamala Das. Under the influence of present day technology, the rationalists both expect to abandon poetry or sentimentally kill the poetic spirit and breathe in the increasing influence of Machine age. We wonder if in the present age, poetry has lost the appeal which it had in the past. There were many forces shaping the Literature of the present century. The teachers were trying to reach the lowest common denominator of understanding, suitable to the peculiar character of the common man so as to bridge the gap between poetry and the people, today the teacher of English faces some strange paradoxes in the teaching of poetry. This chapter deals with some of the basic mechanics of teaching poetry to the students so that it becomes understandable for them as well as interesting.

Keywords- Poetic pleasure, enthusiasm, diction, stanza, human sentiments, imagination, knowledge, classroom, imagery, sensuousness

INTRODUCTION

Poetry in the Second Language

All the teachers of English know that poetry embodies the most ancient and universal culture but today poetry is the least read and is the least influential in the society. The teacher finds an unusual problem in handling a situation in the class when what is delight to the teacher is often a despair or boredom to the pupils. When the teacher is filled with excitement and enthusiasm to communicate this elatedness, it is taken by the students with a lot of indifference, arguments and sometimes hostility. A genuinely dedicated teacher who has been under the influence of poetry and who has experienced that "Poetry is nothing less than the most perfect speech of man and that one comes nearest to be able to utter the truth." (Mathew Arnold)⁽¹⁾ persistently makes efforts to reap the most rewarding results. The teacher is sensitive to anything that is worthily nurtured, that is beauty, creation in any form and human sentiments that make life good and grand. A greater force is contained in the sublimity that poetry conveys. It is the moral responsibility of the teacher to make the student understand that poetry nurtures a temperament that in the long run, enriches the individual's existence. Hence is the justification of teaching poetry. One remembers Einstein saying. "Imagination is more important than knowledge, for knowledge is limited, whereas imagination embraces the entire world, stimulating progress."

What could be some of the specific benefits of reading poems in the second language? Poetry written in one's own mother tongue or first language undoubtedly is likely to be relished far more than the one that is written in the second language. This may not be a feature of the modern time alone, by its very nature it is in vain to expect that poetry will make a down to earth appeal to the multitude of readers. Secondly poetry is looked upon as one of the finer and higher artistic features of literature. It has to be understood in the completeness of form of language. Expression will suffer if English poetry is not read or taught properly in the Indian Classroom. In that case, what should a teacher do to enhance the interest of the students?

The students in general are found to respond well provided the teacher knows the art of handling the poem or evoking the sensitivity to the poet's work. A good poetry class should be able to stir up such corners of the minds of students and make them to understand that if poetry is not taught in an English classroom, then the very existence of human

beings can be questioned. Further poetry may not be every pupil's taste. The apathy may be resulting from a kind of general failure in language learning. A pupil's age, sex and mental capacity often determine the nature of their reactions to poetry. The gaiety, the freshness of group of little children makes it possible for them to make an easy transition from poetry to song and song to dance. At a later age, poetry has less appeal to either imagination or sensuousness. In higher classes, ambition and career consciousness kills the poetic and rhythmic sensitivity. It is noted that only a small percentage of them retain a true and lively interest in poetry. Sometimes, the cultural background from which they come may also be responsible for their losing interest in poetry. In such cases the poor performance of the students in the examination should not be taken into consideration for analyzing their interest in poetry. They make take interest in later stages, once they grow up gracefully.

On Selection of Poems

Does poetry reveal itself through its nature? Shouldn't a distinction be made between a poem and a verse? Should Indian students be pleased more with verses than poems till the age of 18? The selection of poems in texts depends on the availability of poetic selection, a little contact with new and current verses and the mood and temperament of the selector. English teachers are made to follow the syllabus; hardly anyone expresses his personal reaction about such selection. The one question that comes to mind is what are some of the signals that can be adhered to while selecting poems. The selection of poems should be done on the basis of theme rather than on the era to which the poems belong to. Poetry, it is admitted upholds an experience, a truth, an idea that has sensitized the maker of the poem. The impact of the creation is never meant to be short lived or transitory but permanent and if possible eternal. Such themes depicting some unique experience in artistic form transcend time and space. In the forties, "The Daffodils" was as enchanting as it is now because the poem has crystallized a unique experience cherish able in any country in any age. The Coromandel Fishers and The Weavers by Sarojini Naidu have made mortal themes immortal. The depth in a poetic theme should be kept up for any selection for Indian children studying English as a second language because students by and large are more touched by the depth of the poem rather than the theme. The major themes that are taught in poetry at the undergraduate level generally deal with.

1. Simple human relationships
2. War incidents, war ravages
3. Natural sights around trees, rivers birds and animals
4. Death and immortality
5. Typical Indian situations of family ties. (nothing noteworthy about India's hills and valleys and rivers, simplicity and greatness, peace and harmony)
6. A few ballads
7. Humorous poems
8. On season (any one poem)
9. On childhood in varied forms

We generally miss the heights and depths of a poetic theme in such a selection. More desirable elements that add to poetic beauty such as imagery, picturesqueness, music, richness of diction have been bypassed. Susan reminds us when he says, "It is said that poetry that is best suited to juniors is that which is swift, moving, simple in diction and verse form, undecorated and allusive."⁽²⁾

Requirements of a poetry class

An English Teacher should never feel that we have lost a battle because scientific thinking is making advances. If Science searches, poetry gives solace. If Science stimulates curiosity, poetry comforts. The fundamentals of life and truth must be focused on while selecting poems. The imagination should be pervading, catchy, rich, vivid and captivating and the message long lasting. Although we have no control over the poets' use of language, we desire to select poems that will be easy for our pupils to understand. The students perhaps do not show difficulties in understanding the language so much if the teacher concerned impresses upon the class that in poetry form and content are indissoluble. A complete response to a poem once formed tackles with linguistic peculiarities of the poet. Students have to be made critical, serious minded and appreciative. "When we look back to our school days, we cannot forget how we felt moved by poems, like 'On His Blindness' (Milton), 'Ozymandias' (Shelley), 'Tiger' (Blake), 'Ode to a Nightingale' (Keats), 'Incident of the French Camp' (Browning) and some of Wordsworth, Tennyson, Coleridge, Robert Bridges, Rupert Brooke on one hand, and Donne, Herbert and Marvell on the other we always used to feel proud and honored to be considered worthy of the treasures of poetry."⁽³⁾ The teacher proudly and not in so many words, soberly communicated the prestigious issue involved therein, in being students of poetry. It used to be an achievement. We do pay rich tributes to such adorable teachers of the past who could uphold the values of learning the masterpieces just with a foreboding that, 'this will someday often benefit you.'⁽⁴⁾

Studying poetry is never an effortless job in the beginning. It does not allow relaxation but certainly it causes a release. It helps one to treasure up things invaluable for substance of the mind and spirit perpetually. To be in the hands of good teacher of poetry is really an exciting experience. Unless teachers retain the outlook of learners, unless a considerable portion of their leisure time is given gladly to serious reading, their day-to-day teaching is bound in time, to become stale and depressive. Teachers then must keep reading poetry themselves and not be at the mercy of the anthology only.

(i) It would be rather insensitive to paraphrase each stanza into ragged prose and deprive the section of audience the excitement of personal discovery and the refreshment that good contact with good verse can bring. Quite a number of our teachers are often heard to say, “Children do not understand if we do not explain every line of the poem”.⁽⁵⁾ What we need to do here is to carry on with a trust that a poetry teaching will have to be done in a different and yet unique way, no matter what the difficulty initially is.

(ii) Elaboration on poetical ornaments need also be postponed to a later occasion while teaching a poem to bring forth the substance of content. At the core of every true poem, there lies a unique poetical experience, direct and live, often wordless and shapeless, but nevertheless real and definite. The poetic thought should be allowed to precede poetic language; the intensity of feeling should dominate and any discussion on technical competence need not mar the genuine poetic sensation. Often it is argued that a teacher has no right to intrude into pupil’s way of perceiving a poem.

(iii) The study of poetic form is useful once in a while with pupils who are sufficiently interested in poetry as an attempt to verse writing of their own

(iv) The musical potential of a poem should be brought only by good reading, Words then would mean sensuously as well as intellectually, they would speak of the intimate association of the sound sequence and the context.

(v) The art of teaching requires a balance and poise. The completion of the task requires a quiet atmosphere. Teaching poetry is an emotional experience won through complete intellectual balance. An extra quality is visualized in a good teacher. The whole of the poetry lesson cannot be foreseen. A sort of spontaneity will indicate his level of mental agility. She needs to anticipate the kind of difficulty that children are likely to face and what steps she should take but she does not know how the students are going to react. She is preparing with a mood of sensitiveness, a mood and an understanding of the child’s mind. Her mental state should be between a mood of non-attachment and one of receptivity. Here the teacher takes the delicate task of cultivating the taste, a love, a point of view, an insight and a mood in reading poetry. Her job is to sustain the mood carefully.

Summation

The following guidelines should be kept in mind while teaching poetry in an English classroom.

1. It is desirable to introduce the poem while referring to its theme or its most outstanding feature. The objective should be clear and definite and to the level of the class. For example the heart of the poem “The Daffodils” is the scene and its effect on the poet. The teacher and the students should work together to paint the scene, to create a visual imagery of the golden daffodils fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

2 The poem should be read at least twice by the teacher to begin with till she feels that the students have felt the poem. The poem has gone to the heart and an attempt is made to draw their enthusiasm in painting the scene and its effect on the poet. The central theme is different in all the poems and these varied themes should be taught to appreciate the poem.

3 Suggestive questioning can lead to the understanding of the sense. The questions should be direct and pointed and never elusive and mystical. For example, what does the poem in general deal with? Life, death, war, beauty, animals, birds, children etc. What words or lines lend support to your answer? Reading of words, expressions, lines or even stanzas may be necessary

4 If elaboration is needed in terms of explanation of lines, it should be offered at this point of time. The teacher should read the poem again to reinforce the impact of it as a connected whole. She should go straight to the heart of the poem and show how the various pictures, the various details and a particular word here, an imagery there contribute to the beauty of the poem as a whole.

5. A discussion can now follow. Students can be encouraged to give their own interpretation of the poem. It is wonderful to note that each student may interpret the poem in a beautiful way. This should in turn give more confidence to the teacher that she has taught the poem successfully.



No two poems are taught the same way. Every teacher who teaches the poem is different and every student's perception may also be different. An undaunted effort made by a good English teacher in teaching poetry can result in exciting experiences and give birth to many more great poets like Wordsworth, Shakespeare, Byron and Keats.

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