

Teaching Critical Thinking through Literature

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Abstract

Students of literature are expected to think critically and apply their critical and analytical skills to the texts they study. It is generally assumed that students who have read the text and attended the lectures would be able to appraise it critically when in reality the case is quite the contrary. Critical thinking involves the use of different cognitive skills, which do not come automatic and have to be taught and developed. This paper would argue for critical thinking as an important area of teaching as it helps students become self-motivated and autonomous learners who can apply their acquired modes of inquiry both inside and outside classroom situation. Critical thinking can be developed through critical reading, rather the two come together. It involves training the students what to look for and how to think about what they find. Leading the students through different reading practices such as inference, interpretation and also questioning the ideologies embedded within the text can do it. The paper uses the text of a short story Once Upon a Time by Nadine Gordimer to illustrate teaching critical thinking through literature.

It is not easy to define critical thinking as it includes multiple levels of understanding. On one level the word critical may simply mean the ability to see the discrepancies or logical flaws in arguments. On another level it can mean analyzing, resisting and questioning the assumptions on which texts are based and on yet another but wider level it can mean digging for the ideology embedded within the text which is inevitably related to the world we live in. But no matter how diverse the definitions may be they all ‘emphasize the ability and tendency to gather, evaluate, and use information effectively.’ (Beyer, 1985)¹ The word critical is further problematized by the fact that the world-views of different people can be different and yet equally valid. However the exercise of critical ability does not mean trying to arrive at a consensus but looking for possibilities of reaching at a point of view, which is nearest to truth.

To a non-critical reader, books only provide facts but a critical reading also involves answering how a text portrays the subject matter. In doing so, a relationship is developed between an author and a reader with text as their meeting point of reference. As critical thinking involves active interaction with the text, good readers bring their own understanding to the text and add to its dimensions. Critical reading and thinking

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thus come together in the same package. The relationship between a reader and a writer is two-way which can grow as the understanding of the reader develops. A text remains like an incomplete circle, which has to be completed by the reader in his own unique way. The question then, which emerges in the teaching context, is whether we are producing students who have the ability to react to the texts in a creative and challenging way.

Why Critical Thinking

In a literature class, the norm is to deliver a lecture. Students sit passively and most of them only absorb the information being fed into their minds. It is generally assumed that after discussion and analysis in a literature classroom by the teacher, the students would somehow learn how to do it themselves. This is a rather random approach to teaching and as a result only those students respond who have already a wide reading experience and a natural critical ability. The number of such students is always dismally low. Most Pakistani students, even those who come to do their M.A in Literature in English have limited reading experience and speaking and writing in English is a conscious exercise, which lacks the automatic flow of the first language. To expect such students to 'catch' the critical thinking potential is a bit too much. When it comes to answering the hows and whys within any text, the students feel unequipped to answer critical questions. They do not feel confident enough to enter the world of the text in order to have an insight into the underlying design and challenge its rules if need be. It is therefore important to train and teach students how to look beyond the immediate and have the confidence to question not only the instructor's point of view but also that of the author's. It would help them realize that literary criticism is not a haphazard and casual activity but involves a coherent and systematic mental process. Developing a critical bent of mind means developing an awareness of their thought processes, which would enable them to think and rethink their own ideas. In other words they would learn to take charge of their minds and get into the habit of reflecting and examining their impulsive and habitual ways of thinking and acting.

Critical thinking in literature also develops a keen awareness of the use of language, not merely from the aesthetic point of view but keeping in mind today's world and its developments, the inevitable political point of view. Students realize that language is not a neutral phenomenon explaining some already existing reality but words weave layers of meanings creating and generating their own reality. The assumptions behind this argument is that language is a conscious and deliberate choice of particular word patterns which aim at affecting the readers in a certain way. Unless this pattern is discovered, language would not reveal itself as a living and viable force.

How to teach critical thinking

A literary orientation is one of exploring horizons. As horizons continually advance when you reach them, a critical reader too explores new possibilities as complexity and depth of his understanding increases. In order to train students in critical thinking it is of utmost importance to create a conducive classroom environment where students are

encouraged to negotiate different points of view, consider a variety of perspectives and try to analyze how different aspects of a literary text fit in with each other to create a design and world of its own. When literature is approached from a problem-solving attitude, students learn not to say anything without evidence from the text. They learn how to use this evidence to support their point of view. It also ingrains into them the fundamental principle that that nothing is to be taken for granted and that opinions have to be backed by proofs.

Students thus learn to value their thinking processes and an interactive classroom teaches them to respect those points of view also which are different from their own. V. A. Hopper in his book *Varieties of Thinking* quotes Karl Popper, ‘ I’d would like to think that Thales was the first teacher who said to this pupil: “This is how I see things –how I believe that things are. Try to improve upon my teaching.”

It was a momentous innovation. It meant a break with the dogmatic tradition which permits only one school doctrine, and the introduction in its place of a tradition that admits plurality of doctrines which all try to approach the truth by means of critical discussion.’²²

Responding to the text

Critical thinking cannot be separated from critical reading. It monitors the reading process, assumptions are made and rejected and perspectives formulated. To begin with the students must be told that they have to converse with the text in a meaningful way. It is useful to think of a text as an actor, which uses different techniques to coax you into its point of view. In the initial stages the students can be told what to notice. It must not be assumed that students would know intuitively what to look for; they need to be directed. They can later be taught to relate what questions to the how questions.

Genre

Although it may sound childish to begin with genre as it is obvious but since different genres are associated with different styles of writing, it is better to evoke assumptions of the students by beginning with the genre of the text

Tone

The tone of the text is closely related to the purpose of the text. Is it harsh and angry, sarcastic, melodramatic, subtle and ironical or matter of fact?

Style

Is the style argumentative, descriptive, analytical, direct or metaphorical?

Purpose

It is important for the students to recognize the purpose of the writer. Is he only presenting a slice of life for them to have a glimpse into or is he employing any techniques to influence their point of view. Does he write with a moral or a social, a religious

purpose or his intention does not go beyond giving his readers an aesthetic experience. This is a rather simplistic division as a writer can achieve several purposes at the same time but it is useful to classify in the beginning so that students are aware of different levels a writer may relate to.

Content and Language

All of the above mentioned points are never mentioned directly on the page. These have to be inferred from the language choice and the choice of the content.

Tools of Critical Reading and thinking

Usually students are reluctant to exchange the safety of simply saying what the text says without asserting their opinion about the text. But the material used in a literature classroom must enhance their thinking ability. Thus in the context of critical thinking pedagogy, the text should be broken down in the form of activities that challenge their thinking ability.

Students can be given practice in interpretation, inference, analysis and argumentation.

Inference and analysis

Analysis teaches students what to look for and inference teaches how to think about what you find and relate facts to one another in a logical and coherent way. Analysis is important because through it the students learn which aspects of the text control the meaning. Through inference the students learn how to interpret the data which they recognize through their analysis.

Argumentation

For many students ‘argument’ may have a negative connotation. To them it can mean debate and a matter of defense against someone, which borders on hostility and anger. It is not a battle of beliefs but a form of inquiry. It is important to teach students how to argue with responsibility. When students argue, whether on paper or verbally in class, they take a stance and giving reasons is a responsibility that follows from taking a standpoint. This kind of reasoned evaluation is what constitutes critical thinking. After reading a text the students can be made to think by asking,

- *What is at issue? What makes this question an issue?*
- *Why is an answer worth knowing?*
- *What am I being asked to believe?*

This would make students think in terms of the context and the inherent politics behind the question. It would help students realize the significance of an issue and to see to what extent they agree with the writer. The third question would motivate the students to realize consciously that they have an identity apart from the writer and that the author is using certain ways of writing to convince him and make him think in a certain way. It is related to the ideology embedded in the text. Moreover, this would

also lead the discussion to style, language and discourse of the literary text. This kind of thinking exercise will teach students not only to find answers to questions but also pose new questions, which is important to any form of critical inquiry.

Once Upon a Time

This story is from a collection titled *Jump and other Stories*, written by Nadine Gordimer. It is written in the background of apartheid in South Africa. This story has been chosen because it poses considerable problems in terms of style and content for students to think about and explore.

Context:

In order to understand fully any literary text, it has to be contextualized in the culture, situation and times in which it is written. The teacher should evoke broad historical and cultural connections, which can be related to later in the discussion by the students. The students can also be asked to look for South African history with special focus on racial problems. It would make students realize that studying literature is not an isolated activity; it is rooted in the real world. Placing the story in its own culture would at once create room for understanding another part of the world from an outsider's perspective and yet sharing common human feelings. It can thus be viewed in relation to general cognitive development of the students.

Title

The title of any text is always significant in yielding the broad meaning of the text whether directly, ironically or by implication. Students can be asked to think about the title of the story. The title suggests that it is a fairy tale. It is also written in a fairy tale mode but the content renders the title ironical. 'Once Upon a Time' also suggests that it is about some past happening when it is written to portray contemporary situation in South Africa. Though written in a simple narrative style of a fairy tale, the author narrates the story to herself and not to any child. How does it complicate the matter? Does it show that fairy tales in present times can only be as sad and as devoid of romance as this story. Is the title by implication a yearning for better times when such a time would be a matter of the past? Is it that children can no longer dream? The students can also be given these options of explanations and asked to substantiate them.

Narrative Style

There is a shift in the narrative style. The writer in the first part of the story explains her state of mind, which is in the grips of fear. It is to relieve that that she starts telling herself a story. The first part is written in first person and the story to follow is contextualized in an atmosphere of fear. But asking the following questions can generate a discussion on style.

- Can we do away with the first part?
- Would the story be less effective and clear without the explanation of the first part? If so, how?

- How are the two parts connected?
- The two parts of Lord Jim (life before Patusan and after) have been criticized as not being properly connected. Do you agree? Can you compare the shift in Gordimer's narrative style with that of Conrad's?

The writer chooses a form that fully serves his/her purpose. What story to tell is complicated by the artistic question of how to tell. The fairy tale mode of the story gives the entire story an ironical shift. The apparent clash between the subject matter and the style of writing further emphasizes the bitterness and sadness inherent in the situation. The ambiguity of manner and content portrays the confusion and chaos prevalent in the South African political situation. In her Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Gordimer said,

'This aesthetic venture of ours becomes subversive when the shameful secrets of our times are explored deeply, with artist's rebellious integrity to the state of being manifest in life around her or him, then the writer's themes and characters inevitably are formed by the pressures and distortions of that society.'³

Analysis and Inference

The students can begin with the simple activity of counting and picking out the number of safety devices the family adds to its house. They may then be asked to look for devices, which the writer uses to create an atmosphere of fear. This would be an exercise in inference, as it is not stated directly that people are afraid. The devices would show how the story is marked by the turmoil of its times. They would also be able to see, how different points unite to build one cohesive argument in the story.

With the increase in the safety devices, the element of fear also mounts in the story.

The students can be given the following critical questions to think about and build their arguments. It would be an exercise in conceptual thinking.

- Fear is a state of mind; it cannot be hunted down by depending on external safety measures.
- When Jack in *Lord of the Flies* hunts, he feels he is also at the same time being hunted down. Can you relate this thought to *Once Upon a Time*?

Ideology and Language

Closely connected to critical thinking is discourse analysis and the ideology embedded within the text. When an author expresses an opinion, it is a political act because it shows a certain standpoint. Authors make choices in terms of language and content. This presupposes the assumptions of the writer. This story voices opinion against racial discrimination and violence. Racial discrimination leads to violence and a vicious circle is created leading to an ambiguity of values. Gordimer says it subtly, with all the innocence of a bedtime story,

There were riots, but these were outside the city, where people of another color were quartered. These people were not allowed into the suburb except as reliable housemaids and gardeners, so there was nothing to fear, the husband told the wife.⁴

Racial discrimination points at power structures in the society, the power lying with the whites. Gordimer does not say who is bad or good, her story reveals a messed up situation where centuries of poverty and despair have led to violent behaviour. The language of the story reflects a society torn by different forms of violence. The capitalizing of YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED, the little boy's fascination with the 'cops and robbers play', the 'shrills and bleats and wails' of the alarms, 'red earth smudges', 'jagged blades', 'DRAGON'S TEETH', 'hooking and tearing of flesh' are only some of the examples which are used in the story to show how real politick meets the inner lives of ordinary people.

The students should be made to realize how the author's ideological stance is never directly stated in fiction but filters through the vocabulary employed. Art shifts and plays with the boundaries of language and narrative to give an imaginative shape to politics and history.

There is no one way either to read literature or to teach critical thinking. However, if literature were taught with the critical thinking pedagogy in view, it would be a far more creative and challenging mode of learning for students of literature.

End Notes

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Appendix Once upon a Time

By: Nadine Gordimer

Someone has written to ask me to contribute to an anthology of stories for children. I reply that I don't write children's stories; and he writes back that at a recent congress/book fair/ seminar a certain novelist said every writer ought to write at least one story for the children. I think of sending a postcard saying I don't accept that I 'ought' to write anything.

And then last night I woke up____ or rather was awakened without knowing what had roused me.

A voice in the echo- chamber of the subconscious?

A sound.

A creaking of the kind made by the weight carried by one foot after another along a wooden floor. I listened .I felt the apertures of my ears distend with concentration. Again: the creaking. I was waiting for it; waiting to hear if it indicated that feet were moving from the room to room, coming up the passage__ to my door. I have no burglar bars, no gun under the pillow, but I have the same fears as people who do take these precautions, and my windowpanes are thin as rime, could shatter like a wineglass. A woman was murdered (how do they put it) in broad daylight in a house two blocks away, last year, and the fierce dogs who guarded an old widower and his collection of antique clocks were strangled before he was knifed by a casual labourer he had dismissed without pay.

I was staring at the door, making it out in my mind rather than seeing it, in the dark. I lay quite still__ a victim already__ but the arrhythmia of my heart was fleeing, knocking this way and that against its body-cage. How finely tuned the senses are, just out of senses are, just out of rest, sleep! I could never listen intently as that in the distractions of the day: I was reading every faintest sound, identifying and classifying its possible threat.

But I learned that I was to be neither threatened nor spared. There was no human weight pressing on the boards, the creaking was a buckling, an epicenter of stress. I was in it. The house that surrounds me while I sleep is built on undermined ground; far beneath my bed, the floor, the house's foundations, the stopes and passages of gold mines have hollowed the rock, and when some face trembles, detaches and falls, three thousand feet below, the whole house shifts slightly, bringing uneasy strain to the balance and counterbalance of brick, cement, wood and glass that hold it as a structure around me. The misbeats of my heart tailed off like the last muffled flourishes on one of the wooden xylophones made by Chopi and Tsonga migrant miners who might have been down there, under me in the earth at that moment. The stope where the fall was could have been disused, dripping water from its ruptured veins; or men might now be

interred there in the most profound of tombs.

I couldn't find a position in which my mind would let go of my body ___ release me to sleep again. So I began to tell myself a story; a bedtime story.

In a house, in a suburb, in a city, there were a man and his wife who loved each other very much and were living happily ever after. They had a little boy, and they loved him very much. They had a cat and a dog that the little boy loved very much. They had a car and a caravan trailer for holidays, and a swimming-pool which was fenced so that the little boy and his playmates would not fall in and drown. They had a housemaid who was absolutely trustworthy and an itinerant gardener who was highly recommended by the neighbors. For when they began to live happily ever after they were warned, by that wise old witch, the husband's mother, not to take on off the street. They were inscribed in a medical benefit society, their pet dogs was licensed, they were insured against fire, flood damage and theft, and subscribed to the local neighborhood Watch, which supplied them with a plaque for their gates lettered YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED over the silhouette of a would-be intruder. He was masked; it could not be said if he was black and white, and therefore proved the property owner was no racist.

It was not possible to insure the house, the swimming pool or the car against riot damage. There were riots, but these were outside the city, where people of another colour we re quartered. These people were not allowed into the suburb except as reliable housemaids and gardeners, so there was nothing to fear, the husband told the wife. Yet she was afraid that some day such people might come up the street and tear off the plaque YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED and open the gates and stream in.... Nonsense, my dear said the husband, there are police and soldiers and tear-gas and guns to keep them away. But to please her ___ for he loved her very much and buses were being burned, cars stoned, and schoolchildren shot by the police in those quarters out of sight and hearing of the suburb ___ he had electronically-controlled gates fitted. Anyone who pulled off the sign YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED and tried to open the gates would have to announce his intentions by pressing a button and speaking into a receiver relayed to the house. The little boy was fascinated by the device and used it as a walkie-talkie in cops and robbers play with his small friends.

The riots were suppressed, but there were many bur-glaries in the suburb and somebody's trusted housemaid was tied up and shut in a cupboard by thieves while she was in charge of her employers' house. The trusted house-maid of the man and wife and little boy was so upset by this misfortune befalling a friend left, as she herself often was, with responsibility for the possessions of the man and his wife and the little boy that she implored her employers to have burglars bars attached to the doors and windows of the house, and an alarm system installed. The wife said, she is right, let us take heed of her advice. So from every window and door in the house where they were living happily ever after they now saw the trees and sky through bars, and when the little boy's pet cat tried to climb in by the fanlight to keep him company in his little bed at night, as it customarily had done, it set off the alarm keening through the house.

The alarm was often answered_ it seemed_ by other bur-glar alarms, in other houses, that had been triggered by pet cats or nibbling mice. The alarms called to one another across the gardens in shrills and bleats and wails that every-one soon became accustomed to, so that the din roused the inhabitants of the suburb no more than the croak of frogs and musical grating of cicadas' legs. Under cover of the electronic harpies' discourse sawed the iron bars and broke into homes, taking away hi-fi equipment, television sets, cassette players, cameras and radios, jewellery and clothing, and sometimes were hungry enough to devour everything in the refrigerator or paused audaciously to drink the whisky in the cabinets or patio bars. Insurance companies paid no compensation for single malt, a loss made keener by the property owner's knowledge that the thieves wouldn't even have been able to appreciate what it was they were drinking.

Then the time came when many of the people who were not trusted housemaids and gardeners hung about the suburb because they were unemployed. Some importuned for a job: weeding or painting a roof; anything, baas, madam. But the man and his wife remembered the warning about taking on anyone off the street. Some drank liquor and fouled the street with discarded bottles. Some begged, waiting for the man or his wife to drive the car out of the electronically -operated gates. They sat about with their feet in the gutters, under the jacaranda trees that made a garden tunnel of the street___ for it was a beautiful suburb, spoilt only by their presence___ and sometimes they fell asleep lying right before the gates in the midday sun. The wife could never see anyone go hungry. She sent the trusted housemaid out with bread and tea, but the trusted housemaid said these were loafers and *tsotsis*, who would come and lie her up and shut her in the cupboard. The husband said, she is right. Take heed of her advice. You only encourage them with your bread and tea. They are looking for their chance... And he brought the little boy's tricycle from the garden into the house every night, because if the house was surely secure, once locked and with the alarm set, someone might still be able to climb over the wall or the electronically- closed gates into the garden.

You are right, said the wife, then the wall should be higher. And the wise old witch, the husband's mother, paid for the extra bricks as her Christmas present to her son and his wife___ the little boy got a Space Man outfit and a book of fairy tales.

But every week there were more reports of intrusion: in broad daylight and the dead of night, in the early hours of the morning, and even in the lovely summer twilight__ a certain family was at dinner while the bedrooms were being ransacked upstairs. The man and his wife, talking of the latest armed robbery in the suburb, were distracted by the sight of the little boy's pet cat effortlessly arriving over the seven-foot wall, descending first with a rapid bracing of extended forepaws down on the street vertical surface, and then a graceful launch, landing with swishing tail within the property. The whitewashed wall was marked with the cat's comings and goings; and on the street side of the wall there were larger red-earth smudges that could have been made by the kind of broken running shoes, seen on the feet of unemployed loiterers, that had no

innocent destination.

When the man and wife and little boy took the pet dog for its walk around the neighborhood streets they no longer paused to admire this show of roses or that perfect lawn; these were hidden behind an array of different varieties of security fences, walls and devices. The man, wife, little boy and dog passes a remarkable choice: there was the flow-cost option of pieces of broken glass embedded in cement along the top of walls, there were iron grilles ending in lance-points, there were attempts at reconciling the aesthetics of prison architecture with the Spanish Villa style (spikes painted pink) and with the plaster urns of neoclassical facades (twelve-inch pikes finned like zigzags of lightning and painted pure white). Some walls had a small board affixed, giving the name and telephone number of the firm responsible for the installation of the devices. While the little boy and the pet dog raced ahead, the husband and wife found themselves comparing the possible effectiveness of each style against its appearance; and after several weeks when they paused before this barricade or that without needing to speak, both came out with conclusion that the only one was worth considering. It was the ugliest but the most honest in its suggestion of the pure concentration camp style, no frills, all evident efficacy. Placed the length of walls, it consisted of a continuous coil of stiff and shining metal serrated into jagged blades, so that there would be no way of climbing over it and no way through its tunnel without getting entangled in its fangs. There would be no way getting entangled in its fangs. There would be no way out, only a struggle getting bloodier and bloodier, a deeper sharper hooking and tearing of flesh. The wife shuddered to look at it. You're right, said the husband, anyone would think twice... And they took heed of the advice on a small board fixed to the wall: Consult DRAGON'S TEETH The People For Total Security.

Next day a gang of workmen came and stretched the razor-bladed coils all round the walls of the house where the husband and wife and little boy and pet dog and cat were living happily after. The sunlight flashed and slashed, off the serration, the cornice of razor thorns encircled the home, shining. The husband said Never mind. It will weather. The wife said, You're wrong. They guarantee it's rust-proof. And she waited until the little boy had run off to play before she said, I hope the cat will take heed... The husband said, Don't worry, my dear, cats always look before they leap. And it was true that from that day on the cat slept in the little boy's bed and kept to the garden, never risking a try at breaching security.

One evening, the mother read the little boy to sleep with a fairy story from the book the wise old witch had given him at Christmas. Next day he pretended to be the Prince who braves the terrible thicket of thorns to enter the palace and kiss the Sleeping Beauty back to life: he dragged a ladder to the wall, the shining coiled tunnel was just wide enough for his little body to creep in, and with the first fixing of its razor-teeth in his knees and hands and head he screamed and struggled deeper into its tangle. The trusted housemaid and the itinerant gardener, whose 'day' it was, came running, the first to see and to scream with him, and the itinerant gardener tore his hand trying to get the little boy. Then the man and his wife burst wildly into the garden and for some

reason (the cat, probably) the alarm set up wailing against the screams while the bleeding mass of the little boy was hacked out of the security coil with saws, wire-cutters, choppers, and they carried it__ the man, the wife, the hysterical trusted housemaid and the weeping gardener__ into the house.

Source: *Jump and Other Stories*, Gordimer, Nadine (London, 1991)