

Multiple Literary Interpretations: Empowering Readers through Literary Theory.

Devan Vengadasalam Rajaram (Ph.D student),
University Malaya, Kuala Lumpur.
Hema5895@tm.net.my

Abstract

This paper explores literary text interpretations of learners who use critical lenses that are constructed with elements of literary theories. These lenses facilitate multiple text interpretations. The process is carried out through stylistic analyses and the study then investigates the extent to which learners are able to interpret texts. The initial findings indicate that learners are able to interpret texts through critical lenses. The learners' interpretations are measured against an index made up of George Hillocks' Hierarchy of Skills in the Comprehension of Literature (1980) to assess the learners' achievement levels of textual understanding and critical interpretation. This index consists of seven ascending levels where comprehending basic stated information in the text is the first level. Levels two to seven comprise understanding key details, basic stated relationships, simple implied relationships, complex implied relationships, the author's generalizations and the structural generalizations in a text. Learners' interpretations show higher achievement levels according to Hillocks' Hierarchy and recommendations are then made for learners to acquire literary theory to empower them to produce critical and informed responses.

1. Background

As a medium of enhancing critical thinking skills and developing independent readers, English literature was reintroduced as a crucial component of the English language syllabus for Malaysian secondary schools in 2000. This has received support and encouraging response from learners, practitioners and curriculum planners. However, after almost a decade of studying literature texts, learners have not adequately acquired a critical approach towards texts and their interpretations are not independent enough. The examiner's reports for the English language paper in the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (Malaysian School Certificate) examination from 2003 to 2007 have reviewed learners' performances and explicitly asked teachers to 'encourage critical and creative thinking' (Lembaga Peperiksaan Malaysia 2003: 77). The examiners have also advised teachers not to allow learners to rely on workbooks too much as 'it limits their own interpretations and hampers their own creative responses/opinions when answering questions on literature'

(Lembaga Peperiksaan Malaysia 2007: 111). There is a need for learners to look at texts in a more critical manner as the examiners acknowledge this. Another advisory note that the examiners included much earlier asks teachers to ‘train students to give a personal response to text especially when doing the literature component’ (Lembaga Peperiksaan Malaysia 2002: 77). This reinforces the idea that readers should be autonomous and able to give informed personal responses to the texts they engage with. This study focuses on this idea. It also gives reason to explore the possibility of infusing critical literary theory as a guide to encourage learners to produce critical interpretations of their readings and to eventually become independent readers. Since schools in Malaysia are at a point before the second cycle of literary texts is introduced in 2010, learners should be able to give critical responses and multiple interpretations to meet this change in texts. The relevance of being critical and informed is underlined by the exposure to the internet and the influx of global information.

2. Introduction

Reading, interpreting and criticizing empower a reader to present an informed opinion of a text. Essential tools of interpretation and criticism are invested in critical literary theory and it would be appropriate for a learner to be equipped with the knowledge of theory to produce ‘valuable’ readings in the sense put forth by Sheridan B. Blau for whom a valuable reading is ‘the product of a student’s own engaged and mindful act and leads to subsequent readings and further reflection on a text in a way that might yield a more adequate or even a confirming interpretation’ (2003: 198). The learner should be able to contribute to informed interpretations of a text after the engaging with it. Robert E. Probst explains that ‘the text becomes literature by virtue of what the reader is able to do with it. If the reader can’t do anything with it, it remains ink and paper’(2004: 33). This reiterates the need for learners to read, interpret and give a critical appraisal of texts. Cazden separates ‘analysis’ from ‘interpretation’ and defines interpretation as ‘features that stand out as expressive of the author’s unique thoughts and feelings’ (2004: 342). The learner has to grasp this concept besides the learner’s own responses to the text as the text is approached.

Blau makes the connection between interpretation, criticism and evaluation of a text by saying ‘the way one interprets a text depends to a very large degree upon what the text says – what the textual facts are – and the way one criticizes or evaluates it depends to a very large degree upon how one interprets it’ (2003: 51). So, interpretation is crucial as claimed by Blau and the different ideologies that inhere in literary theories would enrich the learner’s criticism and evaluation of a text. Deborah Appleman, a leading proponent of literary theory application for adolescents strongly advocates the use of theory in the study of literature and believes that ‘critical theory can travel with adolescents from the literature classroom into the rest of their lives’ (2000: 126). Hence critical theory carries a potential to stretch beyond the text and into the lives of the learners as a critical guide. And, with the inherent ideologies in theory, it is possible to empower learners with ‘knowledge of ideology and make them more critical and discerning in their reading of texts’ (Devan 2007: 65). Galileo (1564-1642) is known to have said that ‘You cannot teach a man anything: You can only help him find it within himself’. In the same way, it is imperative that learners realize their full potential at critical interpretation, and literary theory sets out to help learners explore their capabilities and ‘find it within themselves’.

3. Objectives

This study aims to find out how elements of feminist theory, post-colonialist theory and reader response theory can be used in the learning process by learners to read critically for better understanding of literary texts and the production of informed interpretations. This study focuses on learners in a rural area as these learners are confronted with challenges such as being in a social context that does little to promote the use of the English language on a regular basis besides the limited use in school during English, Science and Mathematics classes and the reading of English newspapers in the library. Although these students interact in a media context where interaction with the English language is regular through satellite television and radio services, it is limited to specific programs linked to football, MTV and popular movies. This limits them to avenues that do not converge enough towards critical discourse. Furthermore, they take part in economic activities with their parents and communicate in the national language more than English with workers from Thailand, Myanmar and Vietnam in the fishing

community, and with workers from Indonesia and Bangladesh in the plantation sector. Faced with these challenges, learners are hard pressed to appreciate literary texts in English and construct sound interpretations. So, it is felt that an infusion of critical theory would give them a focus to better understand and interpret literary texts in a critical manner. This study seeks mainly to observe learners' performance of textual interpretation after the application of three literary theories through critical lenses.

4. Research Interest

The main research interest of the study revolves around how learners become empowered as critical readers who are informed and resistant in their comprehension and interpretation of literary texts after applying elements of literary theory to their reading.

5. Limitations

Some limitations are imposed on the study for better focus and coordination. Firstly, the size of the target group is kept small to facilitate a manageable analysis. Secondly, since the study will be applying three literary theories, the findings are not definitive for all literary theories. This relates to Tyson's observations where the compatibility of a theory to particular texts has to be examined before further analysis is carried out (2006: 5) and where any theory will not collocate with any text. However, the findings can still be representative based on the premise that other theories or a combination of them could be matched with the texts in the syllabus for the second cycle of the English literature component from 2010 onwards in Malaysian schools. Thirdly, the analysis will look at only the novel of the upper secondary syllabus for the literature component.

6. Research Methodology

The researcher uses a qualitative case study method and includes the process of triangulation that refers to 'using different types of measures, or data collection techniques, in order to examine the same variable' (Neuman 1997: 151), to incorporate questionnaires, observations and the submitting of written responses. The data sources for this study are triangulated with the objective of developing 'converging lines of inquiry' (Yin 1994: 92) that reinforce the findings from different data sources and allow the

researcher to address the issue in the study on a broader range in relation to the research questions. This study is carried out in a unique rural setting as the researcher investigates the learners' reception towards critical literary theory. The learners are the 'case' that will be studied. The learners are in a school which has a population of 1850 (March 2008). It has a racial composition of 35% Malays, 45% Indians and 20% Chinese. The participants of the study are from a form five class. The learners are those who have scored a minimum of grade B in their form three Penilaian Menengah Rendah public examination where they answered objective and subjective English literature questions based on poems, short stories and a novel. The researcher uses a single case design. It involves two stages – the thematic stage and the critical lenses stage which are complementary. The design plots the path taken by the researcher from the discussion of literary elements in relation to the novel until the end of the critical lenses stage where the findings show enhanced levels of comprehension and critical interpretation skills.

7. Data Analysis

There are four stages in the descriptive analysis of the data:

- i) Analysis of the questionnaires – corresponding mainly to research question 1.
- ii) Analysis of the observations – corresponding to research question 1, 2 and 3.
- iii) Analysis of the participants' written responses – corresponding to research question 2 and 3.
- iv) Analysis of the pre and post assessments – corresponding to research question 2 and 3.

For the purposes of this paper, only the analyses of the questionnaires and assessments will be presented due to constraints of space.

8. Findings

8.1. Highlights of Analysis of Questionnaire 1 - Learners' background of reading literature texts.

To the first four questions, all the learners affirmed interest in stories and all have read story books. The school is the main source for books for 56.6% of the respondents, the home for 33%, friends and receiving books as gifts for 33.3%, and the bookshop for 10%.

As to why they read, 50% each responded that they read ‘to pass time’ and ‘to improve language’. ‘For examination purposes’ came in third at 46.6% which was refreshing as Malaysian learners normally read for exams. Asked about stories they have read, 86.6% responded with the prescribed school texts although the researcher anticipated other texts. Learners were also asked to write the plot of the stories read and 72.6% gave concise and relevant details while 28.4% offered loose and fragmented descriptions. When asked for their favourite character, 76.7% chose the protagonist while 23.3% chose supporting characters. For the question on theme, 56.7% discussed multiple themes while 40.0% extracted singular themes. Learners were also asked which event they found most interesting and 69.3% chose moments of crises or climax, while 10% chose prolonged or less important events. 16.6% did not respond.

When asked to extract a critical assessment of issues in the novel read, 23.3% responded with partially critical comments while 69.3% offered reflective statements that were not critical and 7.4% did not respond. Learners’ follow-up activities after reading were enquired and 63.3% thought about the text and criticized it while 53.3% discussed it with a friend or sibling after self-reflection. Another 16.6% entered their comments into a journal. The last question enquired into preferred types of stories if given a choice, and 83.3% mentioned ‘adventure’ as one of the choices. 60.0% voted for ‘romance’ while 46.6% opted for ‘spy thrillers’. 43.3% chose mystery, history, fantasy, horror and comedy. Science-fiction registered a 36.3% support. These findings help to shed light on learners’ reading patterns and will contribute towards the research interest.

8.2. Highlights of Analysis of Questionnaire 2 – Learners’ background of their involvement with the learning processes of literary texts.

A resounding majority of 93.4% of learners admitted enjoying literature lessons in responding to the first question. All the learners appreciated the questioning carried out by the teacher and 96.7% agreed with the teacher’s anticipation of their answers. When asked about their frequency of asking questions during the lessons and reasons for asking, learners were split three ways with 33.3% each responding ‘sometimes’, ‘seldom’ and ‘never’. Reasons ranged from ‘clarity in lessons’ to ‘not knowing what to ask’. Learners

were then asked whether they gave their points of view to help them in comprehension of literary texts and 100% responded affirmatively. Reasons ranged from ‘giving points of view helped individual understanding of texts’, ‘improving language’ and ‘giving points of view can activate me to think critically and understand the text’. When asked if they were comfortable with the methods of approaching literary texts, 90% responded positively with a preference for group presentation. To the question on difficulty in interpretation, 40% admitted to having difficulty in interpretation while 46.6% stated that they had no difficulty. In a related question on whether the interpretations were their own or borrowed, 69.9% said they referred to other authorities and only 16.6% claimed that the interpretations were their own. Another 13.5% did a bit of both. Learners were also asked if they preferred a more interesting way of interpreting literary texts and 86.7% affirmed. Only 10% responded negatively while 3.3% did not respond. On whether learners preferred to engage with critical ideas, 80% agreed. Asked whether learners knew that theories could be used in the study of literature, 23.4% gave a positive response while 76.7% gave a negative response. The final question on willingness to apply elements of literary theory to interpret literary texts elicited an 86.7% favourable response while 13.4% were skeptical and declined to agree. This willingness is a good indicator for the researcher to attempt multiple literary interpretations towards enhancing comprehension of literary texts and shaping the learners as critical and more informed readers.

8.3 Highlights of Analysis of Questionnaire 3 – Learners’ reactions after the application of elements of literary theories.

The first question wanted to find out what learners had learnt in the study and learners gave multiple responses. 66.6% claimed that the text was more interesting when interpreted through theory. 59.9% said that they understood the text in ‘many ways’ while 46.6% expressed that how ‘language is used in a text’ could ‘change meanings of a text’. Smaller groups of learners gave responses that alluded to theory’s role and the ideological stances of authors, text appeals for different audiences, extracting deeper meanings of words and offering different ideas for meanings of texts. The second question asked if learners could interpret texts more critically after the application

exercise where the researcher qualified critical application as an interpretation with valid points of view, a critical sense of issues in a text and a broader outlook. In the context of this study, having a critical sense would entail having a heightened awareness of literary theory to consider relative merits of a text based on literary theory. 100% of the learners responded that they could interpret texts more critically. The reasons given were clustered into 3 major groups. The first group claimed to be able to present texts with their own points and words. The second group clarified that it could interpret texts and found it interesting, while the third group was close to the second and said it could interpret from other points of view and learnt more about the semantics of the language.

The third question followed up from question 2 and asked learners if they could consider themselves as more critical readers now within the parameters set out by the researcher and a majority of 96.7% agreed that they were. The next question wanted to know whether learners would apply elements of theories in their reading in the future. 86.6% affirmed their response. Various reasons were given but one reason of particular interest was to ‘apply the theories in Bahasa Melayu Sastera (Malay Literature)’ texts. Learners seem to be capable of thinking about venturing beyond one language and this is a positive development for critical studies. The last question intended to ask if learners were willing to learn and apply elements of other critical theories in the future. An encouraging 93.3% responded that they would. These responses have given the researcher valuable input to approach and fulfill the research interest. The analysis of one learner’s interpretation of 4 literature essay questions from 2004 to 2007 for the English language 1119 paper is presented next.

9. Pre and Post Assessments – Initial Findings of One Respondent.

Analysis of eight scripts based on Hillocks’ Index for literature achievement.

Title of the novel: ‘The Pearl’ by John Steinbeck.

9.1. Pre-Assessment Script 1

Question 1: Choose an event in the novel you have studied which you find to be the most memorable. Give reasons for your choice and, with close reference to the text, discuss the event. (SPM English 1119, Paper 2, Q34, 2004).

The learner's response to the question shows comprehension of the needs of the task. The question asks for description of a memorable event and the learner states that a fight scene where Kino, the protagonist defends the object of his newfound wealth, a pearl, as the most memorable. He is injured in defending this pearl as he is 'hit on the head by the intruder'. This scene is tied with the danger that he puts his family into knowing that his family's safety is jeopardized. Despite this, he still wants to 'take some risk in his life' as 'he knows that he will become a rich man someday'. The fight is memorable as far as it shows the character's persistence to defend his wealth and dreams but unfortunately the learner does not comment about this scene further. Limited information from the text is elicited, although a contention that 'money will not affect happiness but love will make our life happy forever' is also loosely argued. Critical insights in the answer are rarely found and the answer falls into an upper level 2 on Hillocks' Index.

9.2. Post-Assessment Script 1

This response with a critical lens is in striking contrast to pre-assessment script 1. It ascends on Hillocks' Index from an upper level 2 to an upper level 3. Elements of literary theory are infused in the learner's arguments. The response is quite concise, probably due to familiarity with the question, but more in terms of the style and argumentative quality. Episodes in the novel have been interpreted through elements of theory and the learner is able to express the idea of a people who are oppressed by the colonizers and that this is brought to the forefront through the main character. The learner also traces the difficulties incurred by the main characters. The memorable moment in this answer is the discovery of the pearl and the learner foreshadows that 'it marks the start of family's tragic journey in life' and brings 'more trouble to Kino's (the main character's) family. This point of view shows the learner's grasp of events. There is reference to the post-colonial theory and the learner says it 'explains how the colonized people were oppressed' while giving examples of 'a few people like the doctor and the pearl buyers. They behave like colonizers and imposed difficulties upon Kino'. The post-colonial lens is used as a good starting point for critical interpretation by this learner. In the conclusion 'luxuriance' from the pre-assessment script, is changed to a 'luxurious life' and how the pearl

‘symbolizes’ it but ‘inversely’ affects it. There is reasonable comprehension and interpretation of the issues.

9.3. Pre-Assessment Script 2

Question 2: The writer describes the main character as a very determined person. Using the details from the novel that you have studied, write about some instances that show the character’s determination and how the determination affects his/her family. (SPM English 1119, Paper 2, Q34, 2005).

This pre-assessment response is slightly better than pre-assessment script 1, but still remains in a high level 2 of Hillocks’ Index with the learner offering several opinions attesting to the protagonist’s virtues. These virtues do not clearly portray the main character’s determination but offer evidence of commitment to the family. The learner’s comprehension of the issues in relation to the task is not quite clear but a comparison is made between the noun ‘luxuriance’ and ‘love’ as vehicles to a happy life that the main character has to choose from. It implies a complicated choice for the character to make and a suggestion by the learner to solve this predicament comes at the end of this answer. The relationship between Kino, the protagonist, and his wife after the death of their son is labeled ‘estranged’ by the learner and the concluding remarks provide the answer for the protagonist’s earlier problem of choice after he throws ‘the pearl back to the ocean’ by realizing that ‘luxuriance will not make his life happy and safe but love is the most important thing to make a happy life’. The solution for his predicament lies in his choosing the love for his family even though this comes after ‘the most sad event’ when his son is killed.

9.4. Post-Assessment Script 2

This response through a critical lens also reflects better style and substance than the pre-assessment script and merits an average level 3 on Hillocks’ Index. Since the question asks for an analysis of a character’s determination, the learner seems clearer at the task and refers closely to the text and uses traces of post-colonial elements to explain

the character's struggles to 'change his life from poor to the luxurious life'. Kino's (the main character) determination to sell the pearl and to 'protect his family when they were attacked' is stated. The implied relationships between the characters and the main object of the novel, the pearl, are discussed and because of the pearl, the main character 'cannot save his beloved son from being shot by the cruel intruders'. The learner also observes how the poor pearl diver is victimized and 'cheated by the pearl buyer', but the learner is not persistent enough in continuing with the post-colonial lens to draw the parallel of greed between the protagonist and the antagonists in the novel, so this answer falls short of ascending the index even further.

9.5. Pre-Assessment Script 3

Question 3: 'Love is important in a family'. How is this shown in the novel you have read? Support your answer with close reference to the text. (SPM English 1119, Paper 2, Q34, 2006).

The third question focuses on the theme of love, so the learner gives a three-paragraph summary of love from the events in the novel that does not adequately make the case for the learner's concluding claim that 'love is important in a family'. The main female character, Juana, is referred to in the answer but due to the learner's flaccid references to the text and weak arguments, it attains only an average level 2 on Hillocks' Index.

9.6. Post-Assessment Script 3

The learner shows a bit of maturity in answering and appears better acquainted with the theme of love hence an above average level 3 response is recorded. The leading female character, Juana, is the focal point in this answer and the complex relationships between her and her family members are scrutinized. The learner underlines the character's sacrifice and patience to protect her family, showing that love is the driving force behind these attributes. The learner also tells us that the woman 'remains the focus of love' and that she is 'holding the family together with her overpowering love' for her husband and son. The feminist lens becomes apparent in the concluding sentence when

the character is elevated by the learner as a ‘true feminist because of her strength and courage’ as much as she is also ‘compassionate and loyal to her husband’. These interpretations through the feminist lens allow the learner to put forth observations that are more critical and personal.

9.7. Pre-Assessment Script 4

Question 4: ‘It is important to have a person you look up to in your life’. From the novel you have read, write about one character that you look up to. Give reasons why you choose him/her. (SPM English 1119, Paper 2, Q34, 2007).

The above question refers to character and the learner again chooses the lead female character who is a woman of forthright virtues. The character’s qualities are interpreted quite clearly with reference to the novel but without any critical slant. It is a lower level 2 response that shows reasonably valid comprehension of the novel.

9.8. Post-Assessment Script 4

Since this question invites character analysis, the learner has quite conveniently discussed the main female character which was referred to in the earlier answers but nonetheless the requirements of this task are met. This response is elevated to a level 4 on Hillocks’ Index and it is thus far, the best response from this learner. The reference to feminist theory appears in the beginning of the answer, showing less apprehension and more confidence to utilize the critical lens throughout the answer. The lead female character is analyzed in terms of her struggles, strength and courage. Her responsibility towards her family is lauded and instances when this comes across in the novel are discussed by the learner. In the concluding paragraph the learner calls her a ‘feminist character’ and adds, ‘but actually she is the hero of the situation’. This statement is a result of a critical interpretation that elevates her position in the novel above that of her husband. It is substantiated with an intuitive foreshadowing remark that she knows ‘that the pearl will bring the bad luck to her family’. This reference to her as the ‘hero’ shows

that the learner is able to offer an independent point of view based on textual knowledge through a critical lens.

10. Conclusion

The above analyses of learner scripts show that an infusion of theory is possible to enable learners to look at texts and interpret them in more critical ways. Knowledge of literary theory emanates through critical lenses and gradually increases the threshold of interpretation of literary texts to empower the learner to become more critical and informed. These multiple literary interpretations can invoke the starting points for learners in a Malaysian context to better equip themselves with the necessary skills to become more critical and informed readers of literary texts.

References

1. Appleman, D. (2000). *Critical Encounters in High School English – Teaching Literary Theory to Adolescents*. New York: Teachers College Press.
2. Blau, S. (2003). *The Literature Workshop – Teaching Texts and Their Readers*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
3. Cazden, C.B. (2004). “Analyses” and “Interpretations”: Are They Complementary? *Research in the Teaching of English Journal*, 38(3) (February) pp. 338-343.
4. Devan Rajaram (2007). “Literariness and Ideology in Malaysian Newspaper Advertisements”. *Southeast Asian Review of English*. 47(April) pp.60-84.
5. Hillocks, G. (1980). “Toward a Hierarchy of Skills in the Comprehension of Literature”. *English Journal*. 69(7) (March) pp. 54-59.
6. Neuman, W.L. (1997). *Social Research Methods – Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
7. Malaysian Examinations Syndicate: *Examiner’s Reports of SPM 2002-2007*.
8. Ministry of Education. (2000). *English Language Syllabus*.

9. Probst, R. (2004). *Response and Analysis – Teaching Literature in Secondary School*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann
10. Tyson, L. (2006). *Critical Theory Today*. New York: Routledge.
11. Yin, R.K. (1994). *Case Study Research – Design and Methods*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publishers.