

Literature for Literacy: Strategies for Critical Thinking in the Classroom

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Abstract

In this paper, I have tried to outline strategies that can be deployed in the classroom to enable critical literacy among students. Drawing on recent definitions of literacy that expand the scope of the term to include critical thinking skills and analytical competence, the paper discusses the methods for transacting literary works in a constructionist manner in the classroom to enable active meaning-making by students. To this end, I will discuss the way M. H. Abrams' four coordinates of literary criticism—the artist, the universe, the audience and the work—can be used as the cornerstones of interpretation by teachers, as they source additional materials to help students generate individualized interpretations of various works in the classroom. This method also enables deep reading of texts and a personalized engagement with creative works, that results in critical thinking.

On a WhatsApp group comprising students and teachers of language and literature of which I am a part, there arose a discussion recently on how to interpret A. K. Ramanujan's poem "The Black Hen" (1995). Participants offered various interpretations of the piece, that ranged from an analysis of individual words such as "red eyes" and "stitch", to speculations on the larger meaning and theme of the poem. From a methodological perspective, the discussions begged a reflection on what the act of reading entails and how we, as educators, can intensify critical, analytic and interpretative thinking in our classrooms. These remain crucial aspects of literacy. In this paper, I will attempt to unpack some of these ideas by exploring ways in which literary works can be transacted engagingly in our classrooms to enable critical literacy. This is possible by inculcating deep reading practices to help students think and interpret (literary) texts critically.

Understanding (Critical) Literacy

Recent studies in literacy have expanded the scope of the term "critical literacy", to encompass critical and analytic competence. Language is a discursive space that constructs knowledge. Literature likewise constructs worlds through words. There have been, in the last two decades, numerous grounded discussions on the merits of studying literary works in the classroom, as part of literacy practice. Some of its proponents are Paulo Freire, Bell Hooks, Gayatri Spivak, Louise Rosenblatt, Elaine Showalter, Martha Nussbaum and Umberto Eco, among others, who argue in favour of literature, declaring that it has the power to expand the imagination, nurture critical and analytic skills, lateral

thinking and empathy. Freire, for instance, connects reading of the word with an interpretation of the world (Freire, 1970).

Studies in new and critical literacy also approach it as a competence that enables us to read, write, listen, speak and think (emphasis added) critically (Stephens, 2000). Critical thought, central to literacy, is seen as an active, dialogic process of constructing knowledge. Agency and voice emerge as crucial factors, promoted by critical literacy practices (Sperling, Appleman, Gilyard & Freedman, 2011). Supporting the aims of critical literacy entails exploring the strategies for transacting texts in the classroom in a way that promotes justified self-expression. Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory of literature offers one way of approaching the nature of exchange between the reader and the text that can enable critical interpretation in students. Rosenblatt argues that exploring literary works requires a deeper engagement of the reader with the text, which leads to formulating opinions and creative interpretations that embody acts of agency (Rosenblatt, 1938). Maryanne Wolf's criteria (as cited in Richardson, 2014), of deep reading that requires the reader to slow their pace and savour the meaning of a text in greater depth also advocates the need to eschew distraction and read deeply. How can we enable these acts of agential interpretation in the classroom?

The Four Coordinates of Literary Criticism

In the discussions on "The Black Hen", a predominant concern was to decipher what the poem was about. The participants' responses focused on what the poem said about the craft of creating poetry. Though the explanations were valid, they did not capture the complexity

of the work sufficiently. "The Black Hen" is dense and layered with multiple meanings; it is connected deeply to Ramanujan's musings on the nature of poetry, magic and craft. In fact, it lends itself to being read as a personalized statement of the poet on these themes. Phrased differently, we can ask, "What does 'The Black Hen' signify?" What kinds of specific information must we seek to engage in a critical analysis, appreciation and interpretation of the work?

M. H. Abrams, in *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953), presents a grid where the work, placed at the centre, is surrounded by the artist, the audience and the universe as the three points of a triangle (Abrams, 1953).

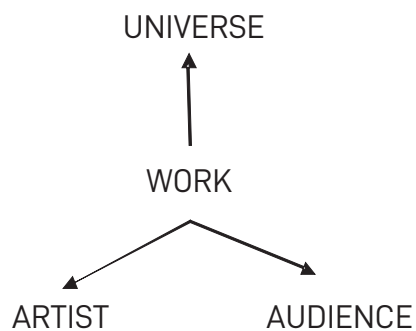


Figure 1. This figure illustrates Abram's grid.

For Abrams, these coordinates comprise the four cornerstones of literary analysis and criticism. Between them, they cover the structure of the work, its biographical criticism, its socio-cultural critique and reader-responses in the act of meaning-making. Drawing on this framework, I would like to propose a method of literary analysis that talks to Rosenblatt's transactional theory of literature, emphasizing on interpretation through a holistic reading of a text to help us become active participants in meaning-making. Abrams' coordinates illustrate the way the form and content of a work are influenced simultaneously by the context (world) in which the work is

situated, the circumstances of the artist who created the work and the perspective of the audience who read the work.

Let us take each of these coordinates separately. The world can influence a work in many ways; it is the socio-cultural, economic and political context within which a work is set and conditions its production. At the same time, the world can be reflected in the plot of the work as well. Reading beyond the work to consider these influences can enrich our understanding of the text.

The author, similarly, is integral to the creation of a work. A straightforward understanding of the author is that of the creator of the work. The work is the author's brainchild and a manifestation of his/her creativity. It is, however, also necessary to situate the author within an intellectual tradition. Consider Michel Foucault who says that the author is a discourse, a set of ideas to be deciphered through patterns in textual structures (Foucault, 1969). Foucault's approach suggests that it is not enough to look at the biographical details of when an author was born, when she/he died, where she/he lived, who she/he married, etc. It is equally important to understand the author as an intellectual and evolving being, with ideas and ideologies that can often be reflected in the (creative) texts she/he constructs through language. By this approach, tracing and establishing the writing tradition of authors is as important, perhaps even more important an act of contextualizing, than situating them chronologically in history. Looking for additional works by authors and exploring their writings, interviews, thoughts and opinions, as well as reading other works written by them will give us a holistic perspective and help us teach a work better.

The audience is, finally, of foremost significance, since it is the unique perspective of the reader that brings the

text to life with each reading. At the same time, the act of interpretation stems from critical thinking and enables the readers to participate in meaning-making activities. If we take the purpose of critical literacy to be an enkindling of analytic thinking and active construction of meaning, this is one avenue for realizing Rosenblatt's transactional theory. At the same time, proof and validity of an interpretation must be drawn from the text as well as through extra information from the world and the author.

Interpreting "The Black Hen" Using Abrams' Rubrics: An Example of Critical Literacy Practice

Let's go back to the poem "The Black Hen", which is part of a poetry collection by Ramanujan, published posthumously in 1995. These poems were collated with three other (already published) volumes and brought out as *The Collected Poems of A. K. Ramanujan* (1995). Poetry collections work with an internal, structural logic. Contextualizing individual poems can therefore lead to a richer analysis. Truly engaging with the meaning of the poem would require the reader to place the work within a larger context, appreciate its craft and structure, and see how the uniqueness of the poet's craft expresses a theme that draws from a world outside the work.

The first level of interpretation of "The Black Hen" would suggest that it is about the process of writing poetry. Ramanujan uses the metaphor of embroidery to

indicate that writing poetry is not a natural process, like leaves sprouting from a tree, but a careful, aesthetically constructed craft. The poem's reference to the black hen, however, still remains elusive. Drawing on Ramanujan's background as a translator, litterateur, philologist, folklorist and anthropologist at this point, can help us interpret the possible meanings embedded in the work.

K. Narayana Chandran's reference to a folktale in Britain, about a vicar who practiced sorcery, is useful for throwing light on the title. According to the tale, the vicar was delivering a sermon when a servant entered his house and opened his book of magic. As the servant started reading from the book, the weather became dark and stormy. A black hen and several chicks entered the house. They slowly started growing in size till they were as high as the ceiling. Midway through his sermon, the vicar noticed the change in weather and guessed what was happening. He rushed back home and saw the hen. He grabbed a bag of rice and threw it to the fowls. As the birds started eating the rice, the vicar quickly reversed the spell (Chandran, 2009).

When we read the poem within the context of this folktale, the text opens up a world of possibilities. Ramanujan's interest in folk traditions feeds into the incorporation of such stories in his work, lending depth and density to it. While the poem is about craft, it is also about the magical power of words. Though a majority of descriptions in literature on the magic of words remain positive and speak of transformation and empowerment (for example, Shakespearean sonnets, romantic poetry, etc.), Ramanujan's poem draws attention to its dark and threatening aspects.

Poetry can empower, but in incompetent hands, it can also overpower. Every stitch can lead towards an intricate tapestry, but this can come undone as well. The symbolism of the black hen, with its dramatic use of colours such as black and red, add to the density of the work. There is also a hint of illegitimacy when we think of the vicar practicing black magic. It is the servant's act, however, that provokes the natural elements while the vicar sets right the wrong.

The title is dense with all these connotations that become evident when we read more about Ramanujan, and the context of his work in relation to the craft, which requires reading beyond the text. Further reading, as we can see, opens up the possibilities of interpretation and creates opportunities for a wide range of readers to comment on and analyse the work from their individual perspectives.

Also comment-worthy, at this point, is that what you have read so far is my interpretation of the poem, based on extra-textual references, as I used Abrams' rubric to construct a critical analysis of "The Black Hen". Any number of such interpretations are possible and valid as long as they draw on examples from the text to validate their stance. Several interpretations currently exist of the poem, and several more can be generated in the years to come. The interpretations by Narayana Chandran (2009) and Pallavi Srivastava (2015) listed in the references, for instance, are two of many critical readings of Ramanujan's works. Each of these interpretations is unique and valid as it focuses on select aspects of his poems and prose, and expresses the reader's opinion, drawing on examples from the work to substantiate its claim.

Some Concluding Reflections on the Methodology for Using Literature for Literacy

What is of critical import is that the deployment of Abrams' rubrics of the artist, the universe, the audience and the work for interpretation can lead to a dynamic classroom. As teachers, we can enable similar practices of critical literacy in our class, by providing additional resources to students to contextualize the text we teach. Other curated poems from Ramanujan's writing can broaden their imagination of the work as an artefact that is volatile and transforming. Students can now ground their interpretation using additional materials to validate their opinions. In the process, meaning-making becomes the focus of the language and literature classroom, leading to construction of knowledge through dialogues, which for Sperling et al., is a core function of literacy (Sperling et al., 2011). With this argumentative framework, we have already started moving towards an approach that privileges analytic thinking. A transactional approach in the language and literature classroom will enable the exploration, navigation and critique of the world, the text and the self, that remain the core concerns of critical literacy practice.

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