

Interdisciplinarity of literature: A pedagogical perspective

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“It is not a matter simply of questions that one formulates while submitting oneself ...to the principle of reason, but also of preparing oneself thereby to transform modes of writing, approaches to pedagogy, the procedures of academic exchange, the relations to other languages, to other disciplines, to the institution in general, to its inside and its outside”. (Jacques Derrida, 2001:13)

Abstract

Literature is not a flat discipline that can be approached from one perspective. It encompasses a bunch of interrelated disciplines which form a multi-facet subject emanating from the author-reader contextual elements. Thus, approaching it with a sole perspective often leads to a sterile upshot. It rather necessitates an interdisciplinary approach that grants students and teachers as well a powerful medium for the understanding of the function and value of literature. This paper will take the endeavor to point out the interdisciplinarity of literature, and how can the latter be valuable and rewarding as a pedagogical instrument. It argues that literature is not a purely aesthetic output, though it can be thought of as such if looked upon from one perspective, but a culmination of different subjects carried out through the aesthetic dimension of the literary work.

The subject of literature is a challenging venture for both teachers and students. For students it is most of the time considered as an esoteric subject along with the widespread belief in the uselessness of literature. Not knowing what literature is affects the students' comprehension of the subject and leads to their disinterest. For

teachers, the endeavor of gaining the interest of students and making literature within their reach might not be easy to achieve. Therefore, we believe an interdisciplinary approach may lead to a better understanding of the subject and will enthuse students and attract their attention to the importance of literature along with the joy it provides. This paper does not pretend an exhaustive and precise definition for the concept of interdisciplinarity in literature, yet it is an attempt to introduce this approach as an efficient didactic means for a better apprehension of literature as a whole as well as for the review of specific topics.

The author of this paper sees interdisciplinarity as the interaction between different disciplines and the use of their various perspectives and parameters in an integrative approach for a better understanding of literature. Interdisciplinarity is not considered in itself, it is “neither a subject matter nor a body of content. It is a process for achieving an integrative synthesis, a process that usually begins with a problem, question, topic, or issue” (Klein, 1990: 175). It is not an aim in itself or a simple way to walk through for “Interdisciplinary pedagogy, then, is not synonymous with a single process, set of skills, method, or technique. Instead, it is concerned primarily with fostering in students a sense of self-authorship and a situated, partial and perspectival notion of knowledge that they can use to respond to Literature and psychology”(Chettiparamb, 2007: 32). It is subsequently a set handed to students to equip them with a more personal and autonomous interpretation of the text and grant them more space for creativity. The more perspectives we have the closer we come to Truth.

Besides, literary texts are not a simple form/content dichotomy. They do not have a central meaning or a given unique right interpretation. For Barthes “To interpret a text is not to give it a (more or less justified, more or less free) meaning but on the contrary to appreciate what *plural* constitutes it” (Barthes, 1974:5). A plurality of

meaning that cannot be tackled by one given outlook. It is then necessary to make use of the different elements of answer and tools provided by a range of disciplines such as History, Psychology, Sociology, Ethnography, Politics, Linguistics and even exact sciences whenever needed. These disciplines are not solely significant when dealing with the content of the literary text but they may be of much importance to draw pertinent theoretical frameworks and methodologies for critical as well as for didactic purpose.

When a teacher has a literary text between his hands, he detains a page of human life drawn by the artist. This drawing reflects, to a given extent, the outside world as well as the inside world. The world outside the text is the writer's context with all its political, social, linguistic and ethnographic elements, along with others; and the world inside the text may be part of History or may be a promised land or an evasive sanctuary. That drawing reflects as well a world inside the writer, a world where psychology is put forward. When a teacher makes his students conscious of this plurality, of the in-world and the out-world, he makes the literary text relevant and more valuable and interesting for students. For that reason viewing the text with solely the aesthetic dimension is not enough to have an insight to the text. It necessitates then the inclusion of as much disciplines as possible to lay hold its multiplicity.

An important discipline that can be used for literary studies and for teaching is History. Being at the first place a story, History has much similitude with literary writings. The difference is the claim to truth, yet both may give a realistic representation of the past. Literature operates on History in its way by allowing the reader to see through the past with the characters' eyes. It makes the vanished scenes and places alive with its setting and breathes life in History by its plots. On the other hand, History may grant literature the contextual elements of the writer's

work. For instance, a teacher who tackles the early works of American Literature cannot do without going back to elements provided by History; on the other hand, the literature of the time provides the reader with a considerable understanding of the age. Making students aware of this close relationship bestows them with more authoritative perception of the literary texts of the period.

History is about people, and the relation between peoples and cultures leads to ethnography. This discipline had and still has a major impact on literature. The racial and cultural interrelations between the north and the south, the white man and the black man, men and women, have gained a growing consideration through the last two centuries. Ethnography's importance is eminent in African and Caribbean literature. The encounter between the white man and the African was a plentiful topic ever since Achebe presented it in *Things Fall Apart*. The teacher, in such a case, might drive the attention of his students to the mutual work literature and ethnography has on each other. Literature is a voice peoples of the world use to speak themselves out. At the same time, ethnography empowers literature with abundant material to explore human relations.

Another discipline in relation with Literature is sociology. The social issues have always been at the center of many literary works while literature plays a major role in sociology as well. Albercht identifies six elements of the link between literature and society: the notion that literature embodies norms and values of a society, the psychoanalytic variant that literature fulfills shared emotional needs and fantasies, a Jungian view that literature arises from the collective unconsciousness and thus is similar to dreams, the theory that literature reflects a Hegelian "essential spirit" of society, the Marxian view that forms of literature are a result of the economic conditions of the elite, or of the rising classes, and literature reflects demographic trends. (in Victoria Alexander, 2003: 31). For a teacher sociology makes literature

closer to students and allows them to see its large impact. A dramatic literary book about a social topic might be more effective than a two hours lecture about the same issue because literature may affect the emotional side of people and plays with the strings of their hearts whether consciously or unconsciously.

Mentioning the unconscious brings us to another fundamentally important discipline in relation with literature, namely psychology. Literature explores the inside world of the human being, whether exposed deliberately by the artist or tossed unconsciously on the paper. Literary texts display the psyche of their writers who are part of a given society and can hence give a reading of the psychological dimension of the writer's age. An example of the psychological portrayal in American Literature is *The Red Badge of Courage* by Stephen Crane where the writer dives into the psyche of a young recruit in the army during the American Civil War. Reading some literary text might give an insight about the psychological disorder of an age such as the works of the post world wars. Subsequently, Literature is a kind of showroom for the psychological symptoms.

Psychology as a discipline has a crucial impact on literary studies and on the teaching of literature itself. A teacher who makes use of psychology will achieve effective results with his students. Besides, psychology is motivating for most students. Therefore, using it enhances the ability of students to respond to the teacher's questions and makes the class thought-provoking instead of data-delivering.

In brief, an interdisciplinary approach avoids a narrow labeling based on exclusion. It deconstructs the idea of autonomy in interpretation, criticism or even teaching i.e. a teacher of literature cannot claim being solely a literary man but a man who has certain knowledge in the literary field that, along with other fields,

makes his perspective a powerful one and grants him an authority that transcends simple literary knowledge. From this perspective, the relation between teacher-student should not be hierarchical or hegemonic. For sure the teacher has a considerable influence upon his students, that's why he should provide them with enough perspectives through the interdisciplinary approach to set them free and to liberate their productive and innovative potential.

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