

An Obligatory Poetry Course: Benefits, Challenges and Way Forward: A Survey of Some Secondary Schools in Rwanda

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Abstract: Poetry as a literary genre is part and parcel of human domains and daily practices. Most scholars have indeed acknowledged the universality of poetry as a boundless form of communication. Although it predates formal education, poetry is unfairly subordinated to other genres of Literature. At school, poetry is not accorded ample space in the curriculum and teaching time-table. Worse still, both learners and teachers seem to dread it, thus a grossly sidelined discipline. Using the available and pertinent secondary data, this paper analyzes the utility of compulsorily teaching poetry to all students. It has been recommended that poetry should be accorded a compulsory status from Primary through to the end of Ordinary school level. The last section of this article suggests several approaches to the learning and teaching of poetry.

Keywords: Definition of Poetry, a form of communication, Poets disseminate knowledge, an approach to poetry

1. Introduction

Many scholars have given poetry varying definitions. Although the wording in these definitions may differ, the sense closely overlaps. Below are few of these definitions. Amateshe (1988) says that poetry is simply a form of expression, either oral or written. He views it as a form of communication. To emphasize the communicative element of poetry, Amateshe cites the English poet and critic, William Wordsworth who observed that a poet is a man speaking to fellow men.

Likewise, Cluster (1964) asserts that poetry is a kind of communication which gives another kind of knowledge. He explains that poets disseminate knowledge by way of describing, commenting, and recording various aspects of human experience in a meaningful sense.

As for the utility of poetry, Rubadiri (1989: viii) points out thus:

“A poem a day soothes, heals, mends, teaches and inspires the family of man, bird, beast and flower”

All these observations on what poetry is, zero-down to the sense of a communicative mode. It focuses on all sheds of human experiences, both pleasant and regrettable. Poets are often out to cheer and inspire mankind into perseverance and self-assertation.

Considering the importance and autonomous existence of poetry, we strongly feel that it should be accorded an independent slot on the school curriculum. It should not be subordinated to the other genres of Literature. Every human being should be granted the opportunity of experiencing the inspiring and enlightening joys enshrined in poetry.

2. Review of Related Literature

The Literature presented below falls into two categories, that is, the benefits of learning- teaching poetry and the challenges experienced in the teaching of poetry.

a) Benefits of a poetry course

In view of the vast benefits of poetry on language improvement, knowledge expansion, intelligence sharpening, and general inspiration to mankind, it deserves being instituted into the school curriculum as an autonomous and compulsory academic discipline. Many, a scholar have pointed out the benefits of a poetry course. Bukenya (1978 : 26) notes:

“ ... poems are written about people and for people”

People should therefore access poetry in enough quantities and study it very closely. Otherwise, the poets' message continues to lay wasted. In a similar connotation, Bukenya also describes poets as the unofficial teachers and lawyers for their societies. This implies that poets are committed to people's enlightenment and justice of humanity. The best way of exploiting this service is to ensure that the young generation is compulsorily exposed to poetry. Of course, school and the school curriculum would be the most dependable forum.

If one takes an example of Okot p'Bitek's poem *“ Return the Bride-wealth”* contained in Cook and Rubadiri (1971) which gives us deep insight on the precarious nature of contemporary marriage relationships. Okot highlights lack of commitment by the modern day couples in comparison to those of the older generation. Marriage being an essential institution in every society, thus everybody, especially the youth deserves some guidance about it. In a similar tone, Alton (1995: 117) asserts thus: *“ what one receives from poetry is an experience”* And indeed, we need educative experience to become useful citizens. Thus, if poetry was made compulsorily accessible in class, some of the social predicaments would be lightened.

In terms of sharpening intelligence, Shirley (1983) argues that a poetry course for secondary school learners would greatly develop their critical thinking. Her observation is based on the premise that poets never communicate in a plain style. Their message is often hidden in symbols, metaphors, allusions and other figures of speech. This would

thus demand of the learner to discover the poet's connotative and denotative messages, all of which awakens one's critical faculty. In a way, Tompkins (1980) also seems to concur with Shirley on the correlation between poetry and intelligence. He contends that deriving meaning from a literary piece of work is a collaborative cognitive task. No doubt, sharpening the critical faculty and thinking is of great service to the young.

Poetry just like other genres of Literature shapes personality. It moulds individual human being's tastes, empathy, sense of imagination and judgment. This is to say that poetry develops the affective domain. Consequently, poetry learners who are exposed to sufficient doses of Literature have a very high propensity of becoming better human beings (Moody, 2001). In a related view, poetry enhances positive personal traits. Wairo (1988:15) claims that poetry builds up learner's confidence. Owing to all these essential attributes, poetry is thus, a very desirable course for all learners. It would make both the individual and society better.

Furthermore, poetry offers an ample avenue for language mastery. More often than not, poets employ ambiguous, compressed, heavy and figurative language which calls for deeper explications as to arrive at the sense. A keen student of poetry will consequently be better at the given language. Through the reading skill by which poetry in schools is largely accessed, vocabulary, structure as well as the writing skill will be easily mastered (Kazemek, 1985; Rubadiri, ibid). Therefore, a poetry course is also a non-threatening language course within which that poetry is being dispensed.

b) Challenges in the learning-teaching of Poetry

In a very large proportion of schools and colleges, especially in Africa, the learning and teaching of poetry is a problem-riddled process. Even in the very few schools and colleges where it is taught, learners are never enthusiastic about it. Cook (1977) recounts his decade's experience with fresh students at Makerere University, in Uganda:

"Generations have emerged from African schools afraid of poetry because their teachers have been afraid of it, so that it is seen all too often as a tedious and fearsome obstacle-course which no one would enter upon again of their own free will"

No matter how well-trained, equipped and experienced; teaching unenthusiastic class deflates the zeal and dulls the mood. The outcome is indeed very obvious – ineffectiveness.

A great deal of challenges facing the learning-teaching of poetry are also related to teacher's competence. Lack of model poetry teachers dogs the process of poetry learning (Lockward, 1994) intimates that most teachers of Literature have phobia for poetry, and not even keen at reading it. Such a situation is akin with incompetence in the genre. It is nightmarish, therefore, for one to teach a discipline he abhors. All this arises from the vicious cycle of poor schooling. A half-baked student can never excel at teaching that very subject.

Kennedy (1999) observes that poetry teaching is often characterized by poor delivery methods. There are many teachers who never attempt to contextualize the subject content and questioning to the learners' socio-psychic environment. Instead, such teachers with a string of mind boggling questions. Poetry teaching, like any other social science discipline should be tuned to the learners' experiences and environment. Content and question contextualization should also take care of the learners' competence. For this reason, therefore, a single poem could be presented in varying ways to match learners' ability and interest.

Carter and Long (1991) single out teacher-centered lesson delivery as the most detrimental challenge in the learning-teaching process of poetry. Such a non-participatory method of teaching alienates learners from any attempt of divulging into poetry. They tend to view it as a teacher-handed down mystery. Consequently, they tend to look on waiting for the teacher to demystify all the ideas and poetic devices for them.

3. Statement of the Problem

The teaching of Literature in English in Rwandan secondary schools formally started in 2011. It is, thus still challenge-ridden. As an academic discipline, poetry is one of the genres of Literature. Unlike other genres of Literature like drama and the novel, poetry predates formal education. It is inherent to human activity. This places poetry among the natural human domains. However, it is somehow unfair that its always subordinated to others genres of Literature.

Regardless of all the bare fact that poetry is laced with an integral part of human knowledge and experiences, the school curriculum as well as teachers and learners seem to under-rate it. The potentiality of poetry in polishing language skills, overshadowing knowledge across the curricula, notwithstanding, it is accorded negligible attention. The school curriculum pays little attention to the teaching of poetry.

Muvandimwe (2013) and Cook (1977) express their dissatisfaction that poetry is only taught as a genre within Literature. It is never allocated enough contact hours on the time-table. Actually, the duo, do remind us that schools are actually under no obligation to offer Literature in general. Meanwhile, even the schools which offer it are not keen at ensuring that poetry is taught, and given the very best seriousness deserved. It is simply a marginalized discipline.

4. Methodology of Data Collection

The idea of conducting this study was conceived in 2012 at Ecole Scholaire Muhazi, Nyarugenge district while on an internship supervision mission. The very first student-teacher I supervised was teaching English and the topic of the lesson was based on a poem.

There and then, I took interest on finding out the status of poetry, the approaches of presenting it, challenges and secondary students' response to Literature learning in general. I used the internship inspection visits to observe

how poetry is taught, as well as share experiences with some experienced teachers of English and French; student-teachers of the same disciplines; and learners majoring in the same.

The basic method of soliciting data was basically lesson observation and informal structured interviews. The case studies were Ecole Technique in Kigali city and GS Rugarama in Burera District for 2012/; GS Nyanza in Kigali city and GS Ntarama in Bugesera district for 2013; GS Masaka II in Kigali city, GS Mushubi and GS Uwinkomo in Nyamagabe district 2014; and GS Camp Kanombe in Kigali city and GS Saint Nicolas Nyamashekye in Nyamashekye for 2015. In order to minimize suspicion and obtain free response on the subject, I conducted the interactions in a rather casual and conversational than interrogative tone. I would record some of their responses by my mobile telephone.

5. Findings and Discussion

The above said field visits found out that poetry is not much prominence on the school curriculum. Many teachers choose to skip it.

Where it is taught as part of Literature, I found out that right from introductory remarks, throughout the lesson to end, most teachers applied teacher-centred approaches in presenting poetry. There was no attempt to involve learners into considerable close-reading of the poem, let alone loud reading. Teacher only handed down their own personal interpretation of a poem. The interpretation basically revolved on denotation rather than the connotation sense. It thus sounds like language comprehension lessons, not literature.

Meanwhile, learners just look on, somewhat amazed. Of course, this is not the right approach to poetry, a fact agreed upon with my supervisees during our discussion after the lesson, and most of the other teachers of Languages and Literature in the visited schools.

A very big proportion of the teachers are not well-versed with vital poetic devices by which poets put across their ideas. Even those who try will only mechanically define the terms, rarely applying them to poems in class. Learners are never engaged in identifying these poetic devices and discussing their effect on enhancing ideas in the poem in question. Much as a poem can arouse varying emotions from each reader, teachers tended to impose their own feelings upon the class. Thus, learners are given little opportunity to react and exercise personal interpretations!

Our discussion focuses on the recommended approach to poetry learning and teaching as it seems the biggest challenge. Whenever you are reading a poem for the first time, it is a good idea to annotate your comments on the margin. It is often useful to identify different aspects of a poem such as allusion, irony, metaphor, simile, personification, rhyme, satire, repetition, pun, etc. Do the same with subject analysis. Jot down the relevant ideas as they normally arise in the course of reading through the poem.

Depending on the poem, ideas like religious hypocrisy, political persecution, infidelity, patriotism, racial tension, class stratifications ... may be noted. Note down each point adjacent to the verse in which it has been identified. It should be recalled that subject matter analysis in poetry is not about paraphrasing or re-telling the story-line of the poem. We must learn how to read deeper between the story-line with a critical sense as to discover the poet's message.

Besides the figures of speech, the poet's message is always contained in the intonation (manner of expression), diction and the tone, that is, the poet's feelings towards the subject. Its helpful to pay close attention to the poem's form and poet's use of punctuation marks, too (Mugumya, et al, 2012). Close attention to the poet's choice of words, poetic devices and punctuation marks is an essential tool in poetry appreciation. Learner-centred approaches to poetry, and Literature teaching in general are more effective and helpful.

Finally, poetry should be accorded an equal status to other disciplines on the school curriculum to avoid the tendency of being marginalized avoided by teachers.

6. Conclusion

Indeed, most teachers in Rwanda, like the rest of the continent shun the teaching of poetry. They are uncomfortable with its abstractness and figures of speech. Learners, on their part, often refer to poetry as a "monster and dreadful" subject. Consequently, a poetry course is always one of the most abhorred and highly neglected (Muvandimwe, 2013). The observation that most learners and teachers have a negative attitude towards poetry is buttressed by various scholars. Dias and Hayhoe (1988) observe that the teaching of poetry continues to pose a challenge to secondary school teachers. They note that there is always considerable unease whenever most teachers of either language or Literature are asked to handle a poetry course unit. They barely know what to do with poetry in the classroom and consequently, little poetry is taught. As such, the insufficient interaction with poetry has a negative bearing on the learners' future relationship with the discipline.

7. Future Scope

This study could be extended by looking into related topics like:

- i) The relevance of traditional poetry on contemporary academic disciplines
- ii) The role of the teacher in changing learner's attitude towards poetry
- iii) The place of poetry in teacher training colleges

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