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Editors

Sudandarambal Saminathan

Saratha Sithamparam

Margaret Yong

MACLALS
Department of English
University of Malaya
Kuala Lumpur
Malaysia

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PARTINGS

by

Siew-Yue Killingley

It is hard to feel who hurts more
By looking on with outsiders' eyes
Or looking inwards with the mother's
As the whimper then cry explodes
Into yet another being all ensouled.

At this parting should we avert our gaze?
So private, yet public, could there be resentment
In those new-born tears, a conventional show
Of grief at parting, perhaps masking relief
That the painful point has passed to living?

They closed their eyes to shut out blackness,
The flatness of refusal to feel more after peaks
Of foreseen joy, which is a kind of parting grief.
Each hides the absence of further feeling from eyes
That cannot overflow with love become relief.

And once as the train was about to start,
Her eyes started to tear and to tear my heart,
Which hiding from my eyes, made me briefly remark
That she'd be on time, no need to fear delays,
And thus sped that parting in conventional ways.

Yet in time there subtly arose other pretence
Veiled in oblique looks and smiles to cover absence
Of grief at parting, and to hide that pain
From all eyes and our own by embracing again
And averting our gaze from the breach in-between.

On Good Friday I saw again the small bright east
Window at Strasbourg Cathedral, glowing with mystery
And light, depicting so strangely the Mother and Child
Of God, like a blinding brilliant eye parting
The gloom of the church with insight into parting.

She could be parting her garments to reveal her breast
(It's only a small window and set high up in the gloom).
Our eyes wouldn't be able to see if lips were on nipple,
Or if parting from it, those gaping childish lips
Darkly revealed, 'And last they parted my garments.'

Then the strange unease of the eleven ill-prepared
Even for a simple parting from their Lord, as they faced
What seemed like a perpetual parting, and looking up,

They had to witness with their eyes if not hearts
A yet cloudier separation of familiar ways.

And last, as the pure soul leaves the body
It looks back with mild regret, as at a birth.
My eyes look on and recognize with averted gaze
The relief of a parting of the ways, and I dry
Them lest they overflow into conventional grief.

THE PERFECTIVE IN ENGLISH

by

Irene F. H. Wong

Among the persistent and prominent problems in the description of the English finite verb has been that of accurately characterizing the difference in meaning between forms like "He went" (usually termed the 'simple past' or 'preterit') and forms like "He has gone" (the 'present perfect') and "He had gone" (the 'past perfect'). Of theories about the perfective/preterit opposition and related phenomena, there is no dearth; in fact, there is a long legacy of grammatical treatises stemming from well before the modern era in linguistics. However, in spite of the plethora of information on the use and meaning of the perfective, many problems remain. This paper re-examines the issue of the perfective, in an attempt at a better understanding of its use and function in English.

Firstly, is the perfective a tense form in English? Before we can answer this question, we have to ask what tense is. It can be defined as an expression of time in the form of the finite verb, relative to the time of the utterance. Now tense is only a grammatical term, while time is a universal, non-linguistic concept in the real world, and no strict correspondence can be expected between the two. Real time, though in actuality a continuum, is usually conveniently divided into past, present, and future, and confusion between real time and tense has led to

the belief that the latter must also be similarly divided into past, present and future.

However, if we consider that tense means the correspondence between the form of the verb and our concept of time, then in actual fact there are only two divisions of tense -- one marked formally with the '-ed' suffix and the other without. Grammarians differ as to what to call these two divisions of tense, alternating between 'past', and 'present', 'past' and 'non-past', and 'remote' and 'actual'. Semantically too, the difference between the two is clear--with past time being the marked member of the pair in that it specifically excludes the present moment, while non-past time is understood to mean any period of time, short, long or eternal, that includes the present moment.

But the finite verb in English also has a number of other suffixes, which do not seem to relate to time. For example, there is the '-ing' suffix (as in 'swimming', 'eating', 'taking', etc.) and the '-en' suffix (as in 'swum', 'eaten', 'taken', etc.). For these verb forms, the relation to time is expressed rather by the auxiliary verbs they occur with, as in "is/was swimming", "have/had eaten". The first suffix, the '-ing', is usually known as the progressive (all other verbs without the '-ing' being non-progressive) and the second suffix, the '-en', is usually known as the perfective.

This has given rise to what is called the progressive or continuous tenses and the perfect tenses. So although the perfective is not included within the main two-way division of tense into past and non-past, it is nevertheless

seen to interact closely with forms serving to indicate temporal relationships. More specifically, it is felt to indicate that the events spoken of have been 'completed'; there is consequently a natural relationship between the perfective and past time, since presumably only events which have occurred in the past will be completed at the time of speaking. The sentences "He went", "He has gone", and "He had gone" all refer to actions that have taken place in the past. If this is so, then what is it, if anything at all, which distinguishes between them?

Grammarians differ in their answer to this. Many would like to call the difference one of 'Aspect', which has to do more with "the manner in which the verbal action is experienced or regarded" (Quirk and Greenbaum 1973:40) than with tense or time. For English, the two aspects usually referred to are the progressive (expressed by the '-ing' suffix) and the perfective (expressed by the '-en' suffix). Hence actions which are regarded as being in progress will take the form "He is going" or "He was going", and actions which are regarded as having been completed will take the form "He has gone" or "He had gone", the first of each pair being in the present tense and the second in the past tense.

While the distinction between progressive and non-progressive forms is relatively clear, that between perfective and non-perfective is not. While the progressive aspect is marked by the '-ing' suffix in main verbs, this is not the case with the perfective aspect, for in the latter case the main verbs generally keep the same form as in the past tense (e.g. 'told',

'walked', 'bought', 'had', 'folded', etc.), with the exception of about only sixty verbs in the language which have their own separate perfective forms (e.g. 'gone', 'rung', 'drunk', 'swum', 'eaten', 'taken', 'ridden', 'arisen', 'written', etc.). The difference between the perfective form and the past tense form resides formally not in the main verb but in the presence or absence of the auxiliary verb 'have/had' (e.g. 'told', 'had told'; 'walked', 'has walked'; 'tried', 'have tried').

Semantically too the meaning of the progressive is much clearer than that of the perfective. It is to the latter, therefore, that this paper devotes its attention. The problem of 'aspect' in English is that it is not systematically marked in the grammar or in the lexicon; moreover, the language does not have as complete or systematic a system of aspect as, say, Russian. Thus, with only two aspectual forms, the progressive and the perfective, English has to express a whole list of relatively concrete meanings. Moreover, it is the perfective aspect which has to bear most of this semantic load since the meaning of the progressive is quite restricted and specialized.

Hence some of the meanings which have been associated with the perfective aspect focus around such concepts as completion, repetition, habituality, result, anteriority, short duration, temporal limitation, punctuality, inception, etc. Of all these meanings, it is that of anteriority, or 'past-in-the-past', which is usually expressed by the past perfect. More accurately, it is said to express "a time further in the past, seen from the viewpoint of a definite point of time already in the past"

(Leech 1971:42). The crucial point about the use of the past perfect is that it demands an already established past point of reference. Examples such as the following make this clear:

1a When he got home, the ambulance had left.

b The robbers had left by the time the police arrived.

However, there are also other means in the language to express the idea of past-in-the-past than through the use of the past perfect. If the narrative is such that the sequence of two events is already well established, the past perfect is interchangeable with the simple past tense, as the following example shows:

2a I went out after my wife had got back from work.

b I went out after my wife got back from work.

Since the subordinating conjunction 'after' places the second event (i.e. the wife getting back from work) before the first (the speaker's going out), the sequence of events is very clear and the past perfect is, in a way, redundant. If there is a difference between the two sentences, it may be said to reside in the fact that the first statement measures the 'beforeness' of the wife getting back from work from the event of the speaker's going out, while the second statement measures it directly from the present moment, treating it as another 'then', or past, event.

Of the two verb forms for expressing the past, the preterit and the past perfect, the latter may be said to be the marked member of the pair in that it is ordinarily used only against the backdrop of the former. In other words, it is not common to the preterit. This is well illustrated in the following extract from Henry James's The Portrait of a Lady (1947:3):

> The old gentleman at the tea-table, who had come from America thirty years before, had brought with him, at the top of his baggage, his American physiognomy; and he had not only brought it with him, but he had kept it in the best order, so that, if necessary, he might have taken it back to his own country with perfect confidence. At present, obviously, nevertheless, he was not likely to displace himself; his journeys were over and he was taking the rest that precedes the great rest. He had a narrow, clean-shaven face, with features evenly distributed and an expression of placid acuteness. It was evidently a face in which the range of representation was not large, so that the air of contented shrewdness was all the more of a merit. It seemed to tell that he had been successful in life, yet it seemed to tell also that his success had not been exclusive and invidious, but had had much of the inoffensiveness of failure. He had certainly had a great experience of men, but there was an almost rustic simplicity in the faint smile that

30 played upon his lean, spacious cheek and lighted up his humorous eye as he at last slowly and carefully deposited his big tea-cup upon the table.

The scene of the old gentleman at the tea-table is narrated in the simple past tense (see lines 10 to 21, 28 to 33, which establishes the past point of reference for the passage. When the author wishes to go further back to a point prior to that established point of reference, he uses the past perfect, as in lines 1 to 8, and 22 to 27.

This leaves the present perfect to express the rest of the whole list of meanings and functions which have been attributed to the perfective forms, such as 'past with present relevance', 'past involving the present', 'state up to the present', 'indefinite past', 'at least once in a period leading up to the present', 'habit in a period leading up to the present', and 'resultative past' (Leech 1971:30-35). As is noticeable, there is no parallel in the present tense to the past-in-the-past idea expressed by the past perfect, and so the idea of anteriority is not relevant when it comes to the present perfect.

The main problem with the present perfect is that there is no one 'meaning' which has been found to satisfy the linguists working in this area. Each work makes claims which refute others. For example, the property of implying an end-point (under the meaning of 'completion') had long been a favourite among grammarians, but recent work now sees that it cannot be taken as necessary to perfectivity. As Comrie declares (1976:19), "indicating the end of a situation is

at best only one of the possible meanings of a perfective form, certainly not its defining feature".

There is a great deal of truth in each description of meaning and function attributed to the present perfect forms, such as 'past with present relevance', 'past involving the present', 'state up to the present', 'indefinite past', 'at least once in a period leading up the present', 'habit in a period leading up to the present', and 'resultative past' (Leech 1971:30-35). However, the trouble is that none of these conceptions applies to more than a subset of cases, and grammarians have to come up with lists of examples to illustrate each 'meaning' of the present perfect, but in the end we are no clearer as to the meaning of the present perfect in general.

This has led to some linguists not being in general agreement with the classification of the perfective under the category of aspect, even though there are correspondences between its meanings and functions with some of the meanings usually expressed by aspectual forms in other European languages, such as that of 'completion' and 'result'. It would seem that the main reason for classifying the perfective as an aspect has been simply that there is no other well-defined category into which it fits comfortably.

Some linguists have even been led to argue for the exclusion of the category of aspect from the categories of English grammar, because of the host of problems which its definition entails (Zandvoort 1962). However, other linguists feel that they should keep the

concept, albeit with some modification; for example, Comrie (1976:52) includes the perfect in his discussion of aspect only while "bearing in mind continually that it is an aspect in a rather different sense ..." Lyons (1968:316) discusses the English perfect as an aspect category, but then considers the use of the perfect to "give support to the traditional view that, in certain circumstances at least, it is a secondary, or relative tense, rather than an aspect". Unfortunately, he does not elaborate on his idea.

It is clear that there is something that distinguishes the perfective form of the verb from the preterit, and that this is in terms of something other than tense. Whether this difference is called aspect, in whatever sense of the word, or a secondary tense, is perhaps not the most important issue at hand. What is more pertinent is a grasp of the differences in meaning expressed by the use of the perfective form of the verb in English.

Sifting through the maze of suggested 'meanings' of the present perfect, it seems that the only general definition which is possible is an abstract and not very helpful one:

> perfectivity indicates the view of a situation as a single whole, without distinction of the various separate phases that make up that situation; while the imperfective pays essential attention to the internal structure of the situation.
>
> (Comrie 1976:16)

All that can be said to be the 'meaning' of the present perfect is an identification of prior events with the 'extended' now which is continuous with the moment of coding, while the preterit contrasts in identifying prior events with 'then'-time which is conceived as separate from the present, the 'now' of speaking. Instead of further attempts at defining the 'meaning' or 'meanings' of the present perfect, it would be far more fruitful to study how this basically simple contrast serves diverse expressive functions and how these functions are addressed by linguistic theory.

To do this we need to distinguish the basic meaning of the preterit/present perfect opposition from the welter of interpretations which that opposition may receive in particular communicative contexts. In other words, the so-called 'meanings' of the present perfect "are not actually intrinsic to it; rather they come from an interaction with other elements of the linguistic and general pragmatic context" (McCoard 1978:11). Quoting again from McCoard (1978:9), "... it is not surprising to discover that aspectual choices cannot, in the end, be pinned solely to objective features of events in the real world; the speaker makes a choice to represent phenomena perfectively or imperfectively, though many times the choice responds to physical reality in some degree".

These interpretations are unconsciously inferred by the listener, who reacts to various linguistic and nonlinguistic clues. When we attempt to describe the inferential meanings as if they were part of the grammatical system itself, we run into problems for the grammar cannot handle the subtlety and variability of

the use of the present perfect from one example to the next. In other words, an opposition like preterit/perfect may be put to very many different uses, supporting many different interpretive extrapolations of meanings; but it is wrong to equate these extrapolations with the meaning proper of the forms themselves.

We are led to undertake an essentially pragmatic analysis in the study of the present perfect, an analysis which focuses on the use of linguistic tools in interactive settings. Fillmore (1974:1) provides the following concise characterization of the realms of syntax, semantics, and pragmatics:

> Syntax ... characterizes the grammatical forms that occur in a language, while semantics pairs these forms with their potential communicative functions. Pragmatics is concerned with the three-termed relation which unites (i) linguistic form and (ii) the communicative functions which these forms are capable of serving, with (iii) the contexts or settings in which those linguistic forms can have those communicative functions.

Stalnake (1972:383) divides the pie in similar manner:

> Syntax studies sentences, semantics studies propositions. Pragmatics is the study of linguistic acts and the contexts

> in which they are performed. There are two major types of problems to be solved within pragmatics: first, to define interesting types of speech acts and speech products; second, to characterize the features of the speech context which help determine which proposition is expressed by a given sentence. The analysis of illocutionary acts (such as promising, warning, etc.) is an example of a problem of the first kind; the study of indexical expressions (whose reference is determined by the context of utterance) is an example of the second.

The role of pragmatic inference-making, based on the individual's understanding of the way the world around him normally works, looms very large in the ordinary rounds of communication, but this does not make it part of grammatical structure. In fact, the inferential meanings are actually rooted in the world-knowledge and belief of the speaker/hearer. If we alter the structure of that world-model, the implicational links will dissolve.

In fact, this use of pragmatic analysis should be extended to cover not only the use and 'meaning' of the perfective aspect in English, but all choices of tense too. McCoard's approach to this is captured by the following quote (1978:15):

> ... we do not hold tense-choice to be a simple function of an event's temporal location; no simple temporal determinism can account for shifts of temporal perspective like those just discussed. Later on, we will discover that the "temporal facts" of a case are insufficient by themselves to explain the choice of the perfect against the preterit or other alternatives. The speaker's conceptualization of events and their relationships intervenes constantly, injecting a degree of apparent indeterminacy into the choice of a particular tense at a particular discourse site. It is up to us to try to identify the relevant conceptualizations and the manner of their intervention between real-world phenomena and linguistic expression.

This appears to be the sort of approach that is most suitable to the linguistic study of literary texts, for it is in such texts that we find carefully delineated all the facets that enter into the real-life use of language, not only for communication, but also for many other functions. Quoting from Winograd (1974:75):

> A sentence does not "convey" meaning the way a truck conveys cargo, complete and packaged. It is more like a blueprint that

> allows the hearer to reconstruct the meaning from his own knowledge.

Wright (1977:211) shows the application of such an approach to the study of literature:

> time is not the only breeze that ripples our language. We live in other dimensions as well, notably that of fiction: the possible, the imaginable, the remembered, the anticipated, each of which has its innumerable shades and shadows to be spoken of as we can. Without quite knowing it, we have chosen to institutionalize our awareness of the varieties of our experience not by multiplying the forms of every verb but by developing new forms of fiction; and it turns out to be one source of our fiction's energy that we narrate these forms, untroubled by time, in tenses that can never quite forget it.

There are many areas where the study of contextual variables has provided valuable illumination into otherwise refractory problems in linguistic analysis. Staying within the realm of verb-tense phenomena, we may mention the case of identifying sentences which can have generic (i.e. timeless or habitual) sense; the analysis in such an instance "must take into account pragmatic matters -- the beliefs and knowledge about the world on the part of the

speaker, the cultural and customary assumptions that the speech community holds in common ... presuppositions and entailments, as well as other logical and quasi-logical relationships are inextricably mixed up with the phenomenon of English generic use" (Lawler 1973:8-9).

In fact, it seems that, especially in the study of tense-choice, we must consider not only the superficially-present elements of the sentence, and the time of the utterance, but the point of view of the speaker of the sentence as well ... the choice of tense is based in part on the subjective factor of how the speaker feels himself related to the event. Kirsner and Thompson (1976:201) show how pragmatic inferences determine the interpretation of sentences with different verb forms, and make a differentiation between the 'message' of an utterance and its 'meaning': "The *message* is the totality of what is *inferred* from the use of the *meaning* in a given utterance in a particular context. Typically, the *message* communicated is richer than the *meaning* signalled." There are many other studies which discuss the role of contextual factors in linguistic analysis, albeit most of them rather sporadically.

We have seen some of the range of variability and subtlety that the present perfect in English can be used to express. The richness is there for speakers who want it, but then there are others too who may find this very richness a source of confusion, especially in a very communication-oriented world. It is perhaps interesting to note that at least two writers, Vanneck (1958) and Defromont (1973) have commented on the apparently increasing use of the preterit in place of the perfect by

American speakers. Vanneck (1958:237) says: "There are signs that in modern spoken American English, the distinction between preterit and perfect is beginning to be lost ... Very many speakers no longer feel any instinctive need for the perfect tense in a number of contexts which traditionally require it." He gives the following examples where he identifies the encroachment of what he calls the "colloquial preterit":

> He isn't there now. I don't know what happened to him.
>
> Spain's a nice country. I know some people who were there.
>
> Hurray! He did it again!
>
> Darn it! I did it again!
>
> Yes, he's here. I just saw him.
>
> You missed him. He just went out.
>
> Did you have lunch (yet, already)?
>
> I didn't pay for this book yet.
>
> That show's still on. I saw it twice.
>
> I live in New York, but I never saw the St Patrick's Day parade.

We could argue that the presence of the adverbs 'yet' and 'already', which so clearly

refer to the characteristic time-span of the perfect, remove the burden of temporal contrast from the verb and allow a neutralization of the forms in favour of the preterit *without* loss of the temporal nuance. Vanneck theorizes that the Continental predominance of the perfect may have fostered the overcompensating use of the preterit in the New World (and in turn a counter-acting 'hypercorrect perfect'). Moreover, "the great majority of non-British immigrants ... have this in common, that they are not used to differentiating between the perfect and the preterit in their own spoken mother tongue" (Vanneck 241).

Defromont (1973) cites examples from Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman where the verb phrase has 'clearly resultative' bearing on the context of utterance, yet we find the preterit:

> (There's such an undercurrent in him.) He became a moody man.
> Here, we brought you some flowers.

And what is the root of the confusion of the perfect and preterit, or rather the tendency toward loss of the perfect? Defromont (1973:110) sees it mainly in the light of phonology:

> a phonological change -- the loss of the auxiliary *have* -- is the starting point for a grammatical change: the substitution of the (preterit) for the (perfect).

He argues that since all but about sixty (a 'small minority') of English verbs do not have

distinct forms of the preterit and the past participle, whenever the forms of the auxiliary *have* are weakened in pronunciation to the point of disappearance, all that is left is a "de facto" preterit: "I have told him" becomes "I've told him" and then "I told him". The weakening process is particularly noticeable where consonant clusters of complexity occur with a full perfect: "I've just bought a hat" contains the spoken cluster /v-dz/, which the "law of least effort" works to simplify into /dz/. If speakers regularly eliminate the auxiliary with verbs which then are ambiguous between preterit and perfect, they are hardly going to have recourse to its services when the forms remain distinct. Thus we find "I seen" (in perfect meaning only, or ambiguous semantically?) appearing naturally in the mouths of the non-upwardly-mobile.

Actually it would be interesting to know if some/all speakers who do say "I seen" ever say "I saw" or "I have seen", and especially if they distinguish the forms in a way analogous to the standard perfect/preterit contrast. Only in this way could we establish a genuine neutralization of the opposition, or find out if the preterit has become the unmarked form, while the perfect retains its status as a marked form. This development could place English in striking opposition to the other major Western languages which have almost universally tended to downgrade and discard the forms of the preterit, heading toward a future with only the non-ambiguous perfect. In some cases, it appears that the preterit/perfect opposition is not simply collapsed, but takes on non-temporal significance or is otherwise specialized. Meantime, however, only time will tell the

actual direction that the present perfect is taking in English, in the different varieties of use around the world.

School of Accountancy and Business
Nanyang Technological University
Singapore

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TRAGIC HEROES SUFFER TO BE WISE

by

Kee Thuan Chye

could I call you a sufferer of love
o jester to the King of Jews
o high priest to a spitfire bitch?
would that not be
awarding laurels to easter clowns
or making a tragic hero out of leander
the commuter
whose neurotic mistrust
must have sown the suicidal seed in him?
Zeus ordains: man suffers to be wise
but He alas is not your god
and so you take your beatings
without a snarl
why with your faithfulness
you should instead have been
a woman's best friend
but you do whimper
awhen your godly heroine wills
that you make your
daily land-crossing
to do her bidding
or leave your temple of love unguarded
against wolves
and when you prostrate at her feet
she sinks her luvociferous fangs
uncaringly
in your virgoan virtues
like nails to break your heart

my friend
you are no tragic hero
but this I know at least:
you'll bear the pain without a bark
when you're nailed to your cross
of roses

PAKISTANI LITERATURE IN ENGLISH 1990: A CRITICAL SURVEY

by

Alamgir Hashmi

Different to many a previous year, writers' meetings and seminars have been popular again. The National Book Council of Pakistan together with the University of Karachi held in May the National Symposium on Pakistani Literature in English, with many writers, academics, journalists, students, and the general reading public attending the three-day event. The Symposium combined academic papers and sessions with a fair share of readings of authors. The Shakir Ali Museum and the Quaid-e-Azam Library in Lahore as well held readings and lectures, which were attended by sizable audiences. As Zulfikar Ghose returned to the country of his birth after twenty-eight years, the occasion was not missed by the literati -- to take another look yet at the man and his work. (See "Sialkot's Prodigal Son", The Pakistan Times, 30 May, p. 9).

Generally, discussion of language, literature, and culture has been quite specific and ever more vigorous. Language, particularly, is drawing increasing academic attention. Along with the articles by Robert Baumgardner (e.g., "The Indigenization of English in Pakistan", English Today, No. 21, pp. 59-65) and others, Tariq Rahman's longer study, Pakistani English: The Linguistic Description of a Non-Native Variety of English (National Institute of

Pakistan Studies, Islamabad), will do much to further Pakistani English as a linguistic subject area.

Criticism and fiction were the year's particular gains. As they competed for the top place during this year, and even some fine short stories appeared in ones or twos in the magazines and anthologies, three new novels, a short story collection, and a first-time reprint of a 1950s novel were the major events, which perhaps should almost make 1990 the 'fiction year'.

Hanif Kureishi published his first novel, The Buddha of Suburbia (London: Faber and Faber), which follows on from his several plays and short stories, showing to advantage the stagecraft and spoken language as well as the themes used there. Adolescent Karim Amir growing into manhood learns about himself and the world around him and discovers the operative rules of family, work, institutions, society, and culture. As it is not an usual bildungsroman, Haroon, his father, is also rediscovering himself in his love for Eva and in the effort on his own and others' behalf "to reach [your] full potential as human beings" (p. 13). He is the latter-day lecturing (contrary) Buddha, a traditional image recast in the suburbs of South London, who walks out of his marriage for another woman, believing himself and declaring to his son "we're growing up together, we are" (p. 22). Karim Amir's own schooling and affairs with Eleanor, Jamila, etc., lead him out to much excitement and learning away from the gloomy family home and boring suburban living as he finds himself a place in the theatre world as well as

interesting people to base his characters on. The experience also leads to a mature self, the artist's conscience:

> If I defied Changez, if I started work on a character based on him, if I used the bastard, it meant that I was untrustworthy, a liar. But if I don't use him it meant I had f -all to take to the group after the 'me-as-Anwar' fiasco. As I sat there I began to recognize that this was one of the first times in my life I'd been aware of having a moral dilemma. Before, I'd done exactly what I wanted; desire was my guide and I was inhibited by nothing but fear. But now, at the beginning of my twenties, something was growing in me. Just as my body had changed at puberty, now I was developing a sense of guilt, a sense not only of how I appeared to others, but of how I appeared to myself, especially in violating self-imposed restrictions. Perhaps no one would know I'd based my character in the play on Changez; perhaps, later, Changez himself wouldn't mind, would be flattered. But I would always know what I had done, that I had chosen to be a liar, to deceive a friend, to use someone. What should I do? I had no idea. I ran over it again and again and

> could find no way out. (pp. 186-7)

As the theatrical itself assumes a dimension of life, playing moves the plot, and searching for a character becomes both a structural and a symbolic device, the first-person narrative develops from the point of view of "a funny kind of Englishman, a new breed as it were, having emerged from two old histories" (p. 3), adding to its already colourful, lower-middle-class plinth and parlance which is the best cure for the latter-day Raj and Daj fiction of the Minerva Press variety. How the past and present are defined, Karim Amir places himself at a distance from his father and takes a decision to construct time in the only personal and valid terms possible:

> I felt ashamed and incomplete at the same time, as if half of me were missing, and as if I'd been colluding with my enemies ... [Dad] was always honest about this: he preferred England in every way. Things worked; it wasn't hot; you didn't see terrible things on the street that you could do nothing about. He wasn't proud of his past, but he wasn't unproud of it either; it just existed, and there wasn't any point in fetishizing it, as some liberals and Asians radicals liked to do. So if I wanted an additional personality bonus [of an Asian past], I would have to create it. (pp. 212-213)

While England is spoken of as a "Kingdom of Prejudice" -- with it routine racist and fascist marches and Asian and West Indian lives imperilled beyond help, in his personal life Karim Amir finds something to sustain him: "I'd grown up with kids who taught me that sex was disgusting. It was smells, smut, embarrassment and horse laughs. But love was too powerful for me. Love swam right into the body, into the valves, muscles and bloodstream ..." (p. 188). His father remarries; Mum and Jimmy become friends; Anwar dies, helpfully; Jamila and Changez try to sort out their marriage; he himself leaves America after a visit and knows that there is hardly an Asia to turn back to but the entire experience has been worth the emotional and intellectual effort:

> I could think about the past and what I'd been through as I'd struggled to locate myself and learn what the heart is. (pp. 283-4)

"To locate myself and learn what the heart is" -- this suburban wisdom, however, is evidently shared by more than one Buddha by the end of the book, even if, except for Karim Amir and his father, the other characters remain shadowy figures portrayed in half tones. Margaret, the mother, is a very sympathetic if 'unfinished' character and Eva, Eleanor, Charlie, and Pyke, etc., are interesting but remain one-dimensional; the younger brother, Amar, "who called himself Allie to avoid racial trouble" (p. 19), remains a name only. The black-and-white aspect of the social reality literally reduces them to certain roles which, howsoever they may modify them, they cannot

reject or transcend; nor is there any motivation, it appears, to conceive of such a society without its brown gurus, breaking-down white spouses, profligate sons, radical Asian daughters, self-indulgent Buddhas, third-worlding white social-workers to help or comfort the blacks, and perverse though brilliant theatre directors. Karim Amir meets them squarely, sometimes treats them roundly, and takes all life's possibilities in a stride, maintaining his sense of humour and detachment.

The Buddha of Suburbia has a gripping story, a contemporary socio-cultural reference which often works better than paste-on, and a concern with human relationships and happiness that predominates all else. Kureishi's energetic style is catchy; the quality of humour, particularly the sarcasm, is distinctly Pakistani; and the plebeian manner is worn with a panache that only a literary culture with a working-class tradition -- such as Britain's-- can make possible.

Tariq Ali's first novel also follows some recent playwriting. In Redemption (London: Chatto and Windus), the gloom caused by the collapse of the Alternative System is beaten out with wit and banter as the Trotskyites contemplate the new challenge. As the socialist and labour classes have failed to be responsive, the brigade considers moving into the Catholic Church and Rome itself. The world congress proposed by Ezra Einstein (alias Ernest Mandel), 70 years old, collects enough elderly revolutionaries for the congress to attract attention, though it falls short of evolving any workable theme or strategy. But there is a plenitude of jokes born of an earthy realism,

and life's decencies are not overlooked in religious fervour. Canadian comrade Cathy Fox does not attend the conference because she does not want to join in excavating Trotsky's grave in Mexico to find some love letters. As she writes of her non-attendance to Einstein, "the whole world has to be remade"; but the novel's wisdom is in having it discussed from more than one angle and withholding the formula to accomplish the Project.

Adam Zameenzad's Cyrus, Cyrus (London: Fourth Estate) follows his previous three novels to match the hectic speedwriting with a resembling theme, which is sure to indicate to some 'a style'. Of lowly, 'untouchable' origins, the disenfranchised protagonist cannot tell his last (family) name and resorts to uttering only his given name to identify himself. In Britain, not enfranchised but convicted of murder of three children, he tells his autobiographical tale of extravagant emotion, sex, and carnage sitting in prison. Religion, society, and justice are held responsible for all wrong, even though his three life sentences have been commuted somehow by some divine intervention. Earlier, going from country to country only lands him in hell finally; there he has only the officialdom to exercise his wild brains with. The little humour there is is based in grotesquery, which comes as a relief against the socio-spiritual mayhem of Zameenzad's one-dimensional world.

In Athar Tahir's Other Seasons: Twenty-five Short Stories (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel), however, a serious purpose, if not a definite formula, is at work; middle-class values are enforced with a vengeance and there is no escape from needing

social approval. A dismal world is portrayed in which people are inadequate and aggressive; their motives are mean; the natural world is indifferent if not an accomplice in man's machinations; and the body and soul are like the sexes portrayed here -- ill at ease with each other. In dialogue, the stories mix the local (usually Punjabi) idiom with usual English; the lower-class characters are recognizable from the nativized speech while the story's point of view or the moral standard is enunciated in the correct language. Still, "A Colonial Octogenarian" and "Diamond Market" have quite successfully and sympathetically drawn characters because they speak in a non-standard language. "Broken Bangle" is perhaps the most psychologically ambitious story in the collection, but has no use for speech. While there is a feel in some of these stories for the countryside as well as the sterile and phoney middle-class culture of the cities, it is a thing apart. Most of them rely on clever, freighted endings; the narratorial comment is heavy-handed; and the characters are rarely allowed to evolve. With all this, Tahir has made a bold effort for Pakistani (pr Punjabi?) rural and urban fiction to have a credible setting and speech. However, there must be many ways to the successful short story. The approach, for instance, is different in Rukhsana Ahmad's stories (in Right of Way. London: Women's Press, 1988), which do not encounter similar problems but remain of interest for other reasons and qualities.

Mumtaz Shah-Nawaz's The Heart Divided (Lahore: ASR Publication) is primarily a Partition Novel which received much attention when it was first published following the

author's death. The text then was in an imperfect state and printed without advice. The present reprint, first in over thirty years, simply copies the first edition and surely has been a lost opportunity. Other notable reprints or paperback editions are Bapsi Sidhwa's The Pakistani Bride (New Delhi: Penguin), which was earlier only The Bride, and The Crow Eaters (New Delhi: Penguin); Saadat Hasan Manto's Kingdom's End and Other Stories translated from Urdu by Khalid Hasan (New Delhi: Penguin); and Sara Suleri's non-fictional Meatless Days (London: Collins).

Not only in fiction but in criticism also the language and idiom issues were the main themes. Language and style (-istics) remains the key to reading in the discussions of fiction and poetry by Tariq Rahman ("Linguistic Deviation as a Stylistic Device in Pakistani English Fiction", JCL, 25:1, pp. 1-22) and Shaista Sonnu Sirajuddin ("Three Contemporary Poets: A Study of Their Use of Language", The Muslim Magazine, 16 November, p. 5; 23 November, p. 5), who use the linguistic and literary approaches, respectively, and offer pragmatic analyses of the literary practice. Studies dealing with these and other topics published by Alamgir Hashmi were: "Poetry, Pakistani Idiom in English, and the Groupies" (World Literature Today, 64:2, pp. 268-271); "Other Seasons Truly" (The Muslim Magazine, 2 Nov., p. 5); and "Lord Buddha, T.S. Eliot, and What's too Right with Our Poetry" (The Pakistan Times: Midweek Edition, 30 Jan., 6 Feb., 13 Feb., 27 Feb.). Eric Cyprian published an important review article, "A New Vision for Commonwealth Literature" (The Nation, 23 Nov., p. 5), which is also a landmark statement

concerning culture. As critical writing about Pakistani literature has dealt with broad philosophical and technical issues, it has been equally concerned specifically with the work of such writers as Ahmed Ali, Iftkhar Arif, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib, Alamgir Hashmi, Mohammad Iqbal, Hanif Kureishi, Saadat Hasan Manto, Taufiq Rafat, Nazneen Sadiq, Sara Suleri, and Athar Tahir.

In non-fiction, M. Attiq ur Rahman, a retired army general, published Back to the Pavilion (Karachi: Ardeshir Cowasjee), a combination of autobiography and memoir, which skilfully recounts a distinguished military and public career and is relatively less stereotypical in its social commentary and personal revelation. Miangul Jahanzeb was the last Wali (ruler of the former State of Swat in Pakistan and his oral narrative (The Last Wali of Swat: An Autobiography as Told to Fredrik Barth. Oslo: Norwegian Universities Press) has its own special charm. The narratives by Hamidul Haq Chowdhury (Memoirs. Dhaka: Associated Printers) and Tamizuddin-Khan (The Test of Time: My Life and Days. Dhaka: University Press Ltd.), both of whom became citizens of Bangladesh in the 1970s, should also be mentioned here because they were both citizens of Pakistan before 1972 and a substantial part of their life, career, and work attached to that period. S.M. Moin Quresh (Crocodile Tears. Karachi: Pak Shield Publications) writes in the jocular vein and can pinch home the point with a laugh. The only place where the reader is called upon to cry over our common failings -- and spilt milk -- is the book's "Introduction".

If this year's work is any indication of the art of the possible, we have come a long way from 1965 (when First Voices was published) and it has all been worthwhile; so that now we can look forward to the 1990s with a strong sense of a contemporary tradition.

MOON OVER MANILA

(for Marjorie Evasco)

by

Kee Thuan Chye

Moon over Manila
drips a dreamdrop in my eye
and the stars become your dimples
as you smile a song for me,
and the stars are the silverpoints of your eyes.
And soon you're here with me
beneath the emerald palmettes
and hanging bay-opals
reflecting the golden dome, cupped in our hands,
floating on Manila Bay.
Then we ride in the Love Bus
and we peer through the misted glass window
at Ch'ang-O's flirtatious beam for Yi,
and as I catch the glass reflection
of your rabbit-cute wink,
it becomes the fleeting farewell
of a silver shooting star.
Now the eaves absorb the moon,
skirting shadows across my page.
Reflecting silky splendour out of the fiery orb
though great distance comes between the two,
the vanishing dome becomes an eclipse of the sun,
and all of a sudden
I feel the morning cold.

THE TEACHING OF LITERATURE IN ENGLISH IN MALAYSIAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS*

By

Malachi Edwin

This paper will briefly describe the development of the teaching of literature in English in secondary schools in Malaysia and how the changes in language and education policies in Malaysia affected its teaching. This paper will discuss the teaching of literature in the ESL classroom and also the teaching of literature in English as an elective subject for upper secondary school students. This paper will finally highlight the role played by Universiti Pertanian Malaysia in the training of literature teachers through its Bachelor of Education (TESL) programme.

Introduction

The teaching of the English language has been very much part of the Malaysian education system from the time of British colonial days. The English language and Literature in English

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were taught as two separate subjects in National Type English schools in the Malaysian secondary schools. Until 1970, English was the medium of instruction in the National Type English schools. However, this was changed when the Malaysian government passed the Education Enactment Bill in 1971 which effected the abolition of the English medium of instruction. As indicated by Gaudart (1985), the Bill was aimed at working towards a common education system with Bahasa Malaysia as the medium of instruction.

Bahasa Malaysia was thus made the sole medium of instruction at the Primary level, beginning with Standard One for all National Type English schools. This change in the medium of instruction was completed in 1980 at Form Five level, the final year for upper secondary education. Since then, the English language has been taught as one of the subjects in the Malaysian curriculum (Asiah Abu Samah, 1983).

English language and Literature in English continued to be taught as separate subjects even after the medium of instruction was changed from English to Bahasa Malaysia. The English language subject did not have any literature component before 1990. In 1990, Literature in English was incorporated as part of the English language programme beginning at the lower secondary level.

Before the change in 1990, Literature in English was a non-examination subject and was taught to all lower secondary students. However, at the upper secondary level, Literature in English was an examination subject. The students who studied Literature in

English were only those who had registered for the Literature in English paper for the Senior Cambridge examination or the Malaysian Certificate of Education examination (presently called Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia).

The Teaching of Literature in English: Upper Secondary Level

The teaching of Literature in English at the upper secondary level has not changed very much over the decades. It is still an optional subject and is studied for examination purposes. Two or three forty minute periods per week are allocated for this subject.

During the 1960s and early 1970s, Literature in English used to be a relatively popular subject among English medium students. These English medium students who registered for Literature in English, generally had a level of English proficiency that enabled them to understand the original literary texts used. However, after the change of medium in the instruction from English to Bahasa Malaysia in 1970, there was a drastic drop in the number of students who registered for Literature in English.

This is probably because the standard of English is declining steadily in Malaysia and more teachers and students tend to shy away from Literature in English. In fact, in 1988, only 57 schools in Malaysia offered Literature in English to Form Five students, and there wre only 355 students throughout Malaysia who sat for Literature in English in (Examination

Syndicate, Malaysia, 1988). These figures were comparatively lower than the previous years. Moreover, the majority of the candidates for the Literature in English paper paper are now from urban or Christian missionary-run secondary schools.

The Ministry of Education has taken steps to check the declining standard in the English language as well as the decreasing number of students taking Literature in English. According to some officers in the Curriculum Development Centre (CDC), the CDC is planning a new syllabus for the Literature in English subject. However, to date, nothing has been officially finalised.

It is believed that among the aims of the new syllabus for Literature in English are: to develop in the students an awareness of the value and pleasure of reading selected literary works; an appreciation and understanding of human genres and literary devices used. This newly planned syllabus is to be in line with the National Education Philosophy and the Integrated Secondary School Curriculum (ISSC) which was implemented in 1987.

To date, a number of changes have been made with the implementation of the ISSC. The English language programme in this curriculum paved the way for the incorporation of a literature component in the English language subject through the Class Reader programme which will be further discussed later.

The Teaching of Literature in English: Lower Secondary Level

Before 1970, Literature in English, was allocated a forty minute period in National Type English schools at the lower secondary level for all students. Unlike the upper secondary level where original texts were used, the texts used for the lower secondary level were bridged versions of literary texts or simplified anthologies.

However, with the change of the medium of instruction from English to Bahasa Malaysia in 1970, Literature in English was no longer taught at the lower secondary level. The single forty minute period was converted into another English language period as the Ministry of Education realised that students did not have the proficiency in English to manage even simplified literary texts. It was also felt that students needed more time for developing their language skills so the conversion of the forty minute period from Literature in English to English language was considered an appropriate move. At the time, this move seemed to signal the end of the teachinbg of Literature in English in lower secondary schools; but this proved however, not to be the case later.

The teaching of literature in English was indirectly affected by the concern for the declining standard in the English language, particularly the students' poor reading skills in English. In its attempts to improve the deteriorating standard of the English, the Schools Division of the Ministry of Education introduced two programmes: English Language Reading Programme (ELRP) and Class Reader

Programme (CRP). The ELRP had little or no relation to the teaching of Literature in English. However, the CRP which was implemented in 1990, signaled the return of Literature in English at the lower secondary level in Malaysia.

The ELRP was initially introduced to residential schools but the programme was later extended to day schools. The ELRP incorporated more than 200 graded literary texts to cater for both lower and upper secondary school students. The aims of the ELRP make no mention of teaching literature in English as this programme was in no way an attempt to bring back Literature in English into the Malaysian curriculum. The ELRP aimed mainly at achieving the standard of reading stipulated in the Lower and Upper Secondary English language syllabuses. The ELRP also hoped to instill the habit of reading for pleasure as well as widen the students' general knowledge.

The implementation of the ELRP at the school level was carried out in a variety of ways. It varied from teachers carrying boxes of books to the classrooms; to the books being placed according to the different grades in the library; or in some instances, the books being merely stacked on the library shelves. The implementation of the ELRP depended very much on the English language teachers. It was later found that the programme was generally ineffective.

The Class Reader Programme (CRP) implemented in the secondary schools through the ISSC, has brought about some significant changes in the English language programme. These

changes have directly affected the teaching of Literature in English. The ISSC specifications require that one forty minute period per week be allotted for the literature component. The aim of incuding a literature component is to enable students to "read and enjoy prose, poetry and plays" (Ministry of Education, Malaysia, 1987).

The CRP for Form I students is presently being implemented. It is also expected to be implemented for Form II students by mid-1991. It is targeted that by 1994, the CRP will be implemented for all the students from the five Forms in the Malaysian secondary schools. In the CRP, a total of 24 titles of literary texts were selected for the Form I students. Another set of titles has been finalised for Form II and will soon be used. As in the case of the books in the ELRP, the texts for the CRP are also graded.

The implementation of the ISSC in Malysia saw the return of the teaching of Literature in English in the Malaysian lower secondary schools through the CRP. Although the CRP is concerned with developing reading skills, the CRP also aims "to introduce elements of literature into language teaching" (Devinder Raj and Hunt, 1991).

The inclusion of Literature in English in the English language programme in the Malaysian curriculum is indeed a welcomed change. This is especially so since there has also been growing dissent among TESL educationists with regards to the divorce of literature from the language classroom and growing popularity for the concept of literature in the ESL classroom (Brumfit, 1985; Widdowson, 1985; Stern, 1987).

As such, the implementation of the CRP also indicated a change in policy with regards to teaching Literature in English as it was no longer taught as a separate subject but as a component of the English language subject. Thus, Literature in English which was once taught as a separate subject, then dropped from the curriculum, has now been brought back into the Malaysian secondary school curriculum but as a component of the English language subject.

Teacher Training for Literature in English Teachers

In its attempts to ensure the successful implementation of the Class Reader Programme, the Schools Division of the Ministry of Education has produced teaching files (Teachers' Guides) as resource materials to help the English language teacher. This is largely because of the concern of the Division that a large number of the English language teachers at lower secondary school have no formal qualification in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) or teaching literature (Devinder Raj and Hunt, 1990).

The situation described by Devinder Raj and Hunt (1990) is a serious problem despite the fact that there are 28 teacher training colleges and four universities in Malaysia involved in the training of English language teachers. The teacher training colleges and most of the universities with the teacher training programes, tend to emphasise on the training of teacher trainees for teaching the language

skills and little emphasis was given to the teaching of literature in English.

Presently, only Universiti Pertanian Malaysia is involved in training teachers of Literature in English. This is through the Bachelor of Education (TESL) programme offered by the TESL Unit in the Department of Languages, Faculty of Educational Studies. It is offered as a minor option for TESL major students. Presently, this is the only program in Malaysia that specifically trains teachers for teaching Literature in English.

This programme takes a two-prong approach:

(i) providing teacher trainees with knowledge about literature in English

(ii) providing teacher trainees with pedagogical knowledge in relation to teaching literature in English.

The teacher trainees, most of whom have some or little knowledge of literature in English, are provided enrichment courses which aim to provide them a relatively sound base to become teachers for the Literature in English subject and for teaching the literature component in the English language subject. These teacher trainees register for the following courses: Introduction to Literary Criticism, Novels in English, Short Stories in English, Drama in English, Poetry in English and Malaysian Literature in English.

Besides the enrichment courses mentioned above, the students also have to register for two pedagogy courses. The courses are: The

Teaching of Literature in the ESL Classroom and Approaches and Methods to the Teaching of Literature. These courses are geared towards providing students with the theoretical framework and practical experience for teaching literature.

Seminars and workshops are also held with the cooperation of the Schools Division of the Ministry of Education for the teaching of literature in English. These sessions provide teacher trainees with information on the current developments in the field of teaching literature and also to provide hands-on experience in producing materials for teaching Liteature in English and literature in the ESL classroom.

In accordance to the requirements of the Bachelor of Education (TESL) programme, the teacher trainees also have to undergo 12 weeks of Teaching Practice at local secondary schools. During their Teaching Practice, the teacher trainees are required to teach the English language, which includes teaching literature in the ESL classroom situation. They also have to teach Literature in English if the subject is offered in the school where they are attached to. Since most schools do not offer Literature in English, the teacher trainees are mostly involved in teaching literature in the English language subject (literature in the ESL classroom situation).

The general feedback from the TESL lecturers who had observed Literature in English as a minor option is encouraging. It is hoped that more TESL teacher trainees will register for the Literature in English minor option as this will help them to be trained as both

English language teachers as well as Literature in English teachers.

The TESL Unit which offers the Literature in English programme is in the process of making a number of changes to further improve it. The changes are made in view of the challenges that these future teachers will have to meet when they become English language teachers and Literature in English teachers in the Malaysian secondary schools.

Conclusion

The development of the teaching of Literature in English in Malaysian secondary schools has been affected to a certain extent by the changes in language and education policies in Malaysia. Over the last few decades, the teaching of Literature in English in Malaysia has remained very much the same at the upper secondary level, in terms of syllabus and examination format. Literature in English is still taught as a separate subject from English language.

However, there have been some changes in the teaching of Literature in English at the lower secondary level in Malaysia. Literature in English was once taught as a separate subject but was later dropped from the curriculum when the medium of instruction changed from English to Bahasa Malaysia in 1970. But with the implementation of the Integrated Secondary School Curriculum (ISSC) in 1987, Literature in English is now taught as a component of the

English language subject, and not as a separate subject.

The changes in the teaching of Literature in English have created a need to train teachers to teach this subject. In order to meet this need, the Faculty of Educational Studies at Universiti Pertanian Malaysia, offers a Bachelor in Education (TESL) programme, in which Literature in Englishy is offered as a minor option.

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THE FIRST ASP

by

Leonard Jeyam

Was the voice of existence heard
as she screamed for her Anthony,
or did those lines

merely sustain themselves so eloquently
the way the poet meant them to be?
Not only in this tragedy

but I can still feel the first asp
not wanting to kill a disgraced
Queen of Egypt, not ever to bite

and release her from a fertile land
that also sometimes shrivels
the snarling crocodiles of the Nile.

TIENANMEN, JUNE 1989

by

Siew-Yue Killingley

Old men should not beget
More children lest they forget
Their mortality and invest
Their last throw for wisdom
In a last show of virility.

But these old men have begotten
Death on children, their youth forgotten:
Such immortality's like incest;
Their last throe of folly
Is their last word to manhood.

Old men have pressed to earth
Youth's bloom and sap at birth,
And choked its trusting cries
And crushed young minds with lies
Of love in a crunch of tanks.

When the blinding folly of old men
Makes them frantic for the death of heirs,
Tien has no eyes, an is dead in Tienanmen,
And hope blinks at its last grey hairs.

The Chinese have a saying, 'Heaven (tien) has eyes' when an evil deed is being done, especially whent he evil-doer seems to be getting away with it. An means 'peace'.

RING OF COSMIC FIRE:
Temporal Strategies and Narrative Consciousness in *The Return*

by

Margaret Yong

The Return is a novel about a Tamil family living in Kedah in the years after the second world war. The background includes the small towns of Bedong and Sungei Petani, and the less accessible rubber plantations of Kedah. The plot covers three generations, Ravi the narrator and central figure of the novel, his father, and his grandmother -- together with the extended family of a typical Tamil family of the postwar period.

From these basic beginnings (a typical family in a small town of semi-rural Malaysia, in the middle decades of this century), it is possible to infer the central thematic preoccupations of the novel. *The Return* fills our expectation of the New Literatures dealing with the culture of an immigrant post-colonial society. It is a work of cultural definition: it answers to the implied question asked by all such fiction dealing with a similar period of colonial and post-colonial history -- the question of the transition of a group of people moving from one world into another world. This process of cultural adaptation constitutes the thematic background to *The Return*.

The novel employs the time lapse of three generations in order to examine this theme of

cross-cultural encounter between the immigrant culture and the culture of the 'reception' country (in this case Malaya/Malaysia). The three-generation saga is an important motif as it enhances the sense of continuing struggle and change within the story of the cross-cultural encounter. It is precisely the passage of time which gives prominence to the processes of cultural adaptation, and which reveal the historical process as something inherently unstable and dynamic. Time in the novel brings about evolving processes of cross-cultural fertilisation.

The novel's treatment of time is ingenious. *The Return* is not merely a chronology of historical change; it views the idea of change through a series of carefully constructed devices, most significantly the use of a first person narrator. Time and change are filtered through the narrating consciousness of Ravi, the man who looks back and remembers how he was shaped by the experience of the cross-cultural encounter. Moreover he does not merely 'remember' passively, he recreates the sense of his family through the trauma of the experience of conflict within change. I am here suggesting a thematic rationalisation of the first person narrator: the story is told as the autobiography of the central figure, which shifts the personal memories of the past, so that we are conscious of the presence of time in his story. Time in his narrative becomes a framework for understanding his life.

In this way, history becomes a personal encounter with the forces of the colonial process, or (to put it another way) the past is understood as a process of change. From the

perspective of the central narrator, all time is transitional, since it moves with the family history of the three generations adapting to their ever-new environment and circumstances.

We see then the thematic implication of using Ravi as the fist person narrator for the story of his family. The story becomes a personal sifting of the past, with the emotional stresses being reflections of Ravi's own sense of identity.

Seen in this way, the framework chapter of *The Return* formulates the first distinct memory of the narrator, and not just the convenient starting point of the family saga. The narrator has an impeccable reason for the opening sentence of his account of the past which shaped him: 'My grandmother's life and her death in 1958 made a vivid impression on me' (p. 1). However, I must add that this is obviously also the starting point of the central thematic preoccupation with the idea of the colonial cross-cultural encounter. After all, the cultural encounter can only take place with the act of migration.

Let us return to the narrator's point of outset. It makes sense for him to begin his story with the grandmother, Periathai, because she is the first vivid presence from his earliest childhood. In this way, the grandmother also becomes the foundation for the protagonist's sense of self. This doubles the theme of the cultural encounter, since the overall 'impersonal' theme of evolving adaptation also occurs on the private and personal level of the main character.

This part of the novel is concerned with the definition of the world of the immigrant (the grandmother) from the time she reaches foreign fields. Again the narrative technique implies a distinctive way of understanding time as a process of change. The grandmother has already taken on mythic proportions in Ravi's recollection -- she has become part of a collective and folkloric past. Her arrival is 'explained' by the common store of stories about her sudden appearance on the horizon. Ravi's description of her arrival is unconnected with any discernable reason for her coming; and this is emphasised by the odd, incongruous image of the camel with which she is compared: the refugee humping her worldly goods.

The textual detail enhances the isolation and strangeness of her coming -- thus foreshadowing the theme of her struggle in the 'new' land:

> She came, as the stories and anecdotes about her say, suddenly out of the horizon, like a camel, with nothing except some baggage and three boys in tow. And like that animal which survives the most barren of lands, she brooded, humped over her tin trunks, mats, silver lamps and pots, at the junction of the main road and the laterite trail. (p. 1)

It is clear from the description that the grandmother has an air of impermanence, of one who is in transit -- or as the novel figuratively points out, someone at the crossroads.

At the crossroads, the grandmother moves off to a destination that may be described as remote, a deadend, and yet in its own way a whole way of life. In Ravi's words (p. 1), his grandmother sets off through trees and bushes, along a dusty track and ends up next to an old Hindu cemetery; the imagery of loss scarcely needs explication. But here she builds a house or at least a dwelling place. Her actions symbolize her isolation from the mainstream of life in the new land, and thus perhaps her incomprehension of its meaning; but they also reveal the fortitude and courage which are the strength of her convictions. Later, she will give the same advice to the puzzled child, Ravi, 'Never let anything break your spirit' (p. 7), when the Emergency regulations fail to break her spirit.

The grandmother is portrayed as a strong woman, with much fierce courage and determined to succeed in building a new life for her family. This aspect of her character influences our understanding of the protagonist, as he is obviously drawn to her because he shares that tenacity.

In contrast to Ravi's early picture of his grandmother, the three young sons seem pale creatures, whom Ravi describes as frightened, cowering in the house built by the grandmother while she trudges with her camel's burden of saris through the estates for miles.

The narrator's mediating presence here is significant in showing the difference in his attitude towards these people. His description of his grandmother is warm and sympathetic, but his description of the three sons evokes

laughter:

> 'They were like chickens afraid of slaughter,' a man who had known my grandmother when she first got to Malaysia, said, laughing. (p. 1)

His laughter distances us from the three sons. But there is a further point to the narrative technique. The man continues, 'And her boys had become the wild fowl, dust of all Bedong on their feet' (p. 1).

The imagery used here already suggests that the process of adaptation has begun with the sons. And yet this too is distanced; made into distant recall by the man who has retreated to the past in bringing up this memory (with 'his eyes glazed with searching the past for my grandmother's image'; p. 2).

The narrative then turns back to the definition of the grandmother's world in Bedong. And it is soon evident that the grandmother's moral resolve alone cannot overcome her problems; and that part of her problem is her limited repertoire of strategies for the new land. Ravi is quite clear about this reason, for he tells us that 'All her Indian skills and heritage had been depleted' (p. 3). The grandmother has been an itinerant peddlar flogging saris, she has been a tinker, a spirit healer, and a vadai seller.

The grown up Ravi in looking back to the past understands that the Indian heritage has become part of the burden of the past. This insight is complexly modified at this point of

his narrative. It is at this stage that Ravi provides the central imagery of that Indian heritage, the light within the house. This image cluster first appears at the beginning of the grandmother's life in Malaysia; and again it is put into the words of the man who used to know her: 'your grandmother wanted to light her own lamp!' (p. 1).

This thematic image, which I have termed the light within the house, is composed of two equal elements: house and light; 'form and spirit' (private communication with the author on 18th February 1987.) The house is a small habitation, with hall, another room and cooking place. However this is her first 'real' house, because of its emotional significance. Its meaning is to be discerned in its elaborately carved entrance. The pillars of the entrance have stories of Indian mythology executed by another impoverished recent migrant from India, who has transferred his vision of the distant world of his cultural consciousness into his work; the work of art represents his version of the past, now speaking to Ravi who is forming his own version. His is a work of love, into which he 'must have put all his disappointments, nostalgia and dreams' (p. 4).

Again the narrative voice suggests that Ravi shared in those sublimated yearnings of the artist, for a vision of life that contained more promise than the dusty tracks of a rubber estate ending at a cemetery. The imagery surrounding the grandmother's existence in Bedong creates a richly layered world; and it is this which forms the emotional background of the young Ravi's memories of her.

The symbolic house whose entrance pillars lead into another world, now seeming far away, conducts the votive mind searching for meaning from the past to another thematic image: the light which burns within.

The image of light comes from the Friday prayer ritual, for which the grandmother prepares herself carefully. The grandmother herself is changed by the experience. The simple image of her is stark in its bareness yet evocative. Dressed in white purity, her face masked by saffron, her manner preoccupied, 'absorbed, impenetrable' (p. 4), she seems no longer on the mundane level of life. The time of twilight ('mysterious dusk') adds to the potent atmosphere, as does the hushed expectancy of the circle of waiting children.

The act of setting up the sacred space for prayer with its ring of cosmic fire (p. 4) is itself a deliberate rite, which leads to the culminating image of the light of the ritualistic lamps:

> Then she drew forth bronze tier lamps and pouring oil from a clay container, she set them, three in number, alight. The sari, the jewellery and the idol glowed now, creating a kind of eternity around them. (pp. 4-5)

The symbolic light of eternity evoked through the religious imagery of the novel illumines the grandmother's existence, transforming the harsh drabness of an itinerant way of life (the transient life of the uprooted) into a world that is meaningful and intense. Through such

ritualistic transformation, the grandmother is able to participate in the profound way of life left behind, which otherwise seems remote from her new mode of existence.

However the whole episode is recalled as a powerful memory, and the act of remembering is also a reminder of time and distance. In Ravi's imaginative recreation of the scene, his grandmother's total absorption into that world of mystery and magical force seems like 'a re-immersion, a recreating of the thick spiritual and domestic air she must have breathed there, back in some remote district in India' (p. 6; my emphasis).

The remote source of the memory indicated here implies a juxtaposition of worlds. The ritual takes the grandmother far away from the world of actuality, the world of selling vadai in the streets of Bedong, which is also a world that is insistent and not to be escaped from permanently. This other world, no less real, claims the attention of the narrator's 'other memories' (p. 12) of his early life. Yet for the intense moment when he watches his grandmother enact the ritual of worship, Ravi glimpses the potency of a different way of being:

> Her voice transformed the kolams into contours of reality and fantasy, excitingly balanced. I felt I stood on the edge of a world I [might] have known. (p. 6)

In the actual world of Bedong, the meaner vision prevails over the grandmother's longing for the greater intensities of metaphysical fantasy.

Ironically, from this point onwards, the narrator records the closing in of an already narrow world: the 'black area' curfews which regulate daily life; the image of the grandmother sleeping 'on a cramped wooden platform at the back of a provision shop' (p. 7); the story of the futile chase after legality at the Town Council Office; the tumour which finally kills her body, though it cannot entirely defeat her spirit.

The emotional withdrawal of the grandmother ('some inner preoccupation robbed her walk of its customary jauntiness'; p. 8) marks a kind of realisation by the reflective Ravi that her hopes of being considered the 'rightful heir' (p. 8) to the land she has come to were illusions: 'she had no papers, only a vague belief and a dubious loyalty' (p. 9). The irony of legality mirrors a wry evaluation of the inefficacy of incipient 'belief' and 'loyalty'. Yet the haunting last image of the grandmother suggests that her inarticulate struggle with the colonial encounter could not defeat her 'belief' and 'loyalty', which continue to light up her 'eyes [that] never lost their vitality' and that 'never spoke a farewell' (p. 110) to those left behind to continue the struggle.

'Belief' and 'loyalty' are nebulous values given an intense life in the finely balanced metaphysics of the grandmother, as she is remembered by Ravi. The act of remembrance is also a balancing act for Ravi ('I felt I stood on the edge of a world ...'), but the balance is tipped by the communist Emergency, which draws him back into the actual world of Bedong.

It is this world which he will explore: 'My other memories were of a lush green countryside, cloud-striated sky ...'; p. 12) arching over the family home, and, thus,another house -- this one apparently only functional compared to the fantasy carved on the portals of the grandmother's house. But the pattern of discovery is to be repeated by Ravi, who plays under a 'graying cloth draped ... like a shroud' over his grandmother's all but forgotten tin trunks. The symbolism of the image encapsulates the grandmother's experience. And out of it, the special aura of the mystic light glows for Ravi.

This time the grandmother's lamps are lit at Deepavali, Thaipusam, and Ponggal, the festivals of the community when everyone comes together. But for Ravi, the secret meaning is to be seen only when the lamps are lit, creating 'large, blue-tinged auras on the air, the flames burning steadily' (p. 14), for then they shine on 'a special country' of the mind, revealing 'an invisible landscape' (p. 14) which transforms the ordinariness of the family house.

There is a darker aspect to this landscape of fantasy, for it is a country inhabited by unseen spirits, ruled by superstitions which find a sign in everyday occurrences (p. 15). But its emotional intensity renders it 'more tangible than the concrete one' (p. 15) of Bedong and Sungei Petani. It is a voice from this world, speaking from the dimension of dream-significance, which snatches Ravi out of the familiar dual orbits of the Bedong/Ramayana worlds of his family, and into a clash between the Indian past (so richly recalled in the framing structures of his mind) and the colonial

present. The story of this conflict is a theme which has been touched upon in an earlier paper[2], so I will restrict my remarks to the framework devices of time in the novel.

The voice from the world of dream speaks through Ravi's 'stepmother' and this voice announces a course of action which introduces Ravi to his third internal landscape. This is the landscape of learning which eventually releases him from the bonds of his other backgrounds, but not without an inner cultural wrench, which leaves him with permanent psychic scars.

The story of Ravi from this stage of his metamorphosis delineates his development away from the traditional spheres of his family and the Tamil community of Bedong and Sungei Petani. The autobiography records the process by which Ravi makes the transition from the fantastic dimension lit by his grandmother's cosmic 'circle of flame', which had made whole the imaginative life of his childhood, to the plane of a fractured self awareness, which sees him moving uneasily from one cultural ambience to another.

The self awareness being nurtured in Ravi reflects the loss of community which is the inevitable corollary of individuality. This is an area of the cross-cultural encounter often crippling to the emerging sense of a personal being, so that the biography of such a transition is often that of disillusionment and alienation: such is the area of psychological darkness associated with V. S. Naipaul's investigation of this phenomenon. *The Return* records a similar loss of meaning in the death

of Naina, in which the brilliance of the grandmother's ritual lights is made 'lustreless, cultureless' (p. 183).

But K. S. Maniam's record of this transition in *The Return* struggles to discover a way out of the darkness of the divided self. Ravi may mourn the distancing of the community spirits in 'our invisible world' (p. 15), but his battle to sustain a sense of wholeness is not a fatal one. In the end he emerges with a sense that the rituals of that communal world, now rendered 'useless' (p. 180), may not be the base for transmutation into a brave new world, but the loss has not utterly destroyed him. Again this may be an effect of the autobiographical voice. Naina's death is felt, its intensity being signified by the fire-twisted articles of the shrine room:

> Nataraja, only darker, had fallen on his side. Periathai's tier lamps had survived the flames, one or two twisted by the heat. (p. 181)

The record of loss implies a distancing ambiguity (the darker, fallen god, the twisted lamps), but its objectivity (so different from the immersion in anguish felt by the mother) can still note wryly the survival of the lamps.

Ravi's sense of loss, then, is not simple. His complex 'knot' of feelings finds itself in the textually perfect expression of the poem composed by the narrator, which ends the 'tormenting recognition' (p. 182) of loss. For the fact remains that Ravi can transmute loss

into an ordered and ordering experience of his world.

Before he dies, Naina chants in a 'garbled language' (p. 180), as though desperately trying to make sense of the destruction to come. The grandmother's symbolic house has been turned into a 'mass of burnt rubble' (p. 181) and with Naina's death, it is replaced by another symbolic house, the funerary house of death fashioned by the priest. With the crumbling of the funerary house, the old ways disintegrate, liberated by the stream behind the house and 'setting the spirit free at last,' (private communication with the author on 18th February 1987). The priest's actions are merely the formal religious double for the act of liberation on the secular plane carried out by Naina before his death, when he burns down the family home.

The Return thus comes full circle with its central image cluster. There is another transformation of the image before the novel closes. Ravi marks the anguish of Naina's attempt to fashion a new kind of shrine of worship from the soil of the land, but he builds quite a different structure. Out of the stony rubbish of the burnt-over waste land, Ravi fashions his house of words. It is a measure of the integrity of this novel that in making the journey out and subsequent return ('Full Circle'; p. 182), its protagonist wears the lineaments of pain, yet can still hear the 'secret language' (p. 180) to be spoken to the new world. (The theme of the 'secret language' was the subject of the paper already referred to.)

This essay will conclude with the suggestion that an exploration of temporal strategies in *The Return* can reveal an intricate play of narrative consciousness. Indeed the idea of time passing frames our perception of the worlds in conflict which are reconstituted by the emergent mind of the central figure of the novel. Ravi is caught inescapably in the flux of time, even as he defines himself against its flow.

Notes

[1] K. S. Maniam, *The Return*, Kuala Lumpur: Heinemann, 1981.

[2] in a joint paper by the present writer and Dr. Irene Wong, which was presented at the ACLALS conference, University of Guelph, August 1983; and published in SARE (1983).

"The Heart of Darkness Revisited: Marianne Wiggins's John Dollar"

Review of

Marianne Wiggins. *John Dollar*. London: Penguin Books, 1989. vi + 234pp.

by

Wong Ming Yook

In *John Dollar*, one feels that the British Empire is once again on trail: the terribly English colonials out in Burma that Wiggins cuttingly portrays are made to look ridiculous in their strutting postures and superiority. If arrogance and chauvinism made the British Empire, Wiggins in this novel has decided that these same attitudes brought about its downfall.

John Dollar is reminiscent of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. In fact, it parallels the earlier novels in many ways. It tells a hellish story within the context of a shipwreck on a Burmese island; except, in *John Dollar*, the leading roles are female. The hell created out of a forced life on a lush and wild island is one borne out of what Wiggins thinks is a perverse civilisation. The stranded characters do not 'revert' to their natural bestial state on the island, away from the safety of a watchdog society. Like Defoe's Crusoe, they try to maintain the laws and religion they were brought up to regard as superior. But Wiggins insists that this law and this religion are, in fact, as beastly as the

eastern cultures the British have come to replace. Highlighted, pared to basics and essentials on the island, Western civilisation is found to be not so much brittle and unable to withstand the wildness around, but as bestial, tribal and savage as the local cultures in the untamed east. Between the demented girls who feed on John Dollar in a fantastic and horrifyingly unholy eucharistic rite, and the native cannibals who kill and then eat the girls' fathers, there is very little difference.

Set first in Cornwall, the novel starts off with the death of Charlotte, the leading female character, and the attempts by her half-breed companion and one-time pupil, Menaka, or Monkey as she is better known, to bury her on holy ground. The rest of the story is an extended flashback, as Monkey, surreptitiously digging her mistress's grave in the dead of night after being refused a proper funeral by the vicar, remembers their lives in Burma in 1918. The British society in Rangoon that Charlotte found herself in was narrow minded, conspiratorial, and repressive. But beneath the obviously social exterior, Wiggins exposes the extremities the characters are capable of, in the privacy of their own uncensored musings. The atmosphere created is strange and surreal. Wiggins's portrayal of the children especially succeeds very well in drawing this out. In their naturalness, these British children teeter between two worlds, that of their parents' civilised and socially restrictive world, and that of the more uninhibited world they share with the natives. Theirs is the simple, uncomplex mind, which sees black as black; and it is this literalness in them which lends them their strangeness. The twins, Sloan and Sybil

(Sam and Eric of *The Lord of the Flies*), for instance, project the idea of children as little savages who must be trained and schooled to become civilized like their master-parents. The Burmese natives are identified with the British children; they too, have simple, uncomplex minds, blessed or cursed with a literalness beyond the understanding of the Western mind. The twins' mother, Kitty Ogilvy, hates them as the white overlords hate their Eastern subordinates. This hatred is born of fear. It is a fear of the unknown, and both the children and the natives are the unknown to the white adult colonials. *John Dollar* does not only set out to damage the reputation of the British colonials. That would be too dated. Wiggins looks not only at the Burmese natives but also the female natives (especially the female children who, stranded on the island, act out their mothers' hideous repressions), colonised and conquered in their own lands. The greater the repressions, the greater the perversions. Kitty Ogilvy hates and fears her twins also because they represent her darkest aspect. If they are monstrous, then, as Wiggins implies, they were born of a monstrous mother who dwells in Kitty's soul.

Such postcolonialist and feminist concerns aren't new, but Wiggins writes with a clever and subversive hand to get her point across. I read this novel at a go because it had enough elements in it to interest me. Still, this doesn't erase the fact that *John Dollar* is a book that I'm a little uneasy about. I recognise the intentions of the writer: anti-British imperialism, anti-white domination, anti-male chauvinism. It is clever and subversive in ways that should make any anti-

imperialist and 'coloured' feminist happy, but -- I find it rather condescending to be told that the British are as bad as the simple-minded Burmese cannibals, and that female repressions outclass male repressions in the degree and extent of their perversions. Wiggins hasn't done either the feminist cause or the East a favour. She hasn't really shed her white imperialist skin, but yes, one does get the impression that she's trying, if trying is all it takes.

LAWRENCE JONES. *BARBED WIRE & MIRRORS: ESSAYS ON NEW ZEALAND PROSE*. DUNEDIN: UNIV OF OTAGO PRESS, 1987. PP. 278.

Review by

C. S. Lim

This book of essays is basically new-critical in its approach though some of the essays go beyond the text to take account of the context. There is nothing like it to introduce a subject. At least it hugs the text and does not float free of its ostensible pretext.

It is often a dissatisfying experience to read a book of reviews. The centrifugal tendency of the volume is constantly threatening disintegration to any unifying ambition the author-compiler may aspire to. Lawrence Jones's book is no exception. It has a fragmentary feel in spite of what Jones claims is "a kind of coherence ... a coherence as a work of literary history". If one concedes that coherence, then it is the loose coherence of a clutch of literary-historical documents. Jones provides his own example to this disintegrative trend in the essays on the realist tradition and what he calls "the other tradition". "The second one," he tells us, "corrects the first while it complements it" (5). He hopes to bring out a full-fledged literary history of New Zealand fiction in the near future which might be more coherent and integrated in form.

Jones sees the critic's task as the search for the author's "idiosyncratic mode of regard" (a phrase he borrows from Thomas Hardy). This can be related to John Carey's search for the "master images" of an author's imagination which are supposed to help the reader to discover the author's idiosyncratic way of seeing. Basically we are still in the realm of the "objective characteristics" of formalist criticism.

There are good essays on Frank Sargeson, Janet Frame and C. K. Stead. From the Sargeson Tradition, Lawrence Jones traces the development of New Zealand fiction to the point where a claim is made on Janet Frame's behalf which does not seem to sound too extravagant -- Owls Do Cry ranks "as one of the very few novels of the last twenty-five years written anywhere in the English-speaking world that can be put next to the work Faulkner and Joyce without being dwarfed" (184).

The volume as a whole is full of sharp insights and helpful comments for readers who may want to explore the area of New Zealand writing as it has been and continues to be inscribed.

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David - 2

by

Edwin Thumboo

With shepherd-stealth astutely tempered by the blunt
History of his pain, David and Abishai the volunteer
Sought and found, for the second, terrible time,
Their King asleep. Saul's dedicated, jealous anger
Still fermented, still heaved and prowled. But David's
Deeply rooted faith chose to see the Lord's anointed,
Not the royal discontent, the turbulent hunter of his life,
Who gave, without intent, point and precision
To his hardy band, to their fugitive wanderings
Among hill and cave and longish Ein-Gedi nights.

Thus delivered, Saul lay fragile, exhausted,
Sealed in quiet, his spear neatly pushed into
The ground by his bolster. Saul the grievous, great
Flawed instrument; restless victim of disobedience,
Rampaging wilfulness. Who so needed music, loved
Courage, monumental anger; adrenalin for tribal nation.
Who was moved by majesty, pride, quick remorse.
Who remembered the quarrelsome words of Samuel,
That thorn, that nuisance of a judge turned prophet.

...let me smite him, I pray thee....
...the Lord himself will strike.... And they left,
Taking the mighty spear, whose sharp whistle had
Shaved the air before, just missing him as he sat

Composing psalms. And the cruse of water, life.
Leaving the camp...the chance to cure, so simply,
Their exile in the uncertain, bitter south...they
Walked between trenches of enemies divinely
Tranquilized.
So ensued some necessary prophesies
To fill their days...Some metaphors for us.

...and they gat them away, and no man saw it...
Darting nimbly as they climbed, held their breath,
Checked the drift of stars, the needling angle
Of the wind as it shifted across gullies, pushing
Patches of mist up the slopes. Pain and joy rippled
In their hearts. Kept from discovery, certain death
By the Lord whose other hand dispensed the dew
Of sleep on Saul's army, they gained the distant
High space of a neighbouring hill, where sad David
Called down to Abner, Saul's bravest of the brave...

ye are worthy to die...ye have not kept your master ...

Heard and spoke to Saul and then departed.

Memories - 3

by

Edwin Thumboo

"Yes... They *are* do-gooders....

3rd Elder of the clan, I am remembered with
Curiously vexed affection. My bachelor ways
Were embarrassments; they arranged distances,
Imposed intermittent exile of a kind, all done
With Tang discretion. They say blood is faithfuller
Than water. I wonder, given such relatives whom,
Incidentally, we can't choose or decline or trade away,
Even in good times.

... Could you please fill up my glass? More....

What odd-jobs I accepted riffled and reduced my
Yin essence, the one great source marinating
Those evenings among spirited friends. You
Know what I mean.

But when all is said and done, I am contented
Even as I watch my body weaken, my resolve
Turn putty, the days diminish before failing
Eyes. Had many lives, and many tales to tell,
In my one language. It is full; has never failed me,
Even in extremes. Remember how that notorious
Jalan Besar gang cornered me? Gambling debt.

It took some doing, I can tell you, but I managed
An air of genial confidence, balanced syntax;
Was allusive, floated like a butterfly, a la Mohd.
Ali; offered a couplet here, an aphorism there.
Was I afraid? Desperately. The trick is to wave a
Hand, hold them folksies with your eyes; vary your
Tone and speed...

What? You've got to go just when Uncle
Is getting dramatic? You don't say! Can I move
An amendment? Ha! Ha! I know, I know. As much
Chance as Chiam See Tong in the SDP? A pity
As I thought we'd try the noodles round the corner.
Children should have ears but no mouth, eh.
See you when I see you. Don't forget the nuts."

You hear me in English. Nephew translated
My meanderings. He won't ever give up.
There's history in me, he says. I'm not sure;
He wants to raid my past, rummage through roots
And memories. But this ang moh speech... very big
Stuff, international, day and night on TV and radio,
Taken on a moon-walk by Michael Jackson,
Used too by taxi drivers, mothers in HDB estates,
Cannot touch some of the finer veins of our
Thought, or carry the sound of an idea, or realise
Enough how omissions can be pretty sneakish.
I have told him so, with challenging examples.
But enough. He's just left. I promised to
See him another time, when in the mood.
Ah...this beer, Raffles Special...good...but not
So shiok as the cheap, early fifties NAAFI supply
In the Old **Beach Road NCO's Club** nr. the hotel.

Off to the coffee-shop to see what
My friends are brewing....

Days are passing;
I hear the abacus again.
It has many meanings.

WE BEGAN

by

Wong Ming Yook

We began on a boat, I think they said,
or somewhere on long hills and wide tracts
of orchard land: were they for sandlewood or
dragon's eyes? I forget, perhaps for
both. We began amid the coconut leaves
that swayed, seductive to the eye,
reaching coyly into our sleepy nights
and drawing unfamiliar thoughts that
never entertained our wintered past. They say
we came too early to be sucked into the soil,
too late to be returned to the mirage, cold
with shifting seasons, and meals around a steaming
pot. We ate the heat of seeds, red with
passion of the local earth, and thought
our former life a dream. But sandlewood
true evokes the dream spell of the countless
years that call, like buddha sticks that
will entrance the willing proselyte
to visions of a waiting past, amid
the watching dragon's eyes. We began on
the boat that rocked our lives away, and
drew our hopes to fix on swaying trees
and losng, hot nights beneath a humid sky.

ANCESTORS

by

Wong Ming Yook

Ancestors still prey the mind
with memories that mean nothing
anymore.
but they sit in conference,
granting audience to naughty
descendants who will not
obey their counsel wise.

ancestors think that nanyang
is a single dream, a stop
within the mortal life
that ends again in
yellow springs.
but here there are no
mile-wide waters for
the dying soul to cross,
no fairy waiting for
the passage to the
western isle. there is
no magic isle down south, and
rough winds blow a
mad monsoon in winter
months. there are no
winter months. but ancestors
will not understand the

humid heat, and will wear
the oddest and hottest of
clothes. fanning themsleves
in the heat of
december, they cannot think
why unfilial descendants,
the offspring of offspring multiplied,
only close their ears
to the whispering past
that still
assails.

PROPHET

by

Wong Ming Yook

a cassandra, she was unheard
till tragedy had passed; and
though the seeing eyes could
not contain the coming grief,
they did not turn to heed
her keening prophecies. foretelling only
sad things, she spent her life in
empty market places, peddling
the curse of god, her
one gift that the cruelty of
fate had made unkind, unwished.
she was
nothing to all men who listened
for the prophecies of
peace; her face a tortured blank
that eyes had rubbed out of
sight, a carefully edited white
upon a page scrawled with
human hopes. no rare thing,
they thought the peddlar
pointless,
better off not-there, not-heard,
not-seen;
until the day of truth
appeared, like horrid tumours

now revealed beneath the human
gaze. and then they held
their retributive hands
to fall upon the strange, anointed
child of god, who was awhile
invisible,
till wisdom's words came
tripping true to fools
whose ears had heard,
and yet not heard,
cassandra calling
in their dark.

MOKSHA NATA

by

Wong Ming Yook

dance of release, reintegrate.
    quest for end of
man's creating spirit's
ancient work. dance, of movements
pure to beating bols; tempo ridden
    fast -
accompany these urgent steps to
ecstasy.

ST. JOHN OF THE APOCALYPSE

by

Wong Ming Yook

images divine invading the
mind most alive. pure, unsullied
on that isle. patmos. what was
burning deep in its heart. was
the same that seared the fineness
of your mind. it branded you. he
branded you... with fire; burned you
with lava of patmos. red passion holy.
hot with spirit's furnace. could
you refuse that fiery dream made
of blood and rocks. island terrain.
dip and flow of sheerness of bare
earth and seas. and winds that
whipped the earth like sheets.
stark, bare. this raging eden
born to grecian minds. and yours.
was inspired. divine. was pulled apart
and blown by sight too pure for mortal
eyes. whose vision was too blasted
for the safe. no. you were sage and
saint inhabiting extremities of
dimensions of the soul. drowned
in the heart of his volcanic eye.
slain. blood language poured from you.
molten. symbols of that fire. words.

corrode the flesh.
here is wind blowing through crevices.
volcanic dust on tongue. dry. releasing
heaven's flood. words from oracle on
patmos. here is priest in banishment.
speaking god in rock. split to let
blood flow. volcanic. revelation.

HOLDING THE LADDER

by

Russ Swinnerton

"Do you want some help?" I called, and gripped the ladder on both sides, wiggling it a bit as if I was getting ready to climb up after him.

He looked down from the top, and said, "No thanks, Jim. Be a good bloke and run along." I could see that the ladder was off-balance, and the higher he'd gone the worse it had got. He looked bloody precarious, I reckoned, which was what my dad said I was when I stood on the window-sill to put the aerial of my crystal set into the guttering.

"You look bloody precarious," I said, real loud so he'd know I meant it. He turned more sharply, and I saw the up-hill leg of the ladder lift just a bit. He felt it, too, and reached for the smooth wall to keep his balance, but the wall had nothing to hang on to except fresh paint, and you'd have to hang on to that for a long time to give you any sort of purchase, until it dried. He tried, though, and put his hand square on the bit he'd just finished painting, and swore. As he jerked his hand back, he bumped the paint-tin and slopped a bit of the bright yellow paint down his left leg and onto his boot. As he looked down at his boot, the ladder lifted again, about an inch this time, and he put his hand back on the wet paint to steady himself. I had to shield my eyes to see all this, because he had the sun behind him, and my neck was starting to hurt a bit.

"Well, I'll see you later then," I called up. He turned to look, slowly this time.

"Yes, thanks Jim. Why don't you go inside and see if the Missus has got any scones or biscuits or something."

"Too right," I said, and bowled on inside to the kitchen. "Hullo Missus," I said, but the place was as empty as an English bath-house, as my Dad used to say, and so I bowled on into the lounge. "Hullo Missus," I said, and this time there was someone, it was Sally in her petticoat with her mother on her knees at Sally's feet, with a mouth full of pins; only it wasn't a petticoat, I could see now it was part of a dress, the inner bit, or the dress inside-out, or something. Not the full dress, and I could see Sal's underwear, which was terrific. Normally she pulls the blinds down when she's changing, except one night about three weeks ago after her exam results came out, and she had a fight with her parents because she reckoned she should go to the university, and they reckoned she should get a decent trade behind her, like her brother Billy who was a panel-beater, only they said she should be a hairdresser, not a panel-beater - she didn't have the build to be a panel-beater, I told her the next day when I saw her, because I had seen her the night before when she was too upset to remember to close the blinds. Anyway, I reckon it's a fair thing for neighbours to be pretty close. "Hello Sal," I added. "How you goin'?"

"Don't you come in here, young Jim" said her mum through the pins, and I saw one of them drop out of her mouth onto the floor, and I knew if it got into the carpet it would be a bugger to find, so I ducked down to help her find it, but I think Sal's mum had seen it drop, too, because she was looking for it, so when I got down by Sal's feet I banged heads with her mum, and that made me laugh. After a while she started to laugh too, and Sal helped me up

and said, "Do it later, Mum," and took me into the kitchen for the biscuit I'd come in for in the first place.

Sal looked lovely in the inside of her dress or whatever it was. It was a light red colour, like a rose they had going in a trellis down the side of the house (down the other side of the house from us, because I'd tried to climb the one Mr Smith put up on our side and it wasn't real strong). Sal's eyes were a beautiful colour in the middle, like a mauvey colour, but set off really well by the colour of the dress. The outsides of her eyes, which are supposed to be white, were red, the same colour as the dress, and I reckoned she'd been crying again.

"You've been crying again Sal," I said.

She looked at me straight, and said, "Did I lift my blind up again?" and we both had a good laugh. She poured me a glass of milk.

"Is it about the University?" I asked. She nodded.

"When you're a hairdresser you'll be able to cut my hair for free, which means I won't have to go Mum's friend Auntie Agnes, who really isn't my Auntie, who puts a bowl on my head and cuts my hair with those horrible clippers with the teeth sticking out the front." Sally looked at me, and stopped laughing. She poured herself a glass of milk, and we sat there for a bit, drinking our milk. I could hear the last words I'd said, "sticking out the front" sort of echoing around the kitchen, because it went real quiet. Sally leaned back and turned on the radio, which was nice, because sometimes she dances with me when they play dance music, and Sal says it's a shame to let it go to waste, and I just come up to her chest now I'm eleven, and it's really nice when she holds me close.

"Anyway," I said, "if you want to go to university you can, I mean this is nineteen sixty one, and things have changed since you were young," which is what I'd heard Sal say to her parents in the middle of the row the other day. Sal smiled again at that, and patted my cheek. Just then there was a loud noise, like when the milkman fell over my bike the other night, and I knew right away that it was Sal's dad on the ladder. I shot off the stool and out the door, but Sal's mum must have been used to this because she'd shot out the front and was there before me, and there was Sal's dad on the lawn on his back with the ladder on top and yellow paint all over his trousers, and he was groaning, and saying, "It's me back, Merle, me back's done for," and just then our dog came running round the side from our place (my brother must have let him out), and he really loves Sal's dad, and he came shooting round the corner like a furry sputnik, but Mr Smith saw him coming, and kicked the ladder off himself, and got up in time to give the dog a boot, "up the arse for the roses" he said, and then I had to drag the dog away. I was a bit disappointed, really, because he was on his back I was going to tell him that I thought he'd looked a bit precarious. As I came round the side with the dog, there was Sal, holding her sides with her arms crossed over her tummy and laughing and trying hard to be really quiet. She'd been watching round the side of the house and had tears in her eyes again, which means she must have been thinking about the university. I took the dog home and locked him in the laundry. By the time I got back, all the paint-pots had been picked up, and there was a big yellow paint-stain on the grass, and Mrs Smith told me Sally was busy and couldn't come out to play, and Mr Smith had locked himself in the garage, and told me to piss off (and I'll tell my dad he said that). I went down to the railway-line to throw stones.

* * * * *

It happened again last night! Sal had another row with her parents and left the blind up. Only this time I knew she knew she'd left it up because it was down when she came in from the kitchen. I'd put my crystal-set headphones on, and was ready to tune-in to 2SM[1] which is easy to find because it's right at the right-hand end of the dial, and I had the earth lead clipped to the frame of my bed and was ready to hook up the aerial. I could hear the argument real clear even with the headphones on while I was standing on the window ledge to loop the aerial into one of the bits that joins the pieces of guttering together. Sal was crying again, and I felt really sorry for her. I climbed back in, took the headphones off, and leaned out the window, and I could hear her father yelling at her, telling her that she would thank him for this in the long run, and how an apprenticeship was worth more than money, and how he wished his father had made these plans for him when he was a young bloke (which is rubbish, because he told me his father was killed in the war, so how could he arrange things for anyone). Sal was really upset, saying things like they wished she'd been born a boy, and she wished she'd been born a boy. I was glad she was a girl, because Billy her brother was a boy, and he used to tease me, and throw stones at me whenever he saw me, which was often, although now he had a kid of his own he was a bit more friendly. She said she only wanted to study arts or fine arts or poetry or something, or it might have been all of those things, and her father was shouting, saying he wasn't going to keep feeding her for the rest of his life, and she had to make her own way, and be able to support herself, and what about when they got old. And, he said, what was the point of all that education when she was just going to get married anyway.

After a while I could hear Sal's mum saying something more quietly, although I couldn't hear the words, and then it all went quiet, and that's when Sal came back into her room and pulled up the blinds. My light was off, but I was still leaning out the window, so I'm sure she could see me, and we looked at each other over the fence for a while. I couldn't see her eyes, the light was behind her, but I knew what they'd look like. After a while she took off her dress and then turned off her light. It was still pretty good.

* * * * *

Michael was holding my hands, and looking at me through those thick lenses of his. "Sally," he said, "I really mean it this time."

He can be so intense.

We were sitting in a corner of the Drummoyne Sailing Club, over behind the poker machines so we couldn't be seen from the stairs. He believed this was about as daring as it was possible to get and still be in the suburbs. He had just finished telling me that I was the love of his life, and that we needed to consummate our relationship. I was thinking about it. I mean, he can be so serious, but he has a good heart. In his view, the intellectual infidelities we'd indulged in for a year or two had committed us to the point where we might as well have the whole lot. He expected it. Trouble is, I liked the kissing and cuddling and the lightness of it all, and wasn't sure that another serious relationship was what I needed. But I didn't know what I needed.

He looked at me with his thick black-framed glasses and his

handsome face, and he said "What time is it?" That surprised me, as if he meant what time in our lives, but then I saw that he finally meant what time it is, and so I told him, and he looked worried and told me he'd call me at work tomorrow. He said he should leave first, and he did.

I finished my drink slowly, and rather enjoyed the freedom from scrutiny. It wasn't late, about six pm, and I didn't really want to go home just yet. The sense of inevitability that Michael had about our relationship depressed me. It's just another kind of fidelity - just another kind of marriage.

I cheered myself up with thoughts like this for a while, and then left to go home. On the stairs, on my way up to the street I met Jimmie, coming down. What do they say? After all these years? I should say that I met a middle-aged painter on the stairs, I mean a house-painter not a Rembrandt: a tradesman in overall, who looked familiar. And he smiled, and it was Jim, Jim the neighbour, the little kid, Jim with the open window, with that horrible smelly dog. Jim.

I threw an arm around him and kissed him, turpsy smells and all, and it was certainly Jim. I hadn't seen him since the night I left home after the last big row, just climbed out my window with my things in a big schoolbag, and never went back.

"Sal," he said, "It's been nearly thirty years. How did you know it was me?" It was his eyes: the way they went when Dad fell off the ladder, that's how they went when he sat me, and how could I forget.

"How could I forget?" I laughed. "Are you going into the bar?" We walked back down together, and he bought me a gin-and-

tonic without asking, and we sat side-by-side at a table in the centre of the lounge in full view of the stairs. I kissed him again.

"It is so good to see you," I said, and the years peeled away while I looked at him. "I missed you most, after I left." There'd been no goodbyes, I'd just gone. They were such unhappy years. If it hadn't been for Jim, it might not have been possible to go, and I don't know what would've happened then. He had seemed so immune to fear, so insensitive to adult power. He must have only been ten or eleven, but he was as wicked as an orphan's revenge. I had loved him for it, and drawn strength from him, watching him watching me across the fence, the night before I left. "Are you still looking into windows?" I said.

"Only if your're still standing in front of them." He grinned that little-kid grin, and it was just like turning on the radio and listening to the dance music.

"What are you doing now, Sal?" he asked.

"I'm the Madame in "A Touch of Class",[2] but tonight's a slow night." I said it dead-pan, and held his look until I had to laugh. "I'm headmistress of a school in Haberfield. I live just over there," I told him, and pointed down the Crescent towards the views. "I had to go, you know."

"We missed you after you went," he said. "I got up that morning, and there was your window open and the blind up, and the curtains blowing out over the window sill. And your dad's ladder leaning against the wall with yellow paint all over it. Did you get where you were going?"

I shook my head. "I don't know. I got married, which they

said I'd do. I've got a husband, three kids, and a house where hardly anyone laughs. My husband reminds me of my father, and I've started to look like my mother. Sometimes I tell my daughters about you when you lived next door, and they just look uncomfortable. I suppose I'm having a bit of a mid-life crisis at the moment. It's not just men who suffer from male menopause." We laughed.

"Jeez, you've been having once since you were sixteen, Sal."

I stopped laughing. "But we build these high walls around us, so that we can struggle to get over them. There's no escape, but we're always escaping."

We sat for a bit in silence. I felt like kissing him again, properly, it was so good to see him, and so I did, there in the lounge of the Sailing Club, a middle-aged painter in his painting clothes being kissed on the mouth, with people watching. I was like being eighteen again.

He stood up then to get more drinks, and to give us both time. After the kiss I imagined the taste of another gin-and-tonic, the fresh-cold bubbles and the sour lemon. But he surprised me, and came back with one of those lime-green tropical cocktails, like in a thirties' movie, with a little red paper umbrella and a pink monkey on a stick. The moisture was frosting on the glass, and the drink sat on the table like a trophy. We started to laugh again. I asked him was the monkey trying to climb out or climb in.

He thought for a minute and said, "He's just up the ladder, enjoying the view."

It wasn't even a serious drink. I was just - frivolous. I

looked at Jim, and he smiled back at me, and I remembered the sound a falling parent makes, falling from a ladder of undeserved authority with a clatter of dignity and paint-tins.

It was getting on for seven, and I had to go. I stood up and took a card from my purse. "Here's my address. I've really got to run, but come and see me. My bedroom window's on the first floor, left side as you look at it. You painters start work pretty damn early, I know, when the rest of us gentle folk are still in our nighties, and just getting up."

He said, "I'll see you tomorrow," and we both knew what we meant.

Endnotes

[1]A Sydney radio station.

[2]A well-known refuge for jaded business men in Sydney.

THE CLOUD OF WORDS

by

Lim Chee Seng

Since we are surrounded by such a cloud of words,
Some strong and strapping,
Some decrepit and tottering,
Others deranged and constantly wandering,
With no fixed address,
Let us try to muster some order
Out of the chaotic shambles.

God first wrote for Moses;
With His very hand engraved
The commandments on recto and verso
Of tablets of stone.
Even He, under the circumstances,
Had to do it again when Moses,
Seeing the chosen people completely miss the point,
Smashed the Manuscripts in his holy rage.

The people preferred the Image to the Word;
Danced around the Idol as they ignored
The mountain Scriptorium's earliest book.

To write it twice is to insist on the Letter;
So when we call to muster and order
The words we sense are growing slack,
We demand that they must be as fresh and clean

As when, washed of post-partum blood,
Trim and clear,
We first recognized in them
A legitimate birth.

NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL VALUES: SINGAPOREAN WRITING AND ITS CRITICS

by

Peter Hyland

In September 1992 a curious controversy, or perhaps pseudo-controversy, developed over the Singapore National Book Development Council's awards for fiction. The top prize was given to Rex Shelley's novel *The Shrimp People*, while Gopal Baratham's *A Candle Or the Sun* was given the minor accolade of "Commended". Baratham responded to this by refusing his award and, further, by declining to be considered for any future awards. This apparently petulant act was justified by suggestions that *A Candle Or the Sun* should have received the top award but did not because of its political content. The novel deals with a conspiracy that is vaguely reminiscent of the so-called Marxist conspiracy of 1987. It constructs a Singapore that has a secret police force whose function is to suppress free speech, and it leaves its protagonist, who is himself a writer, imprisoned in a kind of eternity of police torture.

At first sight the suggestion that the book was a victim of a politically-motivated exclusion seems plausible. It has been rejected by Singaporean publishers even though less politically-suggestive parts of it had already been published there in a volume of short stories entitled *People Make You Cry*. Picked up by a British publisher, Serpent's Tail, it was also taken on by Penguin, and was put on the short-list for the Commonwealth Writers' Prize. This recognition by prestigious bodies does seem to raise questions about

its cooler local reception. Yet the book has not been the victim of other kinds of suppression; it is freely available in Singapore and is taught in undergraduate courses at the National University. During the controversy Baratham attempted to distance himself from the arguments about political hostility, suggesting instead that the judges found his book insufficiently "Singaporean": "It is clear that the council is looking for a Singapore style of writing. But I am more interested in writing for a wider, international, mainstream audience. Our writing will never go global otherwise."[1]

As if to confirm Baratham's claim, the local reception of Shelley's *The Shrimp People* seems to suggest that this novel does indeed fulfil the requirements of a "Singapore style of writing". It went into the competition heralded by the question "Is this the great Singapore novel?" It is certainly a thick novel, and in its historical scope and its attempt to give the feel of Singapore life it has larger pretensions than any local work of fiction that has preceded it. Its social focus, however, is narrowly on the Eurasian community, and the Straits Times critic Koh Buck Song, who raised the question of the book's national greatness, saw this narrow focus as a fundamental limitation. "Shelley's work," he wrote, "does not include enough characters of the other races--Chinese, Malay, Indian and Caucasian--for the full flavour of Singapore to emerge." This is in line with Koh's prescription for the great Singapore novel: "Characters must come from all areas of life. Reference must be made to all the main races and religious groups."

I am not interested in resolving here the questions of which novel is better--both deal with very interesting material, both have deep flaws of structure and style. But the controversy raises many pertinent questions about the relationship between national and international values and the dilemma of the writer in an emergent post-colonial culture. Writers must be concerned about the kind of

audience they are seeking, and we cannot blame them for attempting to increase its size, whether for commercial reasons or for professional satisfaction. In a sense, commercial interests do not impinge much on the serious writer in Singapore, since making a living out of writing have some other profession, so I will set aside the connections between value judgement and the market place, despite the fact that in pushing a work of literature beyond parochial boundaries a writer is also vastly increasing its commercial potential. The possibility that Baratham's novel was rejected because of its political content raises the more interesting issue of the risks involved in writing that is seen to be critical of authority, but it should not blind us to the recognition that the alternative possibility presented by Baratham--that the book was rejected because its style is insufficiently Singaporean--is itself as much a political as an aesthetic issue.

Koh Buck Song's prescription of what the great Singapore novel "must" do implies the larger prescription of what a literature must do: it must reflect a national identity. For the Singaporean writer the problems of national identity are complex, troubled not only by the cultural mix noted by Koh, but also by Singapore's relationship on the one hand to the much larger geographical and political entity of Malaysia, to which it is physically attached by its umbilical causeway, and on the other to its British colonial past, to which it is attached by the English language. The writer has often been called on not simply to reflect a national identity, but to shape it, and this, surely, is a political demand. The most authoritative voice in Singaporean writing is that of Edwin Thumboo who, twenty years before Koh, was presenting this demand far less ambiguously. He said in 1971: "In the life of a nation, literature can be a tool to transmit attitudes and values in keeping with the needs of our country" (The Straits Times, Oct. 10, 1971). This pragmatic view of literature was linked by Thumboo in 1973 to the use of the

English language: "the use of English can help shape the society we want, can accelerate the creation nof a Singaporean identity" (The Straits Times, Nov. 13, 1973).

We are here negotiating that difficult space where the authoritative becomes the authoritarian. Who decides which attitudes and values should be transmitted? Who decides what shape the society should take? By what authority is an identity imposed? The writer who is co-opted into this project may be in danger of losing authority over his/her own work. Singapore supports writers in all its other languages, but English has been chosen as the language for a national literature because of its international currency and because it does not favour any of the immigrant groups that now make up the Singaporean nation. This has had its problems however; the identity that English once imposed was that of the coloniser, and the language has had to be drained of this: as Thumboo said in 1968, "No one in Singapore would want to write as an Englishman" (Malay Mail, Oct. 24, 1968). But how does the Singaporean writer who has rejected the authority of the coloniser find an identity through what Kirpal Singh, another prominent commentator on Singaporean writing, has described as "an essentially foreign language"? ("Singapore Malaysian Fiction" 68).

It may be that the fact that English has been so widely promoted for its pragmatic value has an inhibiting effect when it is used for creative expression. For all the official sponsorship of English, it is not the language that the majority of the population have been comfortable with; hence Thumboo's concept of the "second tongue". The result of this is that Singaporean writers and critics are deeply conscious of the writer's public role. This arises to a large degree from the intense official encouragement of writing in English. There are writing competitions with attractive monetary prizes. For example, in 1986 the National University of Singapore,

using a grant from Shell, organised a competition to encourage the writing of short plays. Ironically, in the following year another national playwriting competition which had been initiated in 1977 by the then Ministry of Culture faced cancellation because of a lack of response. The Ministry of Culture also sponsored *Singa*, a literary magazine, while for some years the Straits Times ran a prominently featured "Poetry Corner" which printed and praised the efforts of its readers. The authoritarian impulse behind all this is rather revealingly suggested by Kirpal Singh, a long-time editor of Poetry Corner, in an article that attempts in part to explain why poetry is the dominant form in Singapore: "a literature in English had to be created quickly so as to give the different races a sense of cultural identity" ("An Approach" 9).

This calculated, pragmatic function that literature is supposed to have--as if it were simply a manufactured product, or a tool to manufacture a product--may in all probability create a confusion in the writer as to his role, and has certainly led to the kind of search for national poets and national classics reflected in Koh Buck Seng's query about Shelley's novel. In the same article Koh refers to Edwin Thumboo as "the unofficial poet laureate of Singapore"; Thumboo has been proclaimed "a simple poet" by Kirpal Singh and a "national poet" by Woon-Ping Chin Holaday (36), and Singh has tentatively offered Thumboo's poem "Ulysses by the Merlion" as a Singapore classic. While there can be little doubt about the importance of Thumboo's work, one may feel that this intense consciousness of the writer's public role is excessive, as is amusingly demonstrated by the advertisement issued by Federal Publications for a collection of short stories by Lim Thean Soo that appeared at the end of 1985, which described the book apparently in all seriousness, as "Lim Thean Soo's effort to forge a national literature."

Alongside this self-consciousness about the public role of the writer in English has gone an anxiety about the kind of English that he/she should use. This is connected to the concept of the "second tongue", and it is also related to official policy. Government initiatives to "upgrade" the level of English in Singapore have tended to favour a version of British English over local, Singlish versions of the language. Although there have been attempts to develop a distinctive literary language (such as the early Engmalchin experiments) most writers have tended to prefer this "educated" English. The result is that a Singaporean literary idiom has been hard to achieve. This is an area that has been examined by linguists (e.g. R.K. Tongue and John Platt) rather than literary critics; the general conclusion seems to have been that "Much of the local poetry in English is 'too well' written, too precious to make it Singaporean" (Platt and Singh 50). It appears that the official drive to "clean up" Singaporean English is at odds with the demands of a creative use of the language.

It is difficult to see how a genuine national literature in English can develop if there is no agreement on an appropriate tongue in which it can express itself. Edwin Thumboo's collection *Gods Can Die*, which is used by Holaday to substantiate her view of Thumboo as national poet, was dimissed by T. Wignesan as "the meekly-reproduced (Eng. Lit. course) poetry of post-war England on some other patch of green" ("Review" 82). The most severe consideration of this question comes in an article by the American critic Jan Gordon, who dismisses the whole idea of the "second tongue" as a myth, "a euphemism for the derivative status of English poetry in Singapore" ("Myth" 60). English is not a second tongue for most of the poets who use it, according to Gordon, since few of them can write in any other language. The idea of the second tongue serves at one and the same time to excuse inferior and toothless writing and to conceal the elitist status of the writers

(whom he considers to be part of a meritocracy) and their cosiness with the political establishment: "By deconstructing what is in effect their first tongue into an illusion of its secondariness, these poets create a special place for themselves as a small group with a small audience in a tiny country, which protects them from international class literary criticism ..." (63-4). The force of Gordon's argument is undercut somewhat by his personal hostility to the Singapore literary establishment; nevertheless it brings us back to the question, implied by Baratham, of what place international concerns have in the creation and evaluation of a national literature, and reminds us of the sensitive issues involved in these social, political, linguistic and aesthetic connections.

One might argue that the idea of "international-class literary criticism" only reflects the criteria of a different kind of elite, and even returns us to the inappropriate values of colonialism. I think, however, that a criticism that is going to be genuinely helpful to a literature developed under the wing of an authoritarian government must stand at a distance and offer an alternative source of authority. The literature needs a clear reflection of itself, of the direction it is taking and the directions it could (not should) take. I think it is fair to say that much of the criticism of Singaporean literature has been implicated in the same process of manufacturing and imposing a cultural identity as has much of the writing.

Criticism in the region has had difficulty defining a role for itself between the functions of promotion on the one hand and evaluation on the other. Clearly one important function of criticism in relation to a developing literature is, through the encouragement of writing, to help create an audience, and this may seem to be particularly true in a highly pragmatic, materialistic society like that of Singapore, where there is a tendency to feel suspicious of literature. But if the encouragement is too generous, genuine

discrimination may become impossible, and the literature of the region has suffered from what Devan Janadas has termed the "have a heart" school of criticism. This kind of criticism is generated for a number of reasons. Some of it arises from a genuine belief that the more encouragement is given the more will be written, and the healthier this will be for the writing in the long run. This appears to be the position of Kirpal Singh, and while no one can object to its motives, it has its dangers in that it tends to lead to a lack of discrimination about what is praised. Another product of this tendency is the custom of having established literary figures "promote" volumes of new writing by providing introductions to them, as Edwin Thumboo has done for, amongst others, Ee Tiang Hong's *Myths for a Wilderness* and Goh Poh Seng's *Eyewitness*. Some of these introductions contain valuable insights, but as an institution they are undeniably suspect because, given the circumstances, objective criticism cannot be expected. A genuine desire to cultivate whatever seeds of quality can be found must inevitably be undercut by simple or politic politeness, preventing those who write the introductions fron pointing out weaknesses in the writing they are introducing, or, worse still, leading to praise of the mediocre. Ooi Boo Eng has noted in some of these volumes "a curious mis-matching--a loosening or sometimes a lack of firm contact--between the analysis and evaluation of the editors and the works themselves" ("Real Estimate" 157).

The root of the problem is obvious enough: the smallness and the intimacy of the local literary world. It makes for a cautious attitude in criticism and a tendency to praise. It may also disable attempts at a more forthright and rigorous criticism, raising suspicions that negative evaluation is personally motivated. Thus, Devan Janadas has been commended for writing "criticism that seems to be determined to divorce itself from what it has too long been: a bland paraphrased retailing of a work, or a desperate, or

polite, balancing act of praise and blame, or an insinuation of reservation so civilly reserved that it loses all the force it ought to have" (Ooi, "Malaysia and Singapore" 100). Yet amongst his "victims" and their sympathisers this critical aggressiveness has been construed as character assassination and unprovoked personal hostility (Singh et al.a "Letters"). And who is to say it is not so, for within this small circle the motives of the critic who condemns may be as suspect as those of the critic who praises.

Given this situation, it seems essential that Singaporean writers be read and evaluated by non-Singaporean critics, and that the voices of Singaporean critics be heard more widely beyond the national boundaries. But modern Singapore has often been unusually sensitive to criticism of its cultural policies by outsiders; as early as 1960 a warning was given by the government to the British poet D.J. Enright, then Professor of English at the University of Singapore, to stay out of local politics, when he criticised the ban on juke-boxes. As recently as 1992 Koh Tai Ann, herself a rigorous and perceptive reader of local literature, had this to say in response to Gopal Baratham's appeal to an international audience: "Thus foreign imports (and judgements) are deemed necessarily superior to the native product. I have said this elsewhere before, and agree with the critic quoted by Kuo Pao Kun ... that 'in matters of art, we as a people still rely on foreigners to make artistic judgements for us'" (Straits Times, Sept. 24 1992).

We can understand the scepticism about "foreign judgements" in a society whose deliberation from foreign domination is so recent. There is, after all, no absolute standard of literary value, and criteria derived from the traditional English canon are likely to prove inappropriate when transplanted to an alien cultural context. But we need to make a distinction between listening to foreign judgements and relying on them, and it seems to

me that the context within which post-colonial Singaporean authors write is not only national, but also (Baratham is right about this) international; they participate in an English-speaking culture far wider than their own, and in taking over an international tongue they have become the recipients of international (not authoritarian) cultural influences. It is here, therefore, in this immensely complex mixture of national and international elements, that the critics must begin, aware that their task is as complex as the situation in which they must work. Only by refusing on the one hand to fall into the trap of the parochial and on the other to accept inappropriate "received" standards will they be able to perform their proper function on behalf of the creative writer.

I should like to end with an account of an incident that may seem irrelevant, but I don't think it is. In North American academia as, no doubt, elsewhere, there has been over the past few years the liberation of previously suppressed voices into a new pluralism. Issues of gender, race and class have been brought into the field of literary interpretation, and questions of legitimacy and authority opened up to a welcome scrutiny. This has, however, cleared the ground for a new authoritarianism, in the guise of so-called "political correctness" to police language and thought. At the University of Western Ontario, where I teach, this has been particularly troubling, and I shall illustrate it with one example. A gay professor, who teaches courses in gay and lesbian literature and culture, as well as gay and lesbian politics, came under sustained attack from women who claimed that as a gay male he had no authority to speak on lesbian issues. The dangers here that an awareness of difference can collapse into tribalism are obvious, and I think they are paralleled by the risks of an excessive concern with national interests in literature. Writers and critics need to see themselves a part of the larger context in which a national identity is forged not by looking inwards but in relation to what exists

outside, the recognition that an "I" can only have a meaning by acknowledging a "you" or a "they" and turning them into a "we". That, I think, is what the "common" in "Commonwealth" ought to mean.

Notes

[1]The events leading up to the controversy, and the various opinions quoted in the present paper, can be found in articles by Koh Buck Seng in issues of The Straits Times dated Saturday, May 30, 1992 and Saturday, September 5, 1992; by Sharon Loh in the issue of The Straits Times dated Friday, September 18, 1992; and by Koh Tai Ann in the issue of The Straits Times dated Thursday, September 24, 1992.

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BASIC SKILL AND QUESTION TYPES IN READING AND INTERPRETING LITERATURE

by

Jariah Mohd Jan
Ghazali Mustapha
Rosli Talif

1.0 Introduction

This paper will present the findings of a case study which sets out to investigate the skill levels in the interpretation of fiction proposed by Hillocks and Ludlow (1984). The purpose of the study is a practical one which is to find out how well students who opted for the Literature in English Programme at the secondary level (KBSM) are coping with their literary texts. Specifically, this is to address the research question that pertains to the students' performance in the higher order comprehension questions as opposed to the literal type questions. In addition, classroom strategies that promote higher cognitive skills will be highlighted.

2.0 Theoretical Background

The theoretical framework for this study is based on a model developed by Hillocks and Ludlow (1984) as their work provides empirical research that investigates the areas of skill levels in reading and interpreting of fiction.

Briefly, they state that in order for students to be able to understand the higher order skills (inferential), they must have mastered the lower level skills (literal). The results of their study demonstrate that "readers who are incapable of answering lower level questions will be incapable of answering higher level ones, while those who are capable of answering higher level questions are also capable of answering lower level ones" (p. 22). The study, however, could not ascertain definitively whether lower level comprehension enables upper level comprehension or vice versa.

Essentially, the skills are categorized into two comprehension levels: literal and inferential. The skills are defined by seven item types which can be discriminated from each other and organized taxonomically through logical analysis. They are as follows:

Literal Level

1. Basic Stated Information (BSI): Identifying frequently stated information which presents some condition crucial to the story.

2. Key Detail (KD): Identifying a detail which appears at some key juncture of the plot and which bears a causal relationship to what happens.

3. Stated Relationship (SR): Identifying a statement which explains the relationship between at least two pieces of information in the text.

Inferential Level

4. Simple Implied Relationship (SIR): Inferring the

relationship between two pieces of information usually closely related in the text.

5. Complex Implied Relationship (CIR): Inferring the relationship(s) among many pieces of information spread throughout large parts of the text.

6. Author's Generalization (AG): Inferring a generalization about the world outside the work from the fabric of the work as a whole.

7. Structural Generalization (SG): Generalizing about how parts of the work operate together to achieve certain effects.

3.0 Limitations

The study emphasizes the enhancement of higher order comprehension skills and the development of related activities or exercises towards the achievement of this purpose.

As such, this paper is not concerned with whether the item types based on Hillock's taxonomy are hierarchical and taxonomically related to each other. This is due to the results of research studies carried out by Hillocks and Ludlow (1984), and G.S. Tian (1991) that strongly support the hypothesis mentioned earlier.

It should also be noted that the results could not be generalised or applied to any circumstances except to those which are similar to the study.

4.0 Procedures

4.1 Instrument

A short story, "The Necklace," by Maupassant was selected among other short stories recommended by the Ministry of Education for the elective Literature in English Programme (ELP) for the upper secondary level. "The Necklace" depicts the life of a lady, Madame Loisel, who hankers after high class society life and borrows a necklace from a friend to appear elegant. She lost the necklace and instead of confessing the loss to her friend, both she and her husband slave-laboured and sacrificed for ten years to pay the debt. The irony was that the lost necklace was a fake. But they bought a real necklace to replace the missing one.

One question set applying the Hillocks taxonomy was devised for the selected text (see Appendix A). The question set was adapted from an earlier study conducted by G.S. Tian. It was administered and revised a few times in order to minimise any serious flaws.

4.2 Sampling

The revised question set was administered during two normal class periods comprising 80 minutes in a selected urban school. The respondents, who were 17 Form Four students, were allowed to refer to the text as they responded to the seven questions. The text had not been dealt with by the class before the administration of the test. Furthermore, none of them had been exposed to formal instruction in literature.

4.3 Scoring

The students' responses were graded according to a partial credit scoring system whereby two points were awarded for a right answer, one point for a partially right answer, and zero for a wrong answer. The researchers attended to each response at a time during the marking sessions. In this respect, each response was thoroughly discussed before the researchers came to a consensus on the grade to be awarded. This is to maintain consistency throughout the marking session.

4.4 Data Analysis

The processing and analysis of the results of the data are based on the scores of each respondent presented in the form of a response string (e.g. 2 2 1 1 0 0 0) and the total scores of the items. For the purpose of the study, the item total scores were analysed in order to determine the performance of the respondents in the higher order comprehension questions as compared to the literal questions.

5.0 Results

The total item scores for the seven item types in the text are presented in Table 1. Not surprisingly, a comparison of the scores between the items in the literal level and the items in the inferential level indicates that the respondents had actually mastered the low order comprehension (see Table 2). In this case, a large majority of the students could respond to Question 4 which involves inferencing at the lowest level. However, their inferential scores, especially for the AG items, are quite low except for Question 4 as

stated earlier.

Table 1

Total Item Scores

	Item Type	Total Score	Percentage
1.	BSI	34	100.0
2.	KD	34	100.0
3.	SR	33	97.1
4.	SIR	29	85.3
5.	CIR	14	41.2
6.	AG	5	14.7
7.	SG	2	

Table 2

Comparison of Literal and Inferential
Comprehension Level Average Percentage Scores

Literal	Inferentia
9.0	36.7

6.0 Discussion

The results of the study confirm the expected outcome that the respondents need more exposure and guidance in answering higher order inferential questions.

Since the respondents were in an urban setting, they were more receptive and proficient in the English language. This means that the respondents' language ability helped in their understanding of literary texts at a factual level. As such, depending on the students' proficiency level, teachers may not have to concentrate much on developing the students' literal skill level.

While further research is needed to determine whether teachers of literature are aware of this situation, it is still necessary to expose them to strategies that could enhance the students' inferential comprehension skills.

At the same time, it is felt that teachers need to be exposed to questioning strategies that could lead students to respond to higher level comprehension questions. In this respect, Carter and Long (1991) provide an adequate taxonomy of questions and basic question types which include: low-order, high-order, closed, and open questions.

- low-order questions are used to obtain factual information, literal meanings or content of a text.

- high-order questions involve the learners' own responses, inferences, knowledge and background experience. They require interpretations and seldom have one correct response.

- closed questions require an accurate information-based response.

- open questions tend to be open to explorations and probing investigation.

Thus, closed lower-order questions concentrate on the factual content of a text, whereas open higher-order questions focus on the imaginative or symbolic content of a context or the context of meaning which it generates.

It is important to note that content questions do not really allow for creative responses on the part of the students as they do not elicit much information. In contrast, context of meaning questions establish a wider social-setting of the text and promote explorations of one's assumptions about the author's intentions.

7.0 Sample Activities and Exercises

Results of the study indicate that the students need more practice in classroom activities and exercises that promote higher cognitive skills. Teachers could enhance students' low and higher order skills through appropriate learning strategies or outcomes. The learning outcomes describe the skills, attitudes and knowledge that students should acquire in the process of studying selected texts.

It is believed that it would be more effective if the learning outcomes (as provided in the literature in English syllabus) for the related activities or exercises are grouped into various stages. In this case, the following four stages are suggested: (1) pre-activity;

(2) analysis of details; (3) synthesis and evaluation of meaning; and (4) creativity.

7.1 Pre-activity

The activities put forward in this stage could build up students' interest in the work and get them to anticipate (guess or predict) what the story is all about as well as to encourage active classroom participation.

The learning outcomes, as specified in the syllabus, which are applicable here include:

- understanding the contents of the text (contents: story/information);

- recognising and discussing issues of life as presented in the text (contents: issues of universal concern such as love, service, and sacrifice).

Exposing students to the visual element of the main subject of the text could encourage class discussion. The following procedures and related questions are recommended:

i. The teacher could show a picture of a necklace or display a real necklace to the class and ask questions about it.

ii. The word "Necklace" could be written on the board and get students' responses as to what they know about the word. Another alternative is to show them an advertisement on a necklace and elicit information from the advertisement.

iii. Get students to listen to a tape-recorded version of an advertisement for jewellery especially a necklace and get responses from students.

Posing open-ended questions will prompt or gear students into focusing on the main subject of the text and at the same time requires students to refer to their background knowledge (schema) about their perception of the subject in question. The following are sample open-ended questions which could be used when carrying out the above procedures:

i. What does a necklace mean to you?

ii. What does a necklace symbolize?

iii. What kinds of necklaces are available nowadays?(genuine precious stones, gold, imitations, costume jewelleries).

iv. Other than the necklace, what objects could be considered as jewellery? (rings, bracelets, earrings, etc.).

v. Why do you think a woman likes to wear a necklace?

7.2 Analysis of details

This stage enables students to understand the main and sub-plots, sequencing of events, reasons and results of these events, and lastly, the relationship between events. Essentially, it involves processes such as comparing, contrasting, classifying, and seriating. It is important for students to realise that the contribution of the setting (time and place) and the interactions as well as the relationships of the characters with one another enhance a better

picture of what the text is all about.

The learning outcomes, as specified in the syllabus, which are applicable here include:

- to understand themes and messages in the text (contents: explicit and implicit meaning)

- to understand plot in the text (contents: main and sub-plots, sequence of events, reasons for events, results of these events, relationship between events);

- to describe characters and interpret their interactions and relationships with one another (contents: physical attributes, social position, attitudes and beliefs, personality, kinds of relationship, actions and reactions, interactions with one another, character development, roles and functions in developing the story).

Encouraging students to respond to the lower-order questions based on the text would enable the teacher to check on the students' comprehension of the expected learning outcomes. In this case, the teacher could allow students to read the story silently and then respond to the following examples of literal level questions in the form of closed, true and false, and multiple choice questions.

A. Closed, lower-order questions

i. How many characters were there in the story?

ii. What was Mr Loisel's occupation?

iii. What did the husband bring upon returning home from work one evening?

iv. What happened to the necklace that was borrowed from Madame Forestier?

B. True and false questions

This exercise could assist students who have difficulty in understanding the basic stated information and key details in the story by the paraphrasing of difficult sentences.

i. Mr Loisel brought back an envelope one afternoon T/F

ii. They were invited to attend a birthday party. T/F

iii. Madame Loisel was unaware that the necklace that she borrowed from Madame Forestier was a fake. T/F

C. Multiple choice questions

The following are the reasons that made Madame Loisel unhappy upon receiving the invitation EXCEPT:

a. She did not have a suitable dress.

b. She needed jewellery to adorn herself.

c. She needed a proper shoulder wrap.

D. Cloze passage (with/without options)

The following is an example of a cloze passage (with options) which is based on the text. The main purpose of this exercise is to check the students' general understanding of the text. In this case, content words (key words or expressions) which illustrate the situation of the couple in the beginning of the story are deleted. The exercise could be made more challenging by requiring the students to use their own words and comparing them with the actual words being used in the text.

unhappy	beauty	appreciated
rich	aristocracy	ladies
clerks	petty	

She was one of those pretty, charming young ladies, born, as if through an error of destiny, into a family of _____. She had no dowry, no hopes, no means of becoming known, _____, loved, and married by a man, either _____ or distinguished; and she allowed herself to marry a _____ clerk in the office of the Board of Education.

She was simple, not being able to adorn herself; but she was _____, as one out of her class, for women belong to no caste, no race; their grace, their _____, and their charm serving them in the place of birth and family. Their inborn finesse, their instinctive elegance, their suppleness of wit are their only _____, making some daughters of the people the equal of great _____.

E. Supporting answers with quotations

Students are required to respond to questions prepared either by the teacher or another group of students. Every answer, however, must be supported with a quotation from the text. This activity provides practice and prepares students for further analytical work involving literary texts. The following are sample questions:

Which of the two characters (Mr and Madame Loisel):

i. is more practical? Mr/Madame Loisel
Quotation: _____

ii. is more imaginative? Mr/Madame Loisel
Quotation: _____

iii. is more extravagant? Mr/Madame Loisel
Quotation: _____

iv. is more forceful? Mr/Madame Loisel
Quotation: _____

F. Re-arrange jumbled sentences or paragraphs

The student could be required to arrange jumbled sentences or paragraphs in their correct order in the process of determining their understanding of the plot of the story.

7.3 Synthesis and evaluation of meaning

This stage is concerned with students' ability to utilise their thinking skills in responding to higher order comprehension questions. This involves interpretation and evaluation which require students to provide ideas from the text, construct meaning, and discuss their own ideas apart from those available in the text.

The learning outcomes, as specified in the syllabus, which are applicable here include:

- to understand and interpret the contribution of setting (place and time) to the story (contents: nature of the setting; atmosphere and mood created by the setting on character, story, and reader);

- to understand the author's point of view (contents: assuming omniscience);

- to identify common literary devices employed to achieve their effects (contents: figures of speech).

Providing opportunities for students to interpret and evaluate from the story could generate ideas for further class discussion while enhancing individual student participation. Some of the activities that could encourage this development are as follows:

A. Inferential questions

i. In what way does the character of Madame Loisel change from the beginning of the story to the end? Explain why the change takes place.

ii. What comment or generalization does this story make on the way "materialism" influences human behaviour and attitudes?

iii. Explain three ways in which the author uses the necklace in developing the story.

B. Student opinionnaire

Apart from giving the students the above questions, controversial statements which pose as thought-provoking learning tasks related to the subject could also be assigned. Students are expected to articulate and critically analyse their own ideas, hunches, and hypotheses in reacting to the statements. This type of activity helps students to deal with interpretations involving characters in complex implied relationships. Consider the following statements:

i. Madame Loisel represents all women.

ii. Jewels symbolize status.

iii. Borrowing always leads to tragedy.

iv. We should always live within our means.

C. Hypothetical situations

It should also be noted that in reacting to the statements in activity B, the students are encouraged to refer to the text as much as possible and find evidence to support their ideas. Discussions in groups should precede the open class discussion, at the end of which the teacher can personalize the work by asking the class to react to hypothetical situations. Some situations are suggested below:

i. if they know any couples like this;

ii. if they have ever been in such a difficult situation;

iii. what they would do if they were the husband or wife;

iv. if such happenings are common in the society.

Further reading strategies:

Teachers could have students debate the issues stated above or discuss them in a forum in order to reinforce the varied skills that they have learned at this stage. They are given the opportunity to form their own "platform or thoughts" and effectively argue a position and refute opposing viewpoints.

Engaging students in presenting the issues in a speech form or encouraging them to participate in an elocution contest forms another avenue of reinforcing the higher order skills. This allows teachers to analyse the proposed ideas and to evaluate the evidence and reasons given in support of their ideas. Furthermore, students' ability to execute appropriate thinking skills and strategies could also be assessed.

7.4 Creativity

This stage focuses on the development of the students' own ideas in the process of using the text as the basis for their creativity. The students should be allowed to explore beyond the limits of the text and experiment with different possibilities and outcomes such as when certain characters or events in the story are changed. The sample activities and exercises provided in this stage could generate ideas and promote thinking skills among the students. As a result, they would become more confident and competent language users.

The learning outcomes, as specified in the syllabus, which are applicable here include:

- to communicate an informed personal response to the text (content: reasons to support one's response to the text; relating the story to one's own feelings and experiences);

- to produce a piece of work (oral/visual) in response to the text studied (contents: comic strips, radio scripts, paintings).

Developing the students' higher order thinking skills and creative abilities should be the main concern here as this would eventually provide them the necessary skills for further explorations with literary texts. Some of the activities include:

A. Create own story

i. Write your own version of the story such as by changing the plot or setting; add or delete characters or paragraphs.

ii. If the necklace were to be a fairy-tale, how would you re-

write the story? What would the changes be?

B. Write a poem (guided/unguided)

Supply words used in the passage and ask students to write a poem based on how they feel about the characters in the story.

i. Madame Loisel - unhappy, dress, ball, adorn, jewels.

ii. Mr Loisel - invitation, elated, grieved, money, helpful.

C. Situation/problem-solving

After settling the debt, the Loisels found a box containing gold coins and jewellery. What do you think they would do next? Provide reasons for your response.

D. Create questions

In most cases, students lack the opportunity to ask questions in the classroom. It has been pointed out that the ability to ask questions is important in the process of intellectual development. In light of this concern, this activity could provide students the chance to generate questions in the classroom setting.

i. The answer is necklace. What would the questions be?

ii. The answer is greed. What would the questions be?

E. Creative reading

Students are required to read a paragraph from the text. Additional key details which are not in the paragraph will be asked. They will have to imagine the possible answer. Example: "The day of the ball approached and Madame Loisel seemed sad, disturbed, and anxious. Nevertheless, her dress was nearly ready." Possible questions: What is the colour of Madame Loisel's dress? Why did you choose the colour for her?

8.0 Conclusion

The compendium for English language teachers (1989) prepared by the Ministry of Education states that teachers always ask questions that test memory and comprehension. However, questions which require students to analyse, evaluate, infer, and give ideas and opinions are seldom asked.

In relation to the above concern, the failure to realise the importance of student competence and ability to comprehend literature in general is likely to result in the inability to instil appreciation among the students toward literary study. In relation to this, the results of the study could provide teachers with a way to determine student skill levels in reading and interpreting literature in general.

The seven question types could also be administered at any point during the instructional process to ascertain the students' comprehension level of the text in question. This exercise could serve as a pre-test or as a feedback to the teacher. After ensuring that the students have understood the lower level relationships, teachers could then guide the students in dealing with the next

higher levels. It is believed that this practice could result in higher levels of comprehension and enjoyment as opposed to questions that are selected and unorganized.

9.0 Implications for Further Research

More question sets on various literary texts need to be administered to a wider sample in order to obtain a better perception of students' ability in higher level skills. In addition, such studies should be extended to the lower secondary and pre-university level involving other genres such as drama and poetry.

Another important consideration is to carry out a survey on teachers' awareness of teaching strategies which promote the inferential comprehension skills. Following that, more research on effective strategies that could guide students to respond to higher level questions and eventually interpret literature in general could be carried out.

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APPENDIX A

"THE NECKLACE" by GUY DE MAUPASSANT

INSTRUCTIONS: 1. RESPOND TO ALL QUESTIONS;

2. DO NOT WRITE ANYTHING ON THIS QUESTION PAPER.

1. What happened to the necklace that was borrowed from Madame Forestier?

2. What did the husband bring upon returning home from work one evening?

3. Why was Madame Loisel unhappy when she first received the news?

4. Why was Mathilde relieved that Madame Forestier did not open the box containing the necklace when she returned it?

5. In what way does the character of Madame Loisel change from the beginning of the story to the end? Explain why the change takes place.

6. What comment or generalization does this story make on the way "Materialism" influences human behaviour and attitudes? Give evidence from the story to support your answer.

7. Explain three ways in which the author uses the necklace in developing the story.

THE USE OF VERSE AT THE PRE-SCHOOL LEVEL

by

Devikamani Menon

This is an article written in two parts by Devikamani Menon a staff member of the Language Centre, University of Malaya. Part One of this article deals with the benefits of using verse for infants and pre-schoolers, as well as the types of verse suitable for pre-schoolers.

Part One

1. Introduction

Psychologists have ascertained that a child's exposure to books and other reading materials during the pre-school years lays the foundation for all subsequent learning. But before books can be introduced as enjoyable objects, parents or teachers must share stimulating language-related activities with children. An example of such is the use of verse for rhythmic language activities.

Human beings have an inborn sense of rhythm, and anything rhythmic tends to invite our participation. Even a baby can respond to rhythmic uses of language such as songs, nursery rhymes and jingles, long before he begins to talk or even understand speech. Every mother knows that rocking a baby to sleep or humming a tune is the best way to soothe an agitated baby. So, by introducing

rhythmic language activities at an early age, parents and teachers are actually conveying the valuable message that language-learning is an enjoyable process.

By 'an early age' we mean right from birth! But for the purpose of eye-contact, it is better to wait until the baby can be supported to a sitting position in an adult's lap, that is, from the age of about 3 months. In the following section we will discuss the benefits that can be derived from the use of rhythmic language activities with a very young child.

2. Benefits Derived for Infants

2.1 Non-language Benefits

There are some non-language benefits that can result from the use of rhythmic language activities for infants. Firstly, verse that can be accompanied by finger play can train a child in some basic psycho-motor skills such as opening and closing fingers, using one hand to open the other hand, and so on.

Secondly, it fosters a sense of self-worth and generates intimacy between a child and an adult. An adult who frequently uses rhythmic language activities with an infant sitting on the lap helps the child to build a positive self concept with regards to learning and this is essential for life-long learning.

2.2 Language Benefits

There are also several language benefits derived from the use of verse with infants. Firstly, a child sub-consciously assimilates the intonation patterns of a language due to the frequent repetitions which are an essential feature of verse. The repetitions inherent in nursery rhymes, for example, will help children pick up language patterns such as structure and speech rhythms, especially if they are repeatedly exposed to these rhymes.

A second advantage is that it enlarges a young child's passive vocabulary. This is because choice of precise and varied words plays an important role in poetic expression.

The repeated listening to verse can also develop listening skills and memory in a young child. A child becomes aware of words sounding the same, and this may reinforce the later learning of sounds through the phonic method. As soon as he or she begins to sound intelligible, he or she begins to recite poetry from memory.

Rhythmic language activities can also be used as channels through which children can be introduced to important cognitive concepts to understand the world around them, such as size, numbers, directions, colours and time.

A fifth advantage is that the rhythmic uses of language can easily involve 'game' elements such as actions and dramatizations. Since children's poetry is always brief, the acting out could be conducted quickly, within five or ten minutes, and usually on an imitation basis. Such activity provides an outlet for the increasing energy of the young child, and can enable the parent or teacher to exercise as well!

Finally, the rhythmic uses of language can introduce a child to the creative potential of words. Sounds can be enjoyed for their own sake, as in the case of nonsense rhymes and 'tongue-twisters'. Or words can weave interesting new images and scenes as in the case of a narrative poem or song. In any case, the words used in verse, enable the child to see something ordinary in a new way, or to see the fantastic and far-away as being immediate and 'real'. In due course, this develops the child's imagination and paves the way for creative use of language.

3. Benefits Derived for Pre-schoolers

After the age of two, any child will derive more benefits than the infant, as he has the capacity for acquiring higher level psycho-motor, language and social skills than the infant. He is physically independent and agile, has a repertoire of basic language skills and a burning need to know more about the world around him. When he enters pre-school he also has a need to be accepted and loved, both by his peers as well as by his teachers. In the following section we will present the benefits that a pre-school child could acquire from rhythmic language activities.

3.1 Psycho-motor Skills

Firstly, the pre-school child will learn better physical co-ordination of his limbs through the use of action and finger play verses. Such activities also encourage the child to acquire certain physical skills such as snapping of fingers, auditory skills such as recognising familiar melodies and developing a reasonably good

'singing' voice. Then there are the advantages of being able to use 'skipping' rhymes when skipping with peers.

3.2 Social Skills

As in the case of the infant, rhythmic language activities can easily involve a 'game' element such as dramatization, singing or choral speaking contests. A teacher who introduces this element provides a safe outlet for the bounding energy typical of most pre-schoolers. When children are singing together or choral speaking rhymes together, they learn to identify better with their peers, and this greatly aids socialization. When children dramatize parts of a poem or song, they also begin to explore their own creative potential, and this enables them to exercise a certain degree of healthy independence vital for self confidence. In fact, it has been said "language teaching at the lower primary level must be active and dynamic" and "must respond to the child's urge to create and his desire for activity" (Wilcox, Forum 1974: 34).

3.3 Language Skills

As in the case of the infant learner, the use of verse at the early stages of language-learning introduces the pre-school learner to the creative potential of words. Rhyming verses give sensuous, rhythmical pleasure and an opportunity for fun with words. A pre-schooler who has already mastered the alphabets can be made to see similarity in word sounds through the use of pictures and flash cards. If the child is familiar with the basic vowel and consonant sounds, the teacher can even direct his attention to such aspects as assonance (words having similar vowel sounds) and alliteration (words having

similar consonant sounds). For example, when using the Mother Goose rhyme 'Hey, Diddle, Diddle', the teacher can point out the words having the short /I/ vowel wound. These have been italicised in the following rhyme:

Hey, diddle, d*i*ddle,
The cat and the f*i*ddle,
The cow jumped over the moon.
The l*i*ttle dog laughed to see such
sport,
And the dish ran away with the spoon.

Besides using nursery rhymes to teach pronunciation, a teacher who is resourceful can create rhymes specifically for teaching different phonemes. An example of this is given by Myint Su in her article 'Teaching Pronunciation' (The English Teacher, VI, 3, December 1978) for the purpose of teaching /a:/:

I say 'ah'
To my glass,
Ah for after
Ah for class
Laughing in
The looking glass.

If an adult repeatedly reads or recites verses to a child, these verses will become meaningful patterns of sound to him. He will then begin to assimilate the intonation patterns of the language and the correct pronunciation of a large repertoire of new words, through mere imitation, parrot-fashion. Children's songs which have repetitions of lines or words, can be utilised by the pre-school teacher as a form of language drill to reinforce correct pronunciation, intonation and structure (Shaw, ELT, XXIV, 2, January 1970). For

example, children may repeat lines of a song quite naturally, to assimilate structures such as the 'WH' question form, as in the traditional English song:

Oh dear, what can the matter be?
Oh dear, what can the matter be?
Oh dear, what can the matter be?

Johnny's so long at the fair.

Other verses may be sung or recited to enable children to assimilate new vocabulary items, as for example in this traditional lullaby:

Hush, little baby, don't say a word,
Mama's going to buy you a mocking bird.
And if that mocking bird don't sing,
Mama's going to buy you a diamond ring.
And if that diamond ring turns to brass,
Mamma's going to buy you a looking glass.
And if that looking glass gets broke,
Mama's going to buy you a billy goat.
And it that billy goat won't pull,
Mamma's going to buy you a cart and bull.
And if that cart and bull turn over,
Mama's going to buy you a dog named Rover.
And if that dog named Rover don't bark,
Mamma's going to buy you a horse and cart.
And if that horse and cart fall down,

You'll still be the sweetest little
baby in town.

The use of rhythmic language activities is the ideal channel for enlarging a pre-schooler's passive and active vocabulary because "poetry is memorable speech which not only stores pattern sentences in the mind but enriches the pupils' vocabulary in a most natural and easy way" (Donen, ELT, XXVIII, 4 July 1974). Since choice of precise and varied expression plays an important role in poetic expression, poetry introduces a variety of words that can effectively describe what was previously difficult to describe in words. For example, horses not only run, they clop; kittens jump, but they also pounce.

3.4 Cognitive Skills

It is also a known fact that any pre-school teacher can use verse to introduce a child to important cognitive concepts. As in the case of the infant learner, the pre-school learner learns about numbers, position and direction through verse. He can also learn about the days of the week, the months of the year, the times of the day, the seasons, parts of the body, as well as many other important concepts which are essential for cognitive development. Examples of verse to teach days of the week are 'Soloman Grundy' and 'Monday's Child is Fair of Face'.

3.5 Cultural Learning

Besides this, the specific use of nursery rhymes or verses which are considered 'foundation stones' of a particular culture enables the pre-school child to acquire "part of the cultural baggage

of all native speakers" (McConochie, Forum, 1979: 8) of that language. This is very important because if a learner does not have an instinctive knowledge of the culture of the native speakers, he will encounter many obstacles if he continues to learn that language beyond a rudimentary level.

It has been said "poetry offers a hot-line to the rhythmic heartbeat of a language: (Brown, 1977). Virginia French Allen has pointed out the cultural advantage of learning this 'cultural baggage':

> "People who write books, magazine articles and newspaper editorials in English expect their readers to be familiar with certain stories (or poems) that native speakers of English generally remember from their childhood."
>
> (Allen, Forum 1973: 2)

While cultural learning may take place through children's poetry, it should also be borne in mind that poetry and song deal with universal themes that are common to all cultures - nature, love, death, pain, etc. This is another advantage of using verse in the language classroom.

3.6 Creative Skills

The use of poetry in a pre-school class can be linked to arts-and-crafts projects. The interesting images that are evoked in the mind of the child, may be transferred to paper in the form of drawings and paintings, or may inspire the child to make cardboard masks or papier-mache puppets. The finished objects may then be

displayed or used during the dramatization of the poetry or songs, during choral reading or group singing (This aspect of creativity will be discussed in Part Two of this paper).

The pre-schooler has an advantage over the infant when doing these activities because he is more skilled with the use of his hands, and has a more well-developed imagination to draw ideas from.

3.7 Emotional Identification

Finally, poetry in any form has the special power to stir the feelings and bring them to life. In a world of never-ending encounters with the new and of half-understood observations, the developing child's feelings are in constant animation. Poems may enable these feelings to be brought up and expressed in an orderly, manageable way. Poetry releases emotions through language which names and contains them. The following poem expresses an emotion many children and even adults have experienced, yet few have ever expressed as effectively as Barbara Ireson has:

The Dog

I lie in bed and through the dark
I hear a dog begin to bark,
A sharp and urgent, fearsome sound
That fills the countryside around.
He's telling someone to beware.
What is it that he knows is there?

Poetry may even provide a safe and satisfying outlet for socially unacceptable emotions as for example in the following poem

by Miriam Chaikin:

I Hate Harry

I hate Harry like...like...OOO!
I hate Harry like...GEE!
I hate that Harry like - poison
I hate! I hate! hate! HAR-RY!

Rat! Dope! Skunk! Bum! Liar!
Dumber than the dumbest dumb flea!
BOY!...do I hate Harry.
I hate him the most that can be.

I hate him a hundred, thousand, million
Doubled, and multiplied by three,
A skillion, trillion, zillion more times
Than Harry, that rat, hates me.

In the following section we will list down some types of verse which can be taught to pre-schoolers or children between the ages of 2 and 6. The categories have been created by the writer, so each category is not a 'water-tight compartment'. There may be verses that can fit into more than one category.

4. Verse for Pre-schoolers

4.1 Finger Play and Action Verses

All the finger play and action verses which are suitable for infants are also suitable for pre-schoolers. Besides these, teachers or

parents can also introduce verses which provide more scope for dramatization or group action.

4.2 Modified Nursery Rhymes

All the Mother Goose nursery rhymes were originally meant for children who are native speakers of English. Hence cultural allusions in nursery rhymes are easily understood by such children. For example, the 'lamb' in the rhyme 'Mary Had a Little Lamb' had "fleece as white as snow". Native speakers would easily understand this allusion. However, ESL learners at the pre-school level would have difficulty in understanding lexical items such as 'lamb', 'fleece' and 'snow'. These words would not be frequently used in a second-language learning situation. Hence it has been suggested that the original lyrics be modified for language-teaching purposes, for the pupils' first encounter with the nursery rhyme. They can learn the original words later, when they are well on their way to mastering the language (Wilcox, Forum, October-December 1974).

In the case of 'Mary Had a Little Lamb' the original lyrics have been modified as shown:

Mary had a little cat,
Pretty cat, kitty cat,
Mary has a little cat
It likes to eat fish.

It can be observed that the low frequency words have been replaced with high frequency words such as 'kitty', 'pretty', 'fish', 'puppy' and 'meat'. Furthermore, the structures have been simplified for the second-language learner.

An advantage of modifying nursery rhymes is that the teacher can put in more vocabulary terms than the original version - terms that can be re-taught in other lessons, or that have been taught already. In this way, the modified nursery rhyme becomes a better pedagogical tool than the original one, for teaching a host of language features such as vocabulary items, adjectives and pronunciation features.

However, it must be noted that as soon as the children have mastered the basics of the language, they must be taught the original versions of the nursery rhymes. The modified nursery rhymes are just 'stepping stones' for this. When teaching original nursery rhymes it has been suggested that they be grouped according to themes in order to enhance understanding (Jacobs, 1966). Examples of themes suggested are verses about boys, girls or old women, character sketches, little stories, riddles, action rhymes, 'tongue-twisters' and counting-out jingles.

4.3 Songs

There are many advantages in using songs for the pre-school child. They add variety to a lesson and set conditions for creative work for both the teacher as well as the pupil. Singing is a natural choral language activity, unlike the repetitions of dialogues and drills. When the pupils sing along with the teacher leading, it involves the whole class and promotes maximum participation. Even a shy pupil will ultimately sing by himself if he can 'hide behind the music' (McDonald, Forum, January 1984).

The use of songs helps learners remember language. Even after a long time has lapsed, hearing the melody of a song learnt in childhood, will gradually bring back the lyrics to our minds.

Songs also promote listening comprehension in an effective way, if the words of the song are well-articulated, and the rhythm is slow. Besides that, singing together results in an excellent group feeling, enables the loss of certain inhibitions and creates a new respect for one's own voice. In all, it is an enjoyable social activity which can be effectively used by the language teacher for the teaching of vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation and other language features.

When sharing songs with young children, it is useful to remember the following guidelines drawn up by Seegar (1948):

i. The song should be sung first at its natural speed (or played on the tape recorder); children should be allowed to experience the impression of the song as a whole rather than analyse the song.

ii. The song should be sung at a lively speed.

iii. The adult who is sharing the songs with young children should have sufficient 'eye contact' with the children during the singing and not focus the eyes on an instrument or printed page.

iv. Children should be allowed to listen, and then interpret the songs at their own leisure.

v. The song should be repeated many times, especially when using the song for rhythmic activities such as skipping, dancing or games.

vi. Both action songs as well as listening songs should be included when planning the activities for a session. The changing needs of the children should be considered when

making the selections. The adult should be sensitive to signals from the children that provide clues as to what they want to do next.

vii. The adult should not hurry when moving from one song or activity to another. Children frequently derive pleasure from savouring a favourite song or interpreting a song in several different ways. Very young children may need several repetitions before they are confident enough to join in.

Sometimes it is very effective to have two song presenters instead of just one. The first presenter may sing part of the song while the other one may engage him or her in repartee, sing a background part, lead the group in rounds or help with the handling of mechanical aids such as musical instruments. As in choral speaking, different lines may be assigned to different groups, or other choral speaking arrangements may be attempted.

It must be emphasized here that the best song presenter is the teacher or parent rather than the cassette recorder. The presenter does not need to be an accomplished singer, but he or she should have clear articulation and a proper sense of rhythm and melody.

Above all, the songs chosen should appeal to the children in terms of the subject matter as well as the tune. The adult presenting the songs should always select well-known songs first, then teach the unknown ones.

The lyrics can be written on the chalkboard beforehand, perhaps temporarily concealed or covered with sheets of paper. The words carrying the beat can be highlighted by being underlined or written in coloured chalk. Alternatively, the lyrics may be displayed on a chart in bold letters that can be seen from the back of the room.

There are many types of songs that can be used effectively at the pre-school level. The following are a list of song titles which the writer has used effectively with her own children.

Mother Goose Rhymes	:	A Bunch of Blue Ribbons Baa, Baa, Black Sheep Ding Dong Bell, etc.
Ballads	:	Early One Morning Greensleeves On Yonder Hill Nobody's Child Tom Dooley Where Have All the Flowers Gone?
Number Songs	:	Ten Green Bottles Standing on the Wall There was one little, two little, three little Indians This Old Man, He Played One
Old Favourites	:	All I Want is a Room Somewhere (from 'My Fair Lady') Do-Re-Me; Edelweiss; Favourite Things; You are Sixteen Going on Seventeen (all from 'Sound of Music') Home on the Range I Love to go A-Wandering

You are My Sunshine
Try A Little Kindness

4.4 'Sound Effect' Verses

Young children love verses that have sound effects. One type of 'sound effect' verse is what the writer would like to refer to as onomatopoeiac verse. Children take pleasure in making various animal sounds or sounds produced by things around them. Another type of 'sound effect' verse is sung or recited to the rhythm of something fast, such as a trotting horse, a chugging train or a beating heart. Songs or verses of this nature are not only exciting and pleasurable to sing, but can also serve the pedagogical purpose of teaching the specific term for a specific sound.

Also included in this category of strongly rhythmic verses are 'jazz chants', a term coined by Carolyn Graham to refer to the choral speaking of highly memorable and impressionistic verse which resembles the rhythms of 'rap' a form of black American music (this will be described in greater detail later in this paper).

A third type of 'sound effect' verse is the traditional 'tongue twister', which is useful as a pedagogical tool for teaching pronunciation. A fourth type of 'sound effect' verse is the 'nonsense' verse which appeals more to the pre-schooler than to the infant. A traditional type of nonsense verse is the limerick, a short and witty five-line poem which focusses more on meaning than on sound effects.

4.5 Riddles and Jingles

Riddles are enjoyable verses which can introduce a 'game' element in a pre-school classroom, while jingles are little verses that help to develop the memory. Riddles can be used to promote listening comprehension, and should not be used in a pre-school class of absolute beginners in a new language. Only pre-schoolers who have a certain degree of oral fluency will enjoy the challenge presented by riddles. Some examples of riddles and jingles are given below:

4.5.1 Four finger and a thumb
Yet flesh and bones have I none.

4.5.2 Once it was green and growing
Now it is dead and singing.

4.5.3 As long as I eat, I live,
But when I drink, I die.

4.6 Jazz Chants

A type of verse which the writer found to be interesting to young children is the 'jazz chant'. 'Jazz chant' is a term coined by Carolyn Graham (1978) of the American Language Institute of New York University. It reflects a beautiful blend between Standard American English and a jazz beat and tempo. The blend has resulted in a particular form of poetry which conveys powerful and varied emotions. When used selectively by a skilful teacher, the jazz chant

can be an innovative and interesting new approach to language learning.

The jazz chant given below was recited by one of the writers to her two young children, who really enjoyed it. It illustrates different ways of complaining about noise, from the polite, gentle, 'Sh! Sh! Please be quiet!' to the angry, rude 'Shut up!' It will be easily understood by pre-schoolers who have had the experience of playing at home while their baby brother or sister was sleeping.

I said, Sh! Sh! Baby's sleeping!
I said, Sh! Sh! Baby's sleeping!

What did you say?
What did you say?

I said, Hush! Hush! Baby's sleeping!
I said, Hush! Hush! Baby's sleeping!

What did you say?
What did you say?

I said, Please be quiet, Baby's sleeping!
I said, Please be quiet, Baby's sleeping!

What did you say?
What did you say?

I said, Shut up! Shut up! Baby's sleeping!
I said, Shut up! Shut up! Baby's sleeping!

WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!

Not anymore.

When reciting this jazz chant, the teacher could do the role of the person who says, 'I said, Sh! Sh! etc.' while the rest of the class could ask the repeated question, 'What did you say?'

4.7 Narrative Poems

The narrative poem is basically a story in verse form. Narrative poems, with their rapid action and typically chronological order, have long been favourites with children. However, it must be borne in mind that for the pre-schooler, the narrative poem has to be relatively short and simple. It should be recited slowly and clearly by the teacher. It should only be read to children who are quite fluent in the language so that they can be organised easily for creative dramatization. Examples of narrative poems suitable for pre-schoolers are 'Wishes' by Christina Rossetti and 'The Owl and the Pussy Cat' by Edmund Lear.

4.8 Concrete Poems

Once a child has learnt to read, the teacher should introduce a unique type of poetry known as 'concrete' or 'shape' poetry. Concrete poetry results when a poet emphasizes the meaning and experience of the poem by shaping it into the form of a picture.

(Part Two of this article deals with the criteria for the selection of verse for pre-schoolers, some of the techniques and activities that can be used in class, as well as some of the findings of a survey done on the use of verse in a few pre-schools).

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