

#### ANOTHER APPROACH TO POETRY IN EFL CLASSES

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To appreciate poetry do the students need to know what iambic, trochaic, dactylic, anapestic or spondaic mean? Must they find out the poem's theme? In this context, our answer to such questions is "no." Knowing how to scan verses or how to state abstract concepts embodied in a poem does not necessarily reveal a thorough comprehension. The act of understanding presupposes the interaction of readers and poet through the text. Thus readers have to figure out what the poet says or implies. To do so, they must bring some knowledge to the text in order to grasp explicit and implicit meaning. Therefore, their background plays an important role in the interpretation of poetry in EFL classes.

In this work we describe an experiment with intermediate-level students of EFL. Taking into account the group's linguistic and literary background, we based our choice of texts on these three factors. First, as far as style (commonplace, to a certain extent) and subject matter (varied), we thought twentieth-century poetry would keep the students interested in the revelation of the poet's world and in the poetic trends of the time. Secondly, in order to have a number of poems to compare and contrast, we decided on shorter ones that would present a vivid picture of twentieth-century American poetry without taking too much time. We planned to cover this unit in five fifty-minute classes or so (a lot depending on the group's responses). At last we selected poems that would enable students to implement the following objectives: (1) to form hypothesis about the texts, (2) to infer meaning from context, (3) to infer vocabulary through connotation, (4) to interpret the poet's attitudes, (5) to identify the mood, (6) to analyze the viewpoint in relation to meaning and (7) to provide a general outline of the literary period in which the poems belong.

#### TEXT SELECTION

We decided to examine the individual art of two major twentieth-century American poets: Ezra Pound<sup>1</sup> (1885-1972) and Robert Frost<sup>2</sup> (1874-1963).

For that purpose we chose a few representative poems: "In a Station of the Metro" and "Epitaphs" by Pound and "Fire and Ice," "Dust of Snow," "Nothing Gold Can Stay" and "The Road Not Taken" by Frost. Specifically, what we wanted to underscore was Pound's characteristics--conciseness, natural imagery and originality--and Frost's use of country scenes, use of contraries and simple diction suggesting deeper meanings. We also chose one poem by Wallace Stevens, which shows, in broad terms, the changes effected in American poetry as a reaction to romanticism: "Of Modern Poetry." Such texts were selected in the light of our goals.

#### THE POETRY OF EZRA POUND

In this part we will discuss two short poems by Pound in an attempt to give an overview of his art. The main points to be highlighted are the poet's terseness, natural imagery and light humor.

One of the poet's most famous poems is "In a Station of the Metro"--a two-line, yet rich poem. It is built on a single metaphor: the tenor is the movement of the subway, and the vehicle is the apparition of the people's faces in the crowd. Although the poem does not contain any verb, the idea of movement is conveyed through the word "apparition," expressive of suddenness. The petals represent the beautiful faces of people which flash through the windows as the subway rushes by:

##### IN A STATION OF THE METRO

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;  
Petals on a wet, black bough.<sup>3</sup>

We certainly did not expect the students to analyze the poem as indicated above although we anticipated a similar response. To accomplish that, we proceeded step by step. Before presenting the poem, we put the title on the board and had the students respond to it. Subway (or Metro), for obvious reasons, reminded them of big crowds and rush, as well as claustrophobia. Such ideas reflected two viewpoints: the observer's, outside the subway train, watching big crowds rushing to their destination, and the passenger's, feeling uncomfortable in a crowded, small space. The former matched the point of view in Pound's poem: third-person narration. Here, the narrator (or persona) played the role of a self-effaced observer. Subtly, by means of one word (the preposition in the title, which expresses inclusion in relation to space), the persona implied he was at the subway station. Therefore, he was relating one of his experiences.

After that brief examination of the title and viewpoint, we wrote the poem on the board and asked the students to (1) explain the use of "these" in the first line, (2) associate "apparition" and "wet" with other lexical items they already knew, and then (3) link the word "bough" to another word in the poem so as to identify the implicit comparison. As far as the first word, "these", students, as expected, brought back the idea of the observer at the station as he referred to something that was close to him and, therefore, suggested once again his presence there. Next, one student referred to the connection between "apparition" and "supernatural," thus indicating her grasp of the idea of suddenness and, consequently, speed or movement. Most students associated the third word, "wet," with "shining," "bright" and "polished." Then, to the persona a wet bough resembles the subway train with its bright surface. At last, students had no difficulty in joining "bough" with "subway" because of their similar shapes.

The next poem, "Epitaphs," consists of two parts that narrate the death of two Chinese men--Fu I and Li Po. As indicated by the men's names and by a reference to the Yellow River, or Huang River, the setting is China. As we did with the preceding poem, we first encouraged the students to react to the title and verbalize their expectations. The word "epitaph"--a tribute to a dead person--suggested the mood would most probably be sadness or lament.

We then wrote the poem on the blackboard. Except for the word "alas," the group had no difficulty in understanding the vocabulary. One expression, not clear to them at once, "died of alcohol," could be inferred from the context with the aid of two clues--"also" and "died drunk":

#### EPITAPHS

FU I

Fu I loved the high cloud and the hill,  
Alas, he died of alcohol.

LI PO

And Li Po also died drunk.  
He tried to embrace a moon  
In the Yellow River.<sup>4</sup>

Instead of being sad, the mood in "Epitaphs" was light and humorous.<sup>5</sup> The interjection "alas" appeared to have double meaning. Conceptually, it expressed sorrow or grief but contextually, it suggested a contrast, with the force of an adversative discourse marker, such as "however." Although the persona lamented the death of the two men, Fu I in particular, he also implied the way they died was amusing (drunk).

Knowing Fu I and Li Po better than anyone else, the persona depicted in a few words the character of each man. As one student observed, the two stood in contrast. Fu I was more of a dreamer, a spiritual man, who contemplated nature (the high cloud, the hill). Li Po, on the other hand, was more down to earth. As he was taking a walk by the Yellow River, instead of looking up at the sky--as Fu I would probably do--he looked down into the river, saw the reflection of the moon in the water, and, as he tried to catch it, he drowned himself. Moreover, Fu I seemed to be given to continued use of alcohol, gradually making him very ill, eventually killing him. Li Po, however, died drunk, so drunk that he could not see straight and fell into the river.

Reviewing our students' reception of both poems, we verified the group read more meaning into the second poem--not as rich as the first as far as form and content--probably because they had improved their reading. Two strong indications of such an improvement were their understanding of the humor (hardly transparent in a foreign language) and of Li Po's and Fu I's contrasting character.

#### THE POETRY OF ROBERT FROST

In this section we will show how we approached Frost's poems in class. Our aim was to give a brief view of subject matter, manipulation of opposites and simple language in his poetry.

One of the poet's most popular poems is "Fire and Ice", which serves as an illustration of his simple diction enclosing a deep meaning. The poem is made up of three sentences written in simple language with just one inversion in word order. Such an inversion, nevertheless, is also accepted in prose and in speech. As to meaning, the poem is an epigram concerning the end of the world, and it contains an antithesis introduced by the connective "but":

#### FIRE AND ICE

Some say the world will end in fire,  
Some say in ice.  
From what I've tasted of desire  
I hold with those who favor fire.  
But if it had to perish twice,  
I think I know enough of hate  
To say that for destruction ice  
Is also great  
And would suffice.<sup>6</sup>

To begin with, as part of our regular procedure, we put the title on the blackboard and welcomed responses. Since the opposites appeared right at the outset in a matter-of-fact way, the idea of burning and freezing was soon pointed out. As the students read the whole poem, they realized that such notions represented the viewpoints of two groups: the first thought the world would end in fire, the second in ice. The attitude of the persona, which students perceived at once, is a characteristic of Frost's: the persona was hesitant to form a definite opinion. Such an attitude was best revealed by an implied negative that dominated the central part of the poem. The impossible condition suggested in "if it had to perish twice" attested to the persona's awareness that the world would end in fire or ice, never in fire and ice. Thus the title reinforced the persona's recognition that both were great for destruction. Consequently, he was caught between the two.

But the poem contained another contrast, not as obvious as the previous one, passion/love and hate, which the group also pointed out. The persona equated fire to desire and ice to hate--two strong feelings that once gained control over him. Therefore, not only fire and ice were great for destruction (a material one) but also love and hate (an emotional one).

As shown above, the manipulation of contraries, together with the persona's irresolution, permeated the whole poem. What helped the students perceive both was the anticipation exercise (done before the presentation of the poem) as well as the gradation of the material, both contributing to a satisfactory reading of the texts.

As the previous poem, Frost's "Dust of Snow" also contains an antithesis, this time in the title. Since dust rises from the ground (an upward movement) and snow falls from the sky (a downward movement), then "dust of snow" can be thoroughly understood in context only. In the poem the crow, sitting on the branch of a tree, shakes the snow from his feathers to clean himself up. Therefore, what falls from the tree, where the persona stands by, is a dust of snow:

#### DUST OF SNOW

The way a crow  
Shook down on me  
The dust of snow  
From a hemlock tree

Has given my heart  
A change of mood  
And saved some part  
Of a day I had rued.<sup>7</sup>

Before introducing the text, we asked students to give a description of snow. Although the great majority had never seen snow before, they had some notion of what it looks and feels like. As for connotations, the students had learned from movies that at times snow could be connected with happiness, at other times with distress. Their responses showed they would not miss the main point in this succinct poem.

Sure enough, after the explanation of a few words, the students identified the visual contrast--black/white, crow/snow--and one student could see a more subtle one: a black bird on the branch of a poisonous tree (a bad connotation) had brought the persona a change of mood for the better.

Next, we turn to another of Frost's condensed poems, which, contrary to the preceding ones, does not deal with opposites. Unlike both, it can be analyzed from various perspectives:

#### NOTHING GOLD CAN STAY

Nature's first green is gold,  
Her hardest hue to hold.  
Her early leaf's a flower;  
But only so an hour.  
Then leaf subsides to leaf.  
So Eden sank to grief,  
So dawn goes down to day.  
Nothing gold can stay.<sup>8</sup>

First of all it might be interpreted as a description of the period of time between the rising and the setting of the sun. At dawn, the first appearance of the sun in the sky announced the beginning of the day. In the morning, the sun began to rise, like a flower in blossom, and in the afternoon, as sunset approached, the close of the day drew near. From another standpoint, the poem might represent three seasons: summer (a time for nature to be bright as if tinged with gold), spring (a time for buds to open into flowers) and fall (a time for leaves to fall from trees). As a consequence, each of those seasons could be compared to a period in our life: summer to childhood, the early period of growth; spring to adolescence, a period of flourishing, and fall to adulthood, the beginning of maturity, thus decline. A third interpretation, which expressed our students' conception of the poem, centered on the depiction of sunrise--the few minutes elapsing between the appearance of the first sunrays and the moment when the whole sun appeared above the horizon. In this sense, nature seemed to absorb the color of the sunrays, but just for a short while, because soon the day would be clear and that moment of beauty would be over.

In comparison with all the preceding poems, "Nothing Gold Can Stay" was much more complex as far as vocabulary, sentence structure and implications. Despite that, students could interact with the persona and come up with a reasonable analysis. What helped them out was once again the anticipation exercise. Before students saw the poem, we asked them to name a few words that would remind them of gold, and they mentioned, among others, the sun. Therefore, after they read the text in its entirety, they were able to read meaning into it.

The last of Frost's poems, much longer than all others, is somewhat similar to "Fire and Ice" as far as the persona's vacillation. To approach this poem, we decided on its presentation without the title so as to emphasize the link between title and the persona's attitude:

#### THE ROAD NOT TAKEN

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then, took the other, as just as fair,  
And having perhaps the better claim,  
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;  
Though as for that the passing there  
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay  
In leaves no step had trodden black.  
Oh, I kept the first for another day.  
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,  
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I--  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.<sup>9</sup>

Following the explanation of a few lexical items, this is how the group read the poem. Broadly speaking, the persona described a moment of



decision in his life. The two roads stood for the options open to him. As in "Fire and Ice," here the persona found it difficult to make up his mind. For that reason he examined the two roads in order to discover resemblances or differences. Again, as in "Fire and Ice," an impossible condition enclosed an implied negative. For example, the persona wished to travel both roads and be just one traveler although knowing he could not refrain from choosing between the two.

Unlike in "Fire and Ice," in which the persona remained hesitant up to the end, in "The Road Not Taken" the persona finally decided which way to go, yet regretfully. He regretted his choice, regardless of his knowledge that both roads--both directions--were very much alike. Moreover, the fact that he called the road taken the "other" and the road not taken the "first" (the one in the title) emphasized the idea of sorrow for the unattainable.

The reading of this poem motivated the students to relate similar experiences in their life, namely, the need to make decisions, the difficulty in doing so and, ultimately, the feeling of regret for not having done differently. Their reactions showed that poet and readers had acted on each other with no linguistic or cultural barriers.

As we looked back at our students' analyses of Frost's poems, we realized that despite the increasing length of the poems (from 9 to 20 lines), the group was able to state all main ideas, relate those to the titles and to the persona's attitudes. Overall, their understanding of poetry in the target language had improved considerably.

## THE POETRY OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

At the end of this unit, we asked our students to write a paragraph on modern American poetry, taking Wallace Stevens's "Of Modern Poetry" as a starting point:

### OF MODERN POETRY

The poem of the mind in the act of finding  
What will suffice. It has not always had  
To find: the scene was set; it repeated what  
Was in the script.

Then the theatre was changed  
To something else. Its past was a souvenir.  
It has to be living, to learn the speech of the place.  
It has to face the men of the time and to meet



The women of the time. It has to think about war  
And it has to find what will suffice. It has  
To construct a new stage. It has to be on that stage  
And, like an insatiable actor, slowly and  
With meditation, speak words that in the ear,  
In the delicatest ear of the mind, repeat,  
Exactly, that which it wants to hear, at the sound  
Of which, an invisible audience listens,  
Not to the play, but to itself, expressed  
In an emotion as of two people, as of two  
Emotions becoming one. The actor is  
A metaphysician in the dark, twanging  
An instrument, twanging a wiry string that gives  
Sounds passing through sudden rightnesses, wholly  
Containing the mind, below which it cannot descend,  
Beyond which it has no will to rise.

It must  
Be the finding of a satisfaction, and may  
Be of a man skating, a woman dancing, a woman  
Combing. The poem of the act of the mind.<sup>10</sup>

The responses to the above poem were rather satisfactory. All of them included at least one of the following fundamental points. First, there was the contrast between yesterday's and today's poetry--static and dynamic, respectively. For instance, for the poet a static poem reflected a search for something that would please, such as the depiction of a scene; a dynamic one pointed out the finding of simple pleasures, like skating, dancing or combing. Secondly, there was a comparison between the theater and poetry. Both must portray the people and the events of the time. Both must also "learn the speech of the place."

From the analyses handed to us, we chose one that best outlined Stevens's poem:

The poem centers on the changes poetry has undergone. Before, it used to be static, that is, it repeated what was already there. Now, poetry has to improvise and search for a new subject matter and new language. It has to take its themes from the everyday life of modern women and men. It has to be like an improvised song where no fixed rules can be applied. Furthermore, modern poetry must be an "act of the mind" and reflect the environment.<sup>11</sup>

The above assignment was originally written in the students' native language. We did not encourage the group to write in English so that we could check only comprehension (and not written production in L<sub>2</sub>). As far as content, the essay summarized the main ideas in Stevens's poem--an evidence of the interaction of poet and reader. No doubt that the examination of Pound's and Frost's poems had paved the way for such results.

Reviewing our work during these five classes (one for Pound, the others for Frost), we concluded that our objectives had been implemented. At the end of this unit it was noted that students were able(1) to form hypothesis about the texts: "In a Station of the Metro" and others; (2) to infer meaning from context: the word "apparition" in "In a Station of the Metro;" "gold" in "Nothing Gold Can Stay" and "died of alcohol" in "Epitaphs," and others; (3) to infer vocabulary through connotation: the word "gold" in "Nothing Gold Can Stay;" (4) to interpret the poet's attitudes: the poet's hesitation in "The Road Not Taken," for example; (5) to identify the mood, such as the humor in "Epitaphs"; (6) to analyze the viewpoint in relation to meaning: "In a Station of the Metro" and (7) to provide a general outline of modern American poetry: "Of Modern Poetry."

In sum, the poems studied throughout this section illustrated that, as Richard Ellmann observed, "ours is a century of poetic diversity probably unequalled in history; the extremes of style and subject available to today's poets are farther apart than they have ever been before" (p. 17). As the present selection showed, modern poetry can speak about the city as well as the country, in rhymed or free verse, with or without the use of figures of speech and in a serious or humorous way. It is our belief that our approach to such poems, as shown in these pages, will enable students to examine critically the art of other poets from other literary periods and in their own language as well.

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#### NOTAS

1. Ezra Pound is a controversial figure. Although born in Idaho, USA, he lived most part of his life in Europe, especially in Italy and England. During the second World War he broadcasted his sympathy for Mussolini and disapproval of the US, and in 1945 he was arrested for treason by the US army. In 1958, because of the intercession of a few poets, including Robert Frost, he was released from the institution for the mentally handicapped where he had been confined for all those years and returned to Europe, very much disillusioned with America, and strongly determined not to set foot on American land ever again. However, from a literary point of view, Ezra Pound, although markedly concerned with and influenced by European civilization, is

both British and American, and his work belongs in British and American literature indiscriminately.

2. Robert Frost is a very popular figure in the US and throughout the world. Four times he was awarded the Pulitzer prize for the best poetry of the year. Unlike Pound's, Frost's language and subject matter are everyday. Most of his poems are lyrics about country scenes. Although a native of San Francisco, California, he lived most of his life in a small farm in New Hampshire, New England. Despite being about country life, Frost's poems are universal in the sense that they comprehend man's inner feelings and conflicts.
3. Ezra Pound, Selected Poems: 1908-1959 (New York: American Publishing House of New Directions, 1975), p. 53.
4. Idem, p. 55.
5. As Hugh Holman states, "early epitaphs were usually serious and dignified--since they chiefly appeared on the tombs of the great--but more recently they have, either consciously or unconsciously, taken on humorous qualities" (p. 200).
6. Robert Frost, The Complete Poems of Robert Frost (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1949), p. 268.
7. Idem, p. 270.
8. Idem, p. 272.
9. Idem, p. 131.
10. Wallace Stevens, The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954), p. 161.
11. This essay was originally written in Portuguese by Denise da Silva Nóbrega and was translated by the authors.

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