

## English Studies: Textual vs. Cultural Approaches

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### Abstract

*Study of English texts today takes place through two approaches: textual and cultural. The textual approach focuses on the study of a text's formal features. The cultural approach includes the study of social, cultural and political contexts within and beyond the text. Though these approaches are usually taken as separate, they should be used as complementary to each other. Simultaneous use of both approaches gives learners adequate exposure to the text as a source of language learning and of understanding human values.*

### Introduction

In a very traditional sense, being a scholar in English means being able to do two things: first, to use the English language with correct grammar and pronunciation; second, to read and analyze classical literary texts with special focus on learning certain excerpts by heart. In this sense, traditional English studies is text-based, focused on the teaching and learning of linguistic conventions and discernible meanings within the periphery of the text with only secondary attention to the potential range of inferences and implications.

The trend has changed today. English is a full-fledged discipline with multi-faceted accesses and assimilations. English teachers' knowledge of grammatical norms and literary genres is sometimes only a prerequisite for their reaches to the vast domain of texts, contexts, meanings and interpretations. English studies has already walked through the black-boarded classrooms out to history, culture, politics, gender, sexuality, media, globalization, diaspora, human rights, law, and many other areas of inquiry. The evolution of English from past to present can be rightly termed as the evolution from language and literature into culture.

### Two models

The twentieth century saw the development and practice of diverse approaches of studying literary texts. These approaches fall into two representative models in terms of their distinctive characteristics. The first is the essentialist textual model which came into practice predominantly from 1920s to 1960s. It comprises formalism, New Criticism, structuralism and deconstruction. The second is the more recent cultural-political model developed after 1970s. It covers a wide range of areas like Marxism, new historicism, gender studies, postcolonial studies, media studies, globalization, human rights, ethnic studies and others. These two models are generally taken in a contrastive relationship, and in the light of only a thin complementarity. In humanities, for example, the textual model is believed to have restricted the wider goal of English

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studies, and is taken only as a precondition to enter into a vast range of cultural studies. In Education, the cultural model is taken as a secondary method in the course of attaining mastery, scholarship and professionalism in English. Thus, on the face of the comparison, the general dichotomy between these models is that of purism without eclecticism and eclecticism with purism. What follows here is a brief discussion on the issues surrounding the efficacy and importance of these models. The discussion is, however, delimited to the study of literary texts.

The textual model focuses on the formal aspects of literary texts and disregards their relation with the author and the context of writing. To begin with, formalism is the method of inspecting, or rather scanning, literary texts in the light of their “literariness.” A formalist teacher, or a critic, tries to trace such literary elements as metaphors, alliterations, rhymes, metric patterns and the like with an aim to show the literariness of a text. The general conviction is that a text becomes literary through the process of “estrangement,” “defamiliarization” and “foregrounding.” The formalist is, therefore, subject to a general criticism for lapsing into a process of “treasure hunt for objective correlatives, conceits, the image, or ironic turns of phrase,” and for the tendency to overlook feeling, which makes his approach “appear heartless and cold in its absorption with form” (Guerin et al., 1999: 122). In the same way, the New Critical approach concentrates on how the formal elements of a text -- metaphors, paradox and irony -- generate the meaning from within. A New Critic avoids giving value to the matters “outside the work itself – the life of the author, the history of his times, or the social and economic implication of the literary work” (Guerin et al., 1999: 81).

Similarly, structuralism studies how the one-to-one relationships of “signifiers” and “signifieds” sufficiently render meaning and existence to a text. “For structuralists,” according to Bertens (2003: 45), “... everything played a role in what a text was and did.” Here, “everything” refers to the formal, visible and decodable semiotic features. Deconstructionists, despite their opposition to the

notion of a text’s centrality and self-sufficiency of its linguistic codes, claim that there is nothing beyond the text itself. The thrust of their study of a literary text is to point out the dominance of alternative meanings that stem from the indeterminacies and inconsistencies underlying the relationships between signifiers and signifieds strictly from within the text. In deconstructive reading of a literary text, Hawthorn (2003: 225) observes, “The play of signifiers cannot be stopped or made subject to the sway of any extratextual authority: there is...nothing outside the text.” Deconstructionists are vocal in announcing the death of the author and therefore in defying the possibility of reading a literary text in the light of human values.

All of these textual approaches have limited their studies within only one or other aspect of the literary text. The priority of formalists and New Critics is the study of poems in isolation from prose. They inspect how the figures and tropes of a poem self-sufficiently construct an organic whole. Structuralists base their studies mainly on the system of language paying little attention to the value of genres and their essential elements. Deconstructionists observe inconsistent and indeterminate relation of codes, with a “commitment to the rooting out of a belief in absolute and extra-systemic determinants of meaning” (ibid.). As a whole, all these textual models overlook the possibility of studying literature from a wider socio-political perspective and thus restrict the goal of humanities, though at the same time they lead to specialization through technique- and skill-oriented study practices.

Let us now look at the scope of the cultural model of literary study. This model has been in vogue with the emergence of cultural studies after 1970s. Cultural studies are an eclectic literary and social movement, not just confined to the study of culture it literally seems to mean. As a critical movement and a discipline it “denies the autonomy of individual, whether an actual person or a work of literature” (Guerin et al., 1999: 241). The point is that the cultural approach transcends the boundaries of a text’s self-sufficiency and challenges the notion of pervasiveness of a single subject or voice. Cultural

critics stress that “literature does not occur in a space separate from most of the other concerns of our lives” (Guerin et al., 1999: 242). Cultural studies welcomes a wide variety of topics ranging from theories such as Marxism, new historicism, gender studies, postcolonial studies and ethnic studies to the more formal academic disciplines like sociology, anthropology, globalization, media studies, urban studies, public policy studies, and human rights studies -- all political in nature for their representation and advocacy of prevalent socio-political issues.

Why has this model been the basis for literary study in the English studies programmes? The answer lies in the notion that literature as a discipline should be eclectically taught, read and interpreted. The concern for adapting to the changes of the world is always of great value to writers, readers and practitioners of literature. Scholars and academicians in the humanities and social sciences are continually encouraged by the need of updating their disciplines along with the changes in the world and, especially, to the level of credibility scientific inquiries have enjoyed today. It is also true that the scope of human knowledge has been diversified greatly over the years. The zeal for establishing new types of discourses and fitting themselves into the same domains have always pushed writers and critics to the task of exploring and experimenting wider areas of knowledge. Because English is a lot more a unifying discipline than a mere *lingua franca* today, the English departments are more comfortable to allow knowledge of various disciplines to enter into their curricula than they used to be before 1970s. The “human” in the humanities and the “social” in the social sciences always constitute the natural ingredients of literature. In this regard, any novel experimentation over the time becomes a subject of formal academic discourse in English departments. This is why media studies, human rights, globalization and ecocriticism, for instance, have come to be included in the English studies programmes in the recent times. Consequently, the traditional thrust of multi-disciplinarity has gradually shifted towards interdisciplinarity with a

prime objective of the unification of diverse fields of knowledge in the making of perfect human beings out of university graduates.

Ironically, the recent trend of interdisciplinarity indicates the growth of a new tendency to professionalize literary study towards “efficiency, narrow specialization, careerism and expertise” (Waugh, 2006: 30), within one or other “cultural” domains. Moreover, the leap from textual limitations into more inclusive cultural-political modes of discourse also seems to lead literary study towards a phase of confused professionalism possibly making university graduates “perceived Jacques-of-all-trades” (Waugh, 2006: 31). At the same time, the existence of disciplinary preoccupations is feared to bring the potential danger of “incommensurable difference between disciplines” (ibid.). In this sense, the glory of English as a unifier of disciplines may lapse into the notoriety of making academic hotchpotches. Baldick (2006) purports that after 1970s, the advent of the cultural-political study of literature has caused “the pure home of criticism” to be “contaminated” and that such development has been “lamented as signaling the collapse of critical standards, cultural value and even the tradition of Western civilization” (p. 94). But notwithstanding the fear for further constriction of literary study into “careerism and expertise,” or for the collapse of “critical standards,” literature cannot afford to remain a mere text in its traditional sense. The study of literature should continue to function across the spectrum of disciplines, theoretical movements and schools because it does contain grounds for multiple voices – voices both of the privileged and the marginalized.

Each model has its strengths and weaknesses. For example, the textual approach makes the study of a text mechanical as it puts the learners to intensive search of the formal features and their position. It is more technical and result-oriented and less helpful in nurturing the critical and creative potential of the learners. But, at the same time, it is helpful in maintaining aesthetic charm in the use of the language, and encourages the habit of learning by constructive imitation.

The cultural model reduces the chance of learning English for its physical, aesthetic features. Purity and perfection in the use of English, which are considered actual professional prerequisites in certain work stations, tend to be secondary concerns in this approach. Freedom in critical thought on inferences and implications, -- in the search of multiplicity -- may take a form of unnecessary “treasure hunt” that this model tends to escape from. But it augments learning by reflection and association, and is useful in making the study process interesting and interactive both in and out of a formal classroom.

### Conclusion

Any one of these models should not be taken as superior to the other. The textual model tends to limit the scope of English studies by restraining it from manifesting human values, but is useful in rigorous learning of the formal features of English through a literary text. It should remain an essential classroom model for English teaching in schools and universities on the ground that English is a foreign language and that learners should get adequate exposure to its fundamentals. Using textual model does not however mean being a formalist, a New Critic, a structuralist or a deconstructionist in a strict sense. It means studying a poem as sufficient with its own language, form and content. Using a cultural model does not mean going beyond the text all the time. Actually, the text is always there at the foundation of learning. Seeing the potential of multiple meanings and connections in a text is what makes a reading cultural. In fact, integration or mediation between both models makes a better third model. Simultaneous use of both textual and cultural approaches enables the preservation of the “home of pure criticism” and, at the same time,

enhances the adaptation of English studies to novel experimentations taking place across disciplines. The objective of English studies programmes, therefore, should be to “maintain cultural continuity and to create a diverse but educated public which would check the process of ‘dumbing down’ and raise the standard of political and social debate” (Day, 2006: 138). Finally, in order to preserve what F.R. Leavis called “the great traditions,” and to make English studies even more eclectic, we should allow both textual and cultural models to exist side by side.

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