

Understanding Themes in Poetry Classes through Songs

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Abstract

This paper discusses and suggests the incorporation of songs in poetry classes to make students understand themes in literature. Themes in literature range from topics such as love, parenthood, childhood, friendship, war and peace, sufferings, homelessness, nostalgia, racism and so on. Each writer has different purposes for presenting these themes in their literary pieces. The genre of poetry is no exception. Poets have used these themes in their works to give pleasure to readers, share feelings or impart a moral lesson by making people aware of certain societal issues and drawing their attention. This short communication discusses how songs can enhance understanding of common themes in poetry. The researchers have selected two English poems along with two English songs that have commonalities from thematic perspectives. These selections and their incorporation in poetry classes can help in explaining and clarifying the themes of 'war and peace' and 'racism'.

Keywords: Class, Poetry, Songs, Students, Themes

INTRODUCTION

From time immemorial, literature and music have been inseparable. Literature and music have been seen to go side by side, as it is a well-known fact that a person who has the senses to appreciate literature will consciously or unconsciously associate it with music. Poetry being one of the core genres of literature has had its impact on students of literature for decades. However, literature teachers sometimes feel that teaching poetry is challenging as many students lack the ability to understand and appreciate poems. Some of the problems that teachers face in teaching literature include low language proficiency levels, lack of reading skill, low motivation, lack of prior knowledge in literature, and lack of student awareness of its importance (Sebastian, 2017). They may be interested to read and enjoy short stories or novels because of the clarity in the use of language, but when it comes to poetry, due to the numerous suggestive and obscure meanings filled with various interpretations, they lose interest in trying to read and appreciate poetry.

There are innumerable ways in which poetry has been defined. According to the dictionary of Literary Terms 'Poetry differs from Prose most basically in being written in lines of arbitrary length instead of in paragraphs.' (p.169). It is defined as a composition written in verse. Poetry is a combination of rhyme, rhythm, meter,

stress, patterns, and figures of speech. It appeals to the readers because of its powerful language along with the themes it discusses. Poetry plays a very important role in our lives. It awakens our senses, connects us with ourselves and others, and leads us to think in synthesizing ways, as required by its use of the language of metaphor (Zwicky, 2000; Hoogland, 2011).

Poems are written with the purpose of sharing feelings, entertaining readers, or conveying messages. In a study conducted by Sekhar (2016), when it comes to English literature, poetry is the dominant form of literature from Chaucer's period to the Modern English Period. According to Khan (2020), a poem can be an effective way and a good resource for teaching rhythm, intonation, stress, and meter. The frequent repetition in a poem enables students to pick up such language patterns.

Poetry being one of the oldest genres of literature discusses universal themes such as love, hatred, human relationships, parenthood, children, and more serious issues like racism and war. Just like poems, songs explore these various themes, making them memorable and appealing to music lovers worldwide. As human beings can relate to these everyday themes, poetry, and songs work together to make these themes more understandable and appreciable. The themes of songs are no exception

Music has played an important role in classrooms for many years. Numerous studies have shown the power of music in language, science, statistics, and mental health classes. The role of music in engaging and motivating learners cannot be denied. Music enriches lessons, making them unforgettable and pleasing (Abbott, 2002). It can make students forget their stress, fear, and anxiety.

Music and learning go together seamlessly (McIntire, 2007). They create a relaxing atmosphere for students as songs ease students' perplexities and lessen the pressure they feel. Moreover, considering the entertaining aspects of singing in daily language activities, songs as a motivational tool in teaching literature are fascinating. Teaching literature is a challenging task for teachers, and most teachers in the 21st century always have to incorporate innovative ways to engage the students in the class. Now more than ever, teaching approaches and methods must fit 21st-century learners. (Asio, Riego de Dios & Lapuz, 2019; Asio & Jimenez, 2020).

Moreover, when it comes to teaching poetry in literature classes, the role of songs is indispensable. The lyrics of songs help students to interact with the text deeply and thoroughly. In terms of themes and structure, there are several commonalities between poetry and songs.

This paper discusses the use of songs in poetry classes from a thematic perspective. For this, the poems 'Ballad of Birmingham' (1965) by Dudley Randall and 'The Man He Killed' (1902) by Thomas Hardy have been chosen. Similar themes are explored in the songs titled 'They don't care about us' by the American pop singer Michael Jackson (1995) and 'Imagine' by the British rock musician John Lennon (1971). The themes in these songs appeal to students' senses and can help them to appreciate poems on a wider level.

The poem 'Ballad of Birmingham' was a composition by the American poet Dudley Randall in 1965. Racism is one of the key themes of this poem. In a study by Dahlia et al., it is claimed that the portrait of racism can be seen in several literary works that have a theme of discrimination against African-Americans. (2021). In a study by Idris (2017), it is stated that Black people in America have struggled to get their proper status against racial discrimination. Racial discrimination against colored people has become popular in United States history. Many writers have shown the theme of racism through their writing in literature. The poem 'Ballad of Birmingham' was inspired by the church bomb incident. The in 1963, which portrays the tragic death of some children because of a bomb blast in the church. The poem opens with a conversation between a mother and a daughter

'Mother dear, may I go downtown?'

A little girl wants to go out to join the protest rally to set her country free. She won't be alone as other children will be with her. The mother fears that the streets are unsafe and suggests she go to the church instead. She dresses her little girl. The line

'And drawn white gloves on her small brown hands.'
signifies that she is a black girl. She goes to the church, and soon the mother hears the bomb blast and realizes with horror what has

happened. She runs out to the street and goes to the church's location and only finds bricks and dust and one of her daughter's shoes.

The theme of racism is not new in literature. In a study by Eid et al. (2020), it is said that the way black Americans were treated shows how they suffered from discrimination in all walks of life. In the poem 'Ballad of Birmingham', from a thematic perspective, it is clear to the readers that being a black child, she was not even safe in the church. The bomb blast even did not spare a holy place like the church. Black people had to endure the pitilessness of the white in all respects. (Zouankouan, 2017). Similarly, the song 'They don't care about us'(1995) by the popular pop singer Michael Jackson portrays a similar theme in his song. The song's title prepares the audience for the song's theme. Among the several themes in the songs which show social inequality, hatred, and prejudice, the theme of racism becomes prominent. It says, 'Don't you black or white me'

In another line, he sings

'Black man, blackmail/Throw the brother in jail.'

The feelings of racism, hatred, discrimination and prejudice govern our everyday life. Jackson protests against the social biasedness of people and states that nothing can subdue him as he says

'Beat me, bash me/You can never trash me.'

Hence in poetry classes, to explain such a serious theme as racism, teachers can use songs with similar themes to enhance the understanding of themes. Students feel more engaged as they can relate to the themes and get a deeper level of meaning.

Similarly, themes like 'war and peace' have been explored in various poems. Several poets have expressed their hatred and disgust toward war. In a study by Muhammad & Muhammad (2015), it is said that war has long been a theme in poetry - after all, some of the world's oldest surviving poems are about great armies and heroic battles. Poets like Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, in their poems 'Dulce et Decorum Est' (1920), 'Anthem for Doomed Youth' (1917), and 'Dreamers' (1919), present the horrible picture of the war in their poems. (Kumar, 2020). Through their presentation of war, these poets have shown the true picture of war, which has no patriotic feelings but only violence, meaninglessness, and hatred. One of the poems which shows the stupidity of war is Thomas Hardy's poem 'The Man He Killed' (1902). It is said that in war poems, there is a strong sense that the moment of death in war is rather "off-hand ."In 'The Man He Killed,' the remembrance of the dead man is only to remark on the strangeness of war, in pitting two soldiers against each other who have more in common with their foe than their commanders (Muhammad & Muhammad, 2015). The poem expresses the meaninglessness of war as it begins with

"Had he and I but met
By some old ancient inn,
We should have sat us down to wet
Right many a nipperkin."

The speaker in the poem imagines a setting at an old inn where he would have met the other man and sat down to share drinks. The next stanza changes the whole atmosphere of the poem when he states

"But ranged as infantry,
And staring face to face,
I shot at him and he at me,
And killed him in his place."

The whole mood of the poem changes when he clearly admits to the killing of an unknown man. They both stare at each other, and he is lucky enough to shoot the man first. Otherwise, it is evident he would have been shot. The speaker finds reasons to convince himself why he had to shoot the unknown man. He admits that war is indeed 'quaint and curious', expressing his mockery about the whole image of war. Hardy employs the terms with heavy irony, fully knowing how inaccurate such a description is.

The poem shows the meaninglessness and stupidity of war. At the same time, it shows how people associate patriotic feelings with war giving the impression that people join the war for patriotic reasons. Muhamad & Muhammad (2015) state in their study that war is always the result of political disturbance. Hardy cares about the humanitarian side. For it is often hard to remember that war always has and always will have a human cost. Men and women die at the hands of other men and women. Somewhere, someone made a choice that made that happen.

Similarly, the song, 'Imagine' by John Lennon takes the audience into a world that has no religion, without borders separating nations, a world of peace without materialism and discrimination. It is similar to the line in 'The Man He Killed' when the poet says 'Had he and I but met', the song 'Imagine' begins with

'Imagine there's no heaven/ It's easy if you try/ No hell below us/Above us, only sky
Imagine all the people/ Livin' for today'

He presents an idealistic world with no heaven, no hell, only the sky above us. It is easy if anyone can try to imagine a world like this. He continues with the same concept as he says

'Imagine there's no countries/ Nothing to kill or die for/ And no religion, too'

The song expresses his wish and desire to get rid of the man-made borders which separate one country from the other and one human from the other. There would be no greed for money, or power, no reason for fights and war, and no reason to kill one another. He asks to imagine 'all people living life in peace', which can only be imagined ironically. He ends the song admitting

'You may say I'm a dreamer/ But I'm not the only one/ I hope someday you'll join us/ And the world will live as one'

Lennon knows it is a dream and people can only dream of such a peaceful world in their imagination where all people will be equal and share the same world. He also admits he is not the only one who dreams of such a world. He ends on an optimistic note, hoping

that someday all will join this thought and start living together happily ever after.

Both Thomas Hardy and John Lennon think of an idealistic world where a man would not be considered a foe just because he belonged to the opposite group. A human being would not have to be killed without any logical reason. They could have been friends if the same man had been met in an informal setting. Likewise, John Lennon imagines a world where every human being would live in one fraternity and in peace. The world would be equal for everyone.

Conclusion

Incorporating music in any class has a positive impact and the inclusion of songs in poetry class gives evidence of this. Since the themes, structure, rhythm, beat, and pattern of poems are similar to songs, they motivate and engage the students more to get the feel and idea of poetry. Due to the condensed form and layers of hidden meanings in poems, students feel they are at a loss. Hence incorporating songs in poetry classes can widen the students' understanding based on thematic perspectives. The themes of war and racism in the poems 'The Man He Killed' and 'Ballad of Birmingham' can easily be connected with the themes of the songs 'They don't care about us' and 'Imagine'. The commonalities between poems and songs make the subject matter of poems more interesting and endearing to the readers. They impact the readers and leave an everlasting appeal helping them to understand the themes better and appreciate them.

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