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English Literature

Nineteenth Century Historical Fiction as a tool for Teaching History: Developing an Interdisciplinary Approach

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ABSTRACT

English literature and History have complimented each other in a mellifluous manner over centuries. Many novels were written with a historical event/s as the backdrop. These texts have helped in reconstructing historical processes. Historical fiction can, therefore, be used as a potent tool to understand the dynamics of history. Many historical events from Europe were weaved beautifully in the literary web of creativity by writers such as Charles Dickens and George Eliot in Britain. In France, writers such as Victor Hugo and Alexandre Dumas set their classic novels within the historical context of their nation. Literature and History has, therefore, always walked hand in hand. This paper aims to explore the ways in which historical fiction can be used as a tool for teaching history. Taking two examples each of 19th century literature from Britain and France (Britain- Charles Dickens' 'A Tale of Two Cities' and George Eliot's 'Romola'; France-Victor Hugo's 'The Hunchback of Notre Dame' and Alexandre Dumas' 'The Count of Monte Cristo'), the paper aims at establishing the inter-disciplinarity between literature and history. Through this paper, the authors aim to articulate that literature and history are inseparable and the former can be used as an effective tool in the teaching-learning process of history.

Introduction

Literature and history are inextricably interlinked in many ways. Each novel or short story has a context, and is set within a time period. Historical events provide the backdrop for many novels, and literary texts can be used as an effective tool for recreating the past. The purpose of modern-day academic discourse must be to develop an inter-disciplinary approach in the teaching-learning process. Literature can contribute to the teaching of history in myriad ways. Stories, plays and poetry can be used as potent instruments in developing a deeper understanding of history. Historical facts can also be reinterpreted and reanalyzed by using literary texts. History and literature are areas open to interpretation, and both can rely on each other for interpreting and re-interpreting factual information as well as nuanced analytical data.

In the 19th Century, many writers adopted historical themes to compose their works. Many of these works assumed iconic proportions in the years to come and came to be called 'classics.' These literary texts were not only set in a historical time space but also provided significant information about the political, social, cultural, and economic life of the times in which they were set. In this paper, an attempt is being made to analyze some British, American and French literary works in order to establish an inter-disciplinarity between history and literature. Two 19th century novels from Britain will be analyzed in-depth to put forth a cogent argument in favour of inter-disciplinarity between history and literature, and also to emphasize the need for using these literary texts as substantive aids in teaching history. Similarly, two texts each from the American and French literary arena will be used as examples to bring forth the inter-connective nature of literature and history. The paper aims to present a compelling argument in favour of using literary works in the teaching-learning process of history.

Nineteenth Century British Novels as a Tool for Teaching History

Two 19th century British novels which were set in historical times were *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens and *George Eliot's Romola*. Marx wrote of Dickens and his fellow novelists that "the present splendid brotherhood of fiction-writers in England, whose graphic and eloquent pages have issued to the world more political and social truths than have been uttered by all the professional politicians, publicists and moralists put together" (*The English Middle Class* 4).

way Dicken's did in the *A Tale of Two Cities*. The novel is set in late 18th century France and England. The novel begins with the year 1775 as the starting point—a time when both France and England are plagued with gargantuan social, economic and political problems. The author provides plenty of examples to highlight the miserable plight of the oppressed peasantry. The bourgeoisie did not spend much time considering the plight of the underclass. "By the time of Dickens's story, poverty was a spectacle rather than a visible reality for many members of the middle and upper classes" (Jaffe 264). The marked social barrier between the aristocrats and the plebeians is highlighted in numerous passages throughout the book.

The plight of the peasantry is beautifully portrayed in 'scramble for the leaking wine' episode which conveys the suffering and rage which lead the French peasantry to revolt. In another episode, the author highlights the supercilious attitude of the aristocrats. How the cruel Marquis Evrémonte runs down a plebian child with this carriage and shows no regret is reflective of the abominable stance of the aristocracy in late 18th century France. Charles Dickens, therefore, makes a strong case against the atrocities of the French aristocracy in the novel.

The novel can be hence used as a tool for teaching the history of the French Revolution. To begin with, an analysis of some characters would be good enough to acquaint the students of history with the social groupings in late 18th century France—Marquis Evrémonte as the quintessential French aristocrat; Charles Darnay, a French aristocrat who cannot bear to be associated with the crucial injustices of the French social system; Madame Defarge, a cruel revolutionary who is tireless in her crusade against the aristocracy. *A Tale of Two Cities* provides accurate historical information in terms of facts and episodes which played out during the French Revolution.

The other British novel which is distinctly historical in character is *George Eliot's Romola*. The ideals of the mature George Eliot's "Religion of Humanity" (Paris, 1962) are evident in *Romola* in the heroine's growing capacity for independent moral decisions and in her active concern for the victims of the plague.

The story is set in late 15th century Florence and revolves around a stranger whose fateful sojourn after a shipwreck brings him to the Italian city of Flornece. Tito Melema, the shipwrecked stranger, projects himself to be an Italian-Greek scholar. He meets some new people in Florence including the daughter (*Romola*) of a blind scholar. The love story that ensues between the two is curtailed by

No literature could ever do justice to the French Revolution the

a circumstantial mock marriage ceremony between Tito and Tessa, a young girl whom he meets in the same city, and who is insatiably in love with him, though eventually Tito and Romolo get married.

George Eliot's *Romola* is essentially a love story but the historical setting of this story lends credence to it being a part of the genre of 'historical fiction.' *Romola* depicts the French-Italian Wars and the uneasy times that followed. The role of the Florentine republican government during war time is also a point of discussion in the novel. The manner in which the French invade the city of Florence is yet another point of reference which can be used for historical research. In the later part of the novel, the religious processes at play along with the political transition are discussed at great length by Eliot. The changes which occur in the lives of Tito and Romola are beautifully weaved within this context. The historical setting, therefore, plays an essential and fundamental role in the novel. Like the *Tale of Two Cities* of Dickens, Eliot's *Romola* can hence be considered an integral part of historical fiction and be used for understanding and reconstructing the past.

Nineteenth Century French Novels: A Means of Reconstructing History

Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and Alexandre Dumas' *The Count of Monte Cristo* are two legendary French novels which have a historical context. Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* was written during the 1830 Revolution and was profoundly affected by the historical and political trends of the early 19th century. The author was born at the beginning of the Napoleonic Empire in the early part of the 19th century, and started writing under the Restoration monarchy. Hugo went on to become one of the most fervent supporters of the French Republic. He was greatly influenced by the theme of social and political equality which were integral to the French Revolution of 1789.

In the novel, Victor Hugo is ecstatic about the resurgence of the ideas of political liberty, democracy and universal suffrage, ideas which played a key role in the French Revolution and which according to Hugo were necessary for the sustenance of the French Republic. Hugo successfully incorporated the political legacy of the French Revolution of 1789 and the Revolution of 1830 and blended it into his story, thereby creating a masterpiece which is not only considered to be a mere novel but also an apt retelling of past events in France. The novel is also greatly inspired by the artistic and cultural representations of the social and political upheavals which took the French society by storm. For instance, the legendary Notre Dame Cathedral is projected to be as the nerve centre of Paris. In the book, he argues that Paris is on the verge of a massive change which will erase its Gothic past forever, and interestingly Hugo's imagination materializes when Napoleon III and Baron von Haussmann begin their massive rebuilding programme two years after the publication of Hugo's novel. Therefore, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* cannot be considered to be just a work of fiction. It is not only inspired by historical events but is also a creative and ingenious retelling of future events, at least as far as the changes in the architectural patterns of the city of Paris is concerned. Therefore, this text can be used as a source for reconstructing the past, and also as a source for understanding the historical narrative associated with France.

In Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, the novel portrays the development of two characters, Don Claude Frollo and Quasimodo, as they are influenced by the charm of the gypsy girl, La Esmeralda. Most critics viewed *The Hunchback* from a New Historicism perspective and utilized the symbolism in the novel for this purpose. Matthew Josephson, a proponent of a New Historicism, writes of Hugo and a little history surrounding the novel itself. "Quasimodo, the cathedral bell ringer, [Hugo] drew from his own boyhood memories of Spain where there was a deaf-mute hunchback porter in the seminary he attended" (197). Andrew Lang likewise looks at the novel historically. He points out some of Hugo's misuses of historical traditions in Medieval France, such as the hanging of Esmeralda as opposed to the more common punishment pronounced on witches of death "by fire"

(195).

The second French novel which can be looked at from the historical point of view and which is deeply rooted in history is Alexander Dumas' *The Count of Monte Cristo*. This novel is based on the external political events of the 19th century. The age of Napoleon Bonaparte is the key theme of the novel. Napoleon was a general who rose to prominence during the French Revolution, and led the French armies to victory over Austria, Italy and Egypt. With the age of Napoleon as the backdrop, *The Count of Monte Cristo* is one of the most riveting reconstructions of the past as it encapsulates all the historical events in a manner which probably no other historical fiction has done. The history of the age of Napoleon is precisely and perfectly depicted in the pages of the novel. The text is a fascinating narration of historical events and can be used as a potent tool for recreating the magic of the Napoleonic era in French history.

Conclusion

To conclude, it may be reiterated that British and French historical fiction can be used as an important and effective source for reassembling historical facts. Literature and history has always been inextricably intertwined, and it is therefore imperative to develop an inter-disciplinary approach and use historical fiction for the reinterpretation of the past.

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