

On Teaching Language through Literature: Ambiguity

Since English is an *economic* language, it represents a tall order for Spanish speakers (garrulous by nature) to incorporate it as their own.

It is a fallacy to think that the English language has fewer words than Spanish, only because fewer words are needed to say the same things. The secret is to become aware of the actual existence of those words.

The fact that most English words have a multiplicity of meanings as well as a multiplicity of collocations, makes it the ideal language for the short story (a tool which I have already defined as invaluable to English teaching).

This versatility is a feature which allows for ambiguity. What could be better than ambiguity to lead the reader astray? And, furthermore, what could be a better tool for teachers in the heavy task of imbuing new vocabulary into their students' heads?

The use of the short story in English as a cultural and linguistic model is a huge step towards the acquisition of this language. The narrator must *tell* without betraying the ending; he must try to *surprise* the reader and still lead him to an unexpected, yet *plausible* denouement. The reader, on the other hand, must be able to recognise the carefully contrived hints the author has dropped in his own *elaborately careless* way (as Saki might have said) and, thus, account for every inch of the resolution!

This is where ambiguity in the use of the language becomes an asset, if cleverly used. Ambiguity calls for a richness of vocabulary and an adroit hand to make the most of it.

In "A Man Who Had No Eyes," Mac Kinley Cantor sets his story in the days when men used to carry malacca sticks to complete their attire. The protagonist, Mr. Parsons (a man of such

description) on *emerging* from his hotel, notes the *clack-clack approach* of a blind man who happens to sell lighters on the street. He buys a lighter from him, which the peddler *presses into his hand*; he, in turn, *presses* a half dollar coin into the peddler's hand. He perceives the spring day through its *blue air* and his own *memories of windy pools and lush shrubbery*. Mr. Parsons is *very glad to be alive*. He is proud of his position. Insurance. And he has done it *alone, unaided, struggling beneath handicaps*. He also feels a *foolish sort of pity for all blind creatures*.

The title of this short story seems to be unerringly pointing to the blind peddler, yet an unexpected turn in its outcome reveals that Mr. Parsons is also blind. This ending, though unexpected, is perfectly accounted for by the ambiguous terms quoted in italics.

If students of English were encouraged to model after any such piece of writing as the one mentioned above, they would be unwittingly led to probe into their "word storage" and become conscious of the existence and utility of these words. This would surely trigger their curiosity about the vast range and variety of words the English language can offer.

The short story "The Escape," written by María José Casais, a former student of mine, is to my mind an amusing and refreshing way of proving my point.

The Escape by María José Casais

The quarrel had been awful. In all his life he had never felt so furious, so mad, as if hot water were boiling inside him, and as the water got hotter and hotter he could see colours: blacks, reds. In a rage, he left the house, slamming the door behind him.

Once outside he felt released. Filling his lungs with the fresh morning air, he started to walk. Why did they always have to end up like that? She had never been able to understand him, never been able to understand his need to do those things. On reaching the garden gate, he went through it and, angry still, climbed onto his vehicle and departed at full speed.

The wind hit his face as he accelerated; all he wanted was to get away from the house and from her. As far as possible. Closing his eyes for an instant, he could feel the vertigo of speed and he enjoyed it, it made him feel relaxed. Little by little, he was beginning to feel better. Going back to what had happened, he could not help but shudder. It had really not been his intention to annoy her; in fact, he had not even considered the possibility, but she had taken it badly, so badly that she had shouted at him. As he turned right, he struggled to keep back the tears that pricked his eyes when he remembered. All his fury was gone now and there was only a sad feeling of emptiness left.

He slowed down, now not so determined to leave her. In fact, he had to admit that his idea of redecorating the white dining-room walls with his own modern paintings without consulting her first had been rather impetuous;

he could see that now but, anyway, it was not so terrible though, obviously, she had not liked it at all... The more he thought about it, the more he slackened the speed, until he finally came to a halt. Something, some kind of feeling was stirring in him. Maybe he should talk to her, try to explain why he had done it, why he was always doing things she disapproved of, tell her that he himself did not know the reason... exactly.

Feeling much better already, he had begun to back out in order to return when his shoulder was met by an enormous, powerful hand; and the touch of the enormous powerful hand was followed by the husky voice of a policeman who was asking him, "Where do you think you're going, mister?"

So taken aback was he, so surprised, that he just stared up at the cop without being able to utter a word. How could he tell him everything he was going through, everything he was feeling? How could he explain to him that he was going back home on his tricycle to tell his mother that he loved her? How *could* he? After all, he was only three!