CHAPTER TWO
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

This chapter presents a review of the theoretical issues related to the teaching of poetry in EFL contexts and of research on the teaching of English literature to Arabic-speaking students. The first part of the review considers three main areas: the nature of poetic communication, poetry in the classroom and stylistics as an alternative approach to the teaching of poetic texts. The issues that are discussed include the nature of poetic discourse and how it differs from conventional discourses, the distinction between text and context and the pedagogical implications of the distinction, the arguments against the use of poetry in EFL classes and the counterarguments, the distinction between subjects and disciplines and the pedagogical implications of the distinction for the poetry classroom, the criteria of the selection of poetic texts for use in classrooms and the teasing question of how to test students of poetry. The chapter also reviews the major approaches to the teaching of poetry and focuses on three such approaches, viz. the cultural heritage approach, the new critical approach and reader response approach. These approaches are compared for their differences with regard to theoretical and methodological claims. The attractions and the drawbacks of each approach are outlined. The review moves to a discussion of stylistics as an alternative approach to the teaching of poetic texts. The chapter then highlights the arguments of the advocates of stylistic methods in literature classrooms as well as the objections of the ‘purists’, and proceeds to give an account of the benefits that can be obtained from the application of stylistic methods in the teaching of English poetry to native and non-native speaking students of English. The review includes an overview of the developments in stylistics in the last fifty years. Five different trends in stylistics are surveyed and their pedagogical relevance to the poetry classroom appraised. The second part of the review examines the previous pertinent research on the teaching of English literature to Arabic-speaking students and outlines the additions made by the present study to this body of research. The chapter concludes with a summary of the chapter and a very brief overview of the next chapter.
Nature of Poetic Communication

What is poetry?

Poetry means different things to different people. Attempts to define poetry and pin it down by words have resulted in at best confusing definitions and at worst contradictory statements. William Wordsworth views poetry as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” whereas for T. S. Eliot poetry is “not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion”. Robert Frost defines a complete poem as “one where the emotion has found its thought and the thought has found the words” while in the words of Archibald Macheish “A poem should not mean, But be”. For P. B. Shelley, poetry is “the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth” while Ezra Pound would emphatically define it as “a composition of words set to music” and describe all other definitions as “indefensible” or “metaphysical”. Howard Nemerov, a United States poet laureate, sums up the difficulty of trying to define poetry.

But what is poetry? The problem there is that I can think of entirely too many answers, which are like excuses in that they lose their effectiveness as their number increases. (cited in Gillespie, 1979, p. 41) The definitions in the literature are so many that one would think there as many definitions as poets, perhaps even as many as there are readers.

All definitions, however, are not generalizable. Almost every one of them can be blown apart by numerous example poems. Can John Milton’s Paradise Lost, for example, be described as “a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” or is William Wordsworth’s A Slumber did My Spirit Seal an “escape from emotion”? In fact, the one characteristic that would seem most central to the definition of poetry is its resistance to generalizations and ‘shackling’ definitions. This position has been taken by the eighteenth century English poet and essayist Samuel Johnson. Asked by James Boswell, “What is poetry?” Samuel Johnson replied, “Why, sir, it is much easier to say what it is not. We all know what light is; but it is not easy to tell what it is”. This quite reserved attitude is shared by many critics. Margaret B. Ackerman (1968) observes that most definitions are “either so broad as to be virtually meaningless or so limited as to exclude something that really belongs” (p. 999).

This ‘non-aligned’ position can well satisfy a literary critic who understands the difficulties involved in trying to nail poetry down, but it will certainly not satisfy a student who has been repeatedly instructed to name and define things. Poetry teachers can not afford to let this definition problem eat into their students’ motivation. If a
‘comprehensive’ definition of poetry is impossible, it is possible at least to get around this problem. Students may be exposed to as many poems as possible and then encouraged to work out the qualities they would normally associate with poems, qualities like the shape of a poem on the page, the open-endedness of poetic meaning, and the musicality of poetic language. Students may still not be able to define poetry but they can surely recognize a poem if presented to them.

Definitions of the first type, the poets’ definitions, are criterial definitions, i.e., definitions which list a number of criteria that poetic texts must meet. For Wordsworth, for example, a poem is a “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings”. If a poem meets all these criteria, it is a poem; if it does not (for example, if it does not express feelings, or if it is not spontaneous), it is not a poem. Such definitions present a list of qualities to be checked off in order for a text to qualify as a poem.

Definitions of the second type, the recognition type, are based on prototypes – a standard example of a particular kind to which other examples of the kind bear some resemblance. This approach is credited to the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (as cited in Meyer, 1997) who first talked of “family resemblances” in defining the word “game”. There may be no attribute that is common to all members but there is a network of similarities that overlap and determine membership to the category.

Most definitions of poetry have been criterial definitions. It is hardly possible, however, to present an all-inclusive list of qualities to be found in all instantiations of poetry, and it is equally hardly possible for any poem to meet all these criteria. But there is a broad agreement among poets and readers about what a prototypical poem is like. Any text which bears ‘family resemblance’ to the prototype may be called a poem or may, at least, be designated as ‘poetic’. Meyer (1997) proposed a definition of literature based on prototypes and this study will attempt here a definition of poetry based on prototypes. According to Meyer, a prototypical literary work is a written text, marked by careful use of language, written in a literary genre (poetry, prose fiction, or drama), intended by its author to be read aesthetically and contains many weak implicatures. A prototypical poetic text, it may be argued, is marked by linear representation on the page, non-referentiality, self-containment and deliberate ambiguity. This is not a checklist approach and so a work would still belong to the category poetry even if it does not meet all of these prototypical characteristics. It should be noted here that since literature by definition subsumes poetry, Meyer’s prototypical characteristics of a literary text also apply for any potential poetic text.
Whether the well-nigh impossible definition approach (the criterial approach) or the more accessible recognition approach (the prototypical approach) is adopted, there remains the question of what it is that makes poetry so difficult to understand and almost impossible to define. Is it the language of poetry or its form? Is it the dislocation from external context or the nature of the experience represented? Is it its indeterminacy or could it perhaps be all these together? The rest of the chapter deals with these and other related issues.

**Poetic Text versus Poetic Discourse**

Typically, a text, according to Verdonk (2002), is a “stretch of language complete in itself and of some considerable extent” (p. 17). It is complete in terms of structural patterning and in terms of communicative meaning. In other words, a text is a “sequence of sentences or utterances ‘interwoven’ structurally and semantically” (Wales, 2001, p. 390). According to Verdonk, however, it is not the “linguistic size” that makes the text but its location in a particular context. A single word, Verdonk argues, like “DANGER” makes a complete text if contextualized. This minimal stretch of language makes a complete text because its communicative meaning is complete. From this it follows that no matter the length, a text is complete if it makes a complete meaning recoverable in relation to a context.

In this sense, any given poem is a text. It is self-contained in terms of structure and meaning. But a poem is something more than just a text. It is a communication situation. The writer intends to express a viewpoint or convey information to an intended audience. The audience receives the message and negotiates meaning. Widdowson (1984a) calls this negotiation of meaning through interaction “discourse”. This discourse involves an addresser, a message, an addressee (or addressees) and a context of situation. Like any other communication situation, a poem makes a complete meaning only if related to a context – the context of text production or the context of text reception or both. But it has been argued earlier in this chapter that dislocation from an immediate context is a prototypical feature of poetry. So how can readers make up for this contextual dislocation in order for them to make sense of a poetic discourse?

A poetic text, the words on the page, is the linguistic outcome of a poetic discourse. The dislocated context in a poetic discourse can be recovered from textual clues. In fact, poets intentionally leave textual clues for the reader to use in the process of context recovery. How much of the context a reader recovers is determined
by factors like the reader’s language competence, world knowledge, knowledge of formal schemata, and, more importantly, reading purpose. So “it is always possible that the reader (or hearer) infers a different discourse from the text than the one the writer (or speaker) had intended” (Verdonk, 2002, p. 18). The poetic text is the writer’s creation but the poetic context is the reader’s, and in this way the meaning of a poetic discourse is the result of a negotiation between the writer, text and reader.

**Pedagogical Implications**

The distinction between poetic text and discourse has important implications for the poetry teacher. Teaching a poetic work as a text would involve an analysis of how the text exemplifies the language system. The analysis includes, and is restricted to, language structure, choice of vocabulary, sounds, typography and register. The focus here is on how the poem as text exemplifies different structural patterns, typographical features and semantic distinctions. In teaching students to interpret the poem as text, teachers direct students’ attention to “the text’s intrinsic linguistic or formal properties”, and the students are required to discern all these patterns and relate them to the normal paradigms of language in order to establish their literary significance (Verdonk, 2002, p. 19). According to Widdowson (1992, p. 55), such textual interpretations are necessarily “convergent”. The patterns are there to be discerned by all readers and assigned literary significance.

Teaching the poem as a discourse, on the other hand, involves “correlating the meaning of a linguistic item as an element in the language code with the meaning it takes on in the context in which it occurs” (Widdowson, 1975, p. 33). In teaching the text as discourse, teachers focus on the “external non-linguistic context” and draw the students to “ideas and experiences in the world outside the text” (Verdonk, 2002, p. 19). The students are invited to reconstruct the poem’s context of production on the basis of textual evidences and relate it to their own context of reception. In this process of context construction, the words on the page are not related only to their signification in the language code but also to the extra-signification they assume in the context of the text. This extra-signification is a function of the interaction between code signification and the world knowledge and experiences that the students bring to the act of interpretation. The result is a contextual interpretation which, according to Widdowson (1992), is essentially “divergent”.

14
Nature of Poetic Discourse

Discourse has been defined as “a context-bound act of communication” (Verdonk, 2002, p. 22). In poetry, like in any other discoursal situation, the writer sends a message to the readers. The message takes the form of a text which the reader engages with in order to construct a context in which the text makes sense. However, poetic discourse has its own genre-specific features which make it a unique kind of discourse. These features have been referred to earlier as the prototypical characteristics of poetry and will be detailed in this section.

The first prototypical feature of poetic discourse is its linear representation on the page. A poetic text is arranged differently on the page. It is not lined up horizontally but is rather vertically assembled. This is so much a prototypical feature of poetry that any other discourse so arranged takes on a poetic character. According to Matterson and Jones (2000, pp. 1-3), the first piece in The Oxford Book of Modern Verse 1892-1935, edited by W. B. Yeats, was by Walter Patter. The poem is printed thus,

MONA LISA

She is older than the rocks among which she sits;
Like the Vampire;
She has been dead many times;
And learned the secrets of the grave;
And has been a river in deep seas;
And keeps their fallen day about her;
And trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants;
And, as Leda,
Was the mother of Helen of Troy,
And, as St Anne,
Was the mother of Mary;
And all this has been to her but as the second of lyres and flutes.
And lives,
Only in the delicacy
With which it has moulded the changing lineaments,
And tinged the eyelids and the hands.

No reader would question the ‘poeticiality’ of these lines. This is poetry because it looks like poetry. Everything else that readers associate with poetry does not really
belong in there. It is the making of the reader. According to Matterson and Jones, the horizontal organization of lines on the page invites the reader to read them as a poem by “encoding a series of elements that the reader expects in poetry” (p. 2). The reader starts giving the words more weight, hearing the rhythms differently and starts finding the words “more memorable and more resonant”. The Walter Patter poem quoted above had in fact, Matterson and Jones continue to argue, already appeared in Arthur Quiller-Couch’s *Oxford Book of English Prose* (1925). There, they are printed thus,

> She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave; and has been a driver in deep seas, and keeps their fallen day about her; and trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants; and, as Leda, was the mother of Helen of Troy, and, as saint Anne, the mother of Mary; and all this has been to her but as the sound of the lyres and flutes, and lives only in the delicacy with which it has moulded the changing lineaments, and tinged the eyelids and the hands.

What Yeats did was that he presented a piece of prose as if it were a poem by way of re-assembling the lines in a vertical pattern. The parallel lines invite the reader to read them poetically. In fact, they become poetry.

The second prototypical feature of poetry is its self-containment. The very shape of the poem on the page suggests that it is a disconnected piece of discourse. It follows from no preceding discourse and “anticipates no subsequent activity either verbal or otherwise” (Widdowson, 1975, p. 54). A poem is an autonomous, self-contained discourse, dissociated from the immediacy of social reality. It denies readers immediate reference to the world outside the text and so they can only return to the text to find clues that might help in the recovery, in fact discovery, of the context of the text. A poem’s text and context are, therefore, in-built. The text contains its context and contains within its own boundaries all that is needed for its interpretation. The detachment of the poetic discourse from the immediate social context has the effect of “focusing the reader’s attention on the language itself and the way it connects with the patterning of language within the poem” (Widdowson, 1992, p. 26). The text, therefore, has to be very carefully structured and patterned. What poets tend to do is devise a new, poem-specific, language code that contains all the clues which a reader might need in the process of ‘re-contextualizing’ and interpreting the poem.
The third feature of poetic discourse is its non-referentiality. This is another consequence of the disruption of the connection between poetic discourse and the social context. Because it does not directly connect with social reality, poetic discourse does not directly refer to it. Readers cannot unproblematically match a subject in the text with objects and people outside of it. This should not be taken to mean that poetry has nothing to do with our reality. In fact, it is nothing but our reality that we find in poetry except that it is not referred to but represented. It is not the conventional, orthodox reality but an alternative reality, or reality as seen by the artist, and this is what sets poetry apart from historical documents. For Widdowson (1992), poetry is “a representation of socially unsanctioned reality through the exploitation of unrealized possibilities in language” (p. 71). The themes that poets deal with in their representation of unorthodox reality are naturally the familiar, commonplace themes of love, death, war, etc. Poetry, however, is far from being a celebration of the familiar. These familiar themes are represented in quite unfamiliar, sometimes startling ways. What poets aim to do is present recognizable experiences from a new perspective in order that readers experience them, or re-experience them, anew. In Widdowson’s words, poems “somehow make out-of-the-ordinary meanings of varying subtlety of sense and force out of ordinary events and experiences” (1992, p. 14). In order for poets to be able to ‘make’ such meanings, they need a somehow different mode of expression. Our everyday language, being necessarily conformist so that we experience reality the way we do, offers little help. A poet needs to speak about “existing subjects without being fettered by the language in which they are encoded” (Fowler, 1986, p. 28). Everyday language would necessarily pull poets back into the conventional reality from which they seek to break away.

But it should be noted here that poets can not avoid these socially sanctioned ways of expression altogether, or else they might be rejected straight away for being incomprehensible. Instead, poets use the resources of the conventional language system in the creation of poem-specific patterns that can best represent the unsanctioned reality they set out to represent. The result is a complex mode of expression. New words are created, syntactic norms flouted and predictable patterns violated. Familiar words take on new significations, rhythmic resonances become meaningful and typographical features acquire literary significance. According to Widdowson (1992), these new patterns work together to create a ‘secondary language
system’ in which they cohere and make sense. The complexity of poetic language, one may argue, is well-suited to the nature of the complex reality represented.

The fourth characteristic feature of poetry is its deliberate ambiguity. Poets do not explain themselves. They often leave gaps for their readers to fill in. Unlike in conventional discourses, nothing is stated categorically in poetry. Conventional discourses are often very clear and easily understood for two reasons. First, their aim is to pass on information or messages; and second, they refer to a familiar reality with which readers can easily identify. Information left out is assumed to be immaterial. In conventional discourses, one may say, writers are very cooperative. Poetic discourse, on the other hand, is comparatively ambiguous. This deliberate ambiguity may be explained in two ways. Poets do not have much space to write. A prototypical poem does not run in more than one page. Because poets, unlike other writers, do not enjoy the luxury of space, they tend to pack all they want to say in the little space available. They re-structure and stretch the conventional code in order to accommodate the reality to be communicated in the space available. In so doing they leave a lot of details out and leave many things unexplained. They are, one may say, uncooperative but they do count a great deal on their readers’ cooperation in order for their meanings to be publicised. The other explanation for the deliberate ambiguity in poetic discourse has to do with the response poets wish to trigger. Poets are not obligated to be accurate and faithful to conventions. Their aim is to “extend the boundaries of human consciousness, teaching people to see things in a new way” (Moody, 1971, p. 29). Given their aim, it is no wonder poets do not respect the ‘approved’ ways of expression. They make their meanings indeterminate and their texts open for multiple interpretation. Readers are invited to explore the texts, fill in the gaps and ‘make’ the meanings that relate to their individual realities. The ambiguity is therefore meant to drag readers into the text and make them participate in its creation, or recreation. Matterson and Jones remark that as reader we do not “just ‘respond’ to a text but we add to it something of ourselves and our own experiences” (p. 114).

Poetic discourse, one may conclude, is a special kind of discourse, marked by deviation at the levels of graphic representation and representation of experience. Linguistic deviation, though very common in poetry, is a necessary consequence of the self-containment and dissociation from context but is not a defining feature of poetry. According to Widdowson (1975), literature, and poetry by entailment, need not be “deviant as text” but must of its nature be “deviant as discourse” (p. 47).
Pedagogical Implications

“The meanings of literary discourses are indefinite, undetermined, unstable and indeed often unsettling” (Verdonk, 2002, p. 22 [original emphasis]). This comes as no surprise to poetry readers, given the ‘disruptive’ nature of poetic discourse. But a necessary consequence is that poetry has to be read differently from the way we read ‘non-poetic’ discourses. According to Widdowson (1992),

When confronted with a poem, our first inclination perhaps is to read it as we would any other communication, looking for meanings which we can accommodate within our customary scheme of things, rather in the same way as we look for meaning in a painting which we can recognize as replicating the familiar world. (p. 19)

In reading conventional discourses, readers engage their schematic knowledge of the world in order to make sense of the text. The subjects and events in the text are related to the external context and everything falls in place. Existing schematic knowledge will act as a framework within which new information is accommodated and interpreted. The language serves as the ‘message-carrier’, and once the message is conveyed, no further attention is given to language. In poetic discourse, however, language is “the only evidence we have” (Widdowson, 1985, p. 187). The meaning conveyed is out-of-the-ordinary and the text is cut off from the social context. Where else do readers go for cross-reference?

The self-containment and non-referentiality of a poetic text direct the attention of its readers to the language. It is the only recourse in the process of interpretation. Language in poetry does not refer to any external reality, the way it does in normal discourses. It rather creates a reality specific to the poem, a reality without which the poem makes little sense. This has important pedagogical implications for poetry teachers. Poetry teachers should help students adjust, or extend, their reading strategies in order for them to be able to make sense of poetry. Normal reading procedures, according to Widdowson (1992), are baffled by the abnormality of poetry. Teachers should encourage their students to pay closer attention to the language of poetry than they would normally do with other types of texts. In the words of Widdowson,

The dissociation of language from its normal connections with context, further confirmed by the way it is fashioned into prosodic shape,
directs the attention of the reader to the language itself enclosed within
the confines of the poem. (1992, p. 32)

The job of the poetry teacher is therefore to guide students towards a reading strategy
that would help them read and enjoy poetry on their own. The focus should be on
activities that sensitize the students to the “the possible significance of particular
linguistic features as conditions on interpretation. Such activities would be designed
to bring out the representational nature of poetic meaning” (Widdowson, 1992, p. 90).
It is one of the aims of this study to suggest a host of stylistically-oriented language-
based activities in order to promote a reading strategy that would enable EFL learners
of poetry to read and enjoy poetry on their own.

Poetry in the Classroom

The Case for Poetry

Whether or not to teach poetry to non-native speaking students is an issue that
has caused much scholarly debate. Other literary genres like novel and drama cause
relatively less disagreement among educators. They are considered ‘authentic
language’ and as such can contribute to the linguistic maturity of the students. At least
they do not so frequently break the rules of language that students are supposed to
learn. But Poetry?

The arguments for the disqualification of poetry appear to be three –
conceptual, linguistic and ‘utilitarian’. At the conceptual level, poetry presents
undesirable difficulty. Much lyrical poetry does not seem to be about anything new at
all. Rendered in conventional terms, these poems end up saying things like ‘I love
you’ and ‘I am sad at the death of my son’. They leave the literal-minded students
puzzled about what it is that they are expected to walk away with. If poetry is this
simple, why should writers choose to communicate their messages through the
complex medium of poetry? The less literal readers have their share of difficulty too.
Such readers are more interested in the how than in the what of poetry. They read not
for reference but for representation. That is, not for how reality is referred to in the
poem but for how it has been represented. But although the reality represented
partakes of our shared reality, it has been represented in so unconventional terms that
immediate identification is challenged. The reality represented is not the one that fits
directly into our schematic knowledge of the world. According to Moody,
Poets have not always concerned themselves with the familiar ideas of ordinary people, for many have attempted to extend the boundaries of human consciousness, teaching people to see things in a new way. (1971, p. 29)

The reality represented in poetry is not, in fact can not be, totally divorced from conventional reality or else it can not be comprehended. It is an individual, highly eccentric version of communal reality, the only key to whose reconstruction is the language of the poem. But ‘poetic language’, as it has been argued earlier, is no less problematic.

Poetry is also disqualified on linguistic grounds. Poets do not write their poems for use in classrooms, and definitely not for foreign language learners. Widdowson (1984a) beautifully expresses this concern of teachers.

Since creative writers do not compose by reference to a check-list of graded words and sentence patterns, they produce language complexity out of sequence, thereby creating nothing but alarm and despondency. (p. 161)

If poets create complexity and despondency, why teach poets? The main objective of language teachers is the development of their students’ language skills, and such an objective is attainable by introducing the students to the normal paradigms of language which have to be learned and reproduced in appropriate communicative situations. In this world of graded language learning, poetry, apparently, will have a disruptive, therefore unwelcome, influence. Widdowson (1984a, p.161) continues to argue that a language class learning language patterns like ‘Can Margaret open the door? Yes, she can,’ will certainly be mystified if confronted with poetry lines like,

Can a storied urn or animated bust
Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath?
Can honour's voice provoke the silent dust
Or flattery soothe the dull cold ear of death?

Besides, poetry’s dissociation from immediate context results in the creation of extra-structures superimposed upon the established language structures. These extra structures take two forms: creation of new lexical items and violation of existing syntactic structures. In other words, in Widdowson’s words, poetry “has a way of exploiting resources in a language which have not been codified as correct usage”. This raises serious doubts about the place of poetry in “an approach to teaching that
insists on the gradual accumulation of correct linguistic forms” (Widdowson, 1984a, 162). Poetic texts become a less favorable model of English for the learners to emulate.

The third argument against poetry involves its relevance to the students’ occupational goals. Most of the students who are studying English end up in vocations that require knowledge, sound knowledge, of the English language. Whether they work as teachers or in English-medium communications like television, radio or newspapers, these students are expected to demonstrate very good language skills. Poetry does not seem, at least in a direct way, to contribute to this end. Its discourse is unorthodox, its reality unsanctioned and its language unconventional.

The discussion above shows that poetry tends to have totally adverse effects in the language classrooms. A poem “proclaims its independence of contexts which normally condition our understanding” (Widdowson 1984a, p. 147) and exploits “unrealized possibilities in language” (Widdowson 1992, p. 71). If poetry is judged irrelevant to the students’ learning objectives and detrimental to the process of language learning, how do we justify the teaching of poetry in a foreign language to students who have not yet fully assimilated the correct norms of usage?

The same arguments raised against poetry can be, indeed have been, turned around to prove the relevance of poetry for the language maturity of EFL learners. At the conceptual level, poetry does represent individualized and eccentric reality but it is a reality related to, in fact reconstituted from, the “commonplace of everyday life” (Widdowson, 1984a, p. 169). All realities in all types of language texts do not in fact replicate actuality but are in some way or another related to it. Widdowson argues that if we get rid of literature and create our own language textbooks, we start creating fictional characters who are “here but not present, now but not in the present”. These types of texts are “cast in a literary mode” because they “relate to no context other than that of their own devising, cut off from reality, self-contained, so that the language naturally draws attention to itself” (p. 165). If all language texts have this essential character of literature, then literary texts, or poetic texts, should be favored because they have an additional advantage. Poetry provides teaching material which can be highly engaging and can elicit “a powerful emotional response from students” (Lazar, 1993, p. 15). The students engage with the texts, provided the texts are carefully selected, at a more personal level and relate the represented reality to their
own realities. In this way poetry can be said to recognize the “human capacities of the learner” (Widdowson, 1984a, p. 170).

At the linguistic level, poetry can help students become more sensitive to the linguistic features of language. It has been argued that by introducing students to the deviant structure of poetry, we are at the same time encouraging them to explore the norms of language use. These deviant uses can not be understood unless related to their normal uses (Widdowson 1975, 1984a, 1992). If teachers adopt a stylistic approach to the teaching of poetic texts, the focus will be on how to guide students to a discovery of the stylistic effects of the poet’s lexical and syntactic choices and this can be done only by considering the deviant structure against its normal usage. Lazar (1993) argues this case strongly,

By focusing on the ‘deviant’ use … we are helping students not only to become aware of the specific stylistic effects in this literary work, but also to consider how this effect is achieved by departing from a norm. At the same time, we are involving them in the process of discovering more generalisable features of language like collocation. (p. 19)

At the ‘utilitarian’ level, poetry may not be relevant to the occupational goals of the students but the teaching of poetry can by all means be made functional. If we adopt a language-based, activity-oriented and student-centered approach to the teaching of poetic texts, which the present study argues for, the teaching of poetry can be shown to provide ample scope for the development of the students’ oral, reading, and writing skills. But that is not all. Poetry can have an educating influence as well. It can help “to stimulate the imagination of our students, to develop their critical abilities and to increase their emotional awareness” (Lazar, 1993, p. 19). By relating the reality of the ‘other’ to their own, the students learn to accept divergence and to tolerate differences, which is one of the main goals of education.

The arguments for the inclusion of poetry do not stop here. Collie and Slater (1987) have additional reasons,

Moreover, poems are sensitively tuned to what, for language learners, are the vital areas of stress, rhythm and similarities of sound. Reading poetry enables the learner to experience the power of language outside the strait-jacket of more standard written sentence structure and lexis. In the classroom, using poetry can lead naturally on to freer, creative written expression. Indeed, poems are capable of producing strong
response from the reader, and this memorable intensity motivates further reading of poetry in the foreign language. (p. 226)

**Poetry: Subject or Discipline?**

After poetry has qualified for use in the classroom, the next question is how to approach it. The approach to poetry that teachers adopt will ultimately depend on the level of education and the objectives of the teaching and learning.

Widdowson (1975) makes a distinction between a subject and a discipline based on educational objectives. According to Widdowson, “subjects must be defined at different educational levels in terms of pedagogic objectives, whereas disciplines are defined in terms of theoretical requirements” (p. 2). Because subjects and disciplines come at different levels of education, their educational objectives are naturally different, though necessarily complementary. Widdowson defines literature, and poetry by entailment, as a subject as “the study of the communicative potential of the language concerned and the manner in which this is realised in literary and conventional discourse” (p. 85). A discipline, by contrast, is defined as “a set of abilities, concepts, ways of thinking, associated with a particular area of human enquiry” (p. 2). Subjects and disciplines exist at different but successive levels of education. Subjects are learned first, as a precondition for the subsequent study of disciplines. “The higher the educational level,” Widdowson continues to argue, “the more the subject which is studied approximates to the discipline whose acquisition represents the ultimate academic terminal behaviour of the learner” (p. 2). It may be inferred from this successive arrangement of subjects and disciplines that poetry as a subject is taught at the undergraduate level of education while poetry as a discipline is the concern of graduate students.

The educational objective of poetry as a subject is to sensitize students to the way poets exploit the unused resources of language in order to communicate reality as they perceive it. The accumulation of facts about poets, poems and literary movements, though it may be a natural and welcome consequence of exposure to poetry, is not, and should not be, the overriding teaching objective. The objective of poetry as a discipline, on the other hand, is to help students make critical comments about texts by the application of critical concepts garnered from the study of literary criticism. The students need to ‘learn’ these principles before they are asked to apply them in the ‘study’ of any text. This leads to the distinction between ‘learning’ and ‘study’.
The distinction between subjects and disciplines led Widdowson to make a further distinction between ‘learning’ and ‘study’. According to Widdowson (1985, p. 184), learning “develops proficiency” and so is associated with subjects whereas study “extends awareness” and is associated with disciplines. Widdowson states the distinction in categorical terms,

By study I mean enquiry without implication of performance, the pursuit of knowledge about something by some kind of rational or intuitive enquiry, something, therefore, which is given separate third-person status. By learning I mean getting to know how to do something as an involved first-person performer. (p. 184 [my emphasis])

It is very important for the teacher of poetry to be clear about these two distinctions and the implications they have for classroom pedagogy. At the undergraduate level, learners are supposed to be ‘learning’ how to read poetry, as a preparation for subsequent ‘study’ at later stages of education. Equating subjects with disciplines, and study with learning will naturally misguide teachers in the selection of their teaching material, the choice of pedagogical practices and in the assessment of students’ progress.

**The Selection of Poetic Texts**

It has been argued earlier that poetry is not written for use in classrooms, least of all for use in EFL classrooms. It has also been argued that poetic discourse is unconventional because of its contextual dislocation and because of the superimposition of poem-specific patterns over the established patterns of the language system. The result is a mode of communication that requires the reader to be extra attentive to language in order to reconstruct the severed context and make sense of the text. It has also been argued that poetry, though complex a discourse as it may look, has its own attractions that qualify it for use in the language classroom. But the key to success in using poetry to develop language awareness and critical competence rests in the selection of the poetic texts to be taught. An ‘inappropriate text’ could mystify students, discourage them, turn them off poetry and ultimately defeat the very purpose of the poetry class.

The issue of text selection has always engaged the attention of stylisticians and educators alike. This concern has been well expressed by Khan (2005) who argues that teachers “cannot just choose any poem from anywhere and then critically discuss it and finish our job without considering its accessibility and appropriateness
for the level of students in question” (p. 90). Khan is concerned with the accessibility and appropriateness of texts for the level of students, indeed very important criteria of text selection. In fact, there have been several lists, comprehensive but not exhaustive, of the criteria of the selection of texts to be used in the classroom. Moody argues that in selecting texts, teachers should consider such factors as students’ language ability, enthusiasm, interests, and aversions. Besides, “students will most easily be attracted to works of literature in which they can quickly recognize a familiar background” (p. 18). Widdowson (1975, p. 81) underlines “the learner’s capacity to understand the language which is used”. To this list Brumfit and Carter (1986) add previous literary experience and cultural inaccessibility. They point out that “we can help students to avoid disliking a book simply because they misunderstand the conventions being used, or because the language is too difficult, or because the cultural references are inaccessible” (p. 23). Besides language level and interests, Collie and Slater underscore the relevance of the students’ reading proficiency and their maturity levels. They recommend “non-serious” poems and poems with a fairly simple narrative structure at the early stages of poetry learning (p. 226). Challenging poems can also be selected provided that learners are given ‘help with the personal and linguistic resources they will need’. Lazar provides a more comprehensive list of criteria.

In choosing a literary text for use with your students, you should think about three main areas. These are: the type of course you are teaching, the type of students who are doing the course and certain factors connected with the text itself. (1993, p. 48)

Under type of course, Lazar includes the level of students, the students’ reason for learning English, the kind of English required for the course (e.g. ESP, EAP, General English, etc.), how intensive the course is, and whether there is a syllabus and how flexible it is. Under the type-of-student criteria, he mentions the age of students, their interests, their cultural or ethnic background, their nationality, their linguistic proficiency and their previous experience of reading literary texts. The other criteria Lazar suggests are the availability of texts, their length, their exploitability, i.e. what activities can be devised to exploit the text, and how the texts link with the rest of the syllabus.

But is it possible to think of a literature course which contains none of the ‘classics’ at all? Widdowson’s answer is yes. The criteria of text selection, he argues,
should be “pedagogic rather than aesthetic or historical” (Widdowson, 1975, p. 85). In practice, however, there is a heavy concentration on the classics of English literature. All courses on twentieth century poetry, for example, would include Eliot’s “The Waste Land” and Yeats’ “The Second Coming”, the justification being that they can not possibly be excluded. The assumption is that “if the students were continually exposed to the best uses of the English language, it would in some sense ‘rub off’ on their own performance in the language” (Short and Candlin, 1989, p. 180). Short and Candlin, however, find a problem with this assumption. “Much, after all, of what is best in English literature derives from ages linguistically very different from modern English”. Besides, “a worthy desire to read what is ‘worthwhile’ can result in an almost worthless reading process” (Vincent, 1986, p. 210). Such texts could “lead individual learners to a premature attempt to tackle literary text, and result in laborious word-by-word deciphering with the aid of a bilingual dictionary” (Vincent, p. 209). The process is painstaking and literature is even more mystified. Modern texts, like the classics, take their share of the attack. Carter (1989a) observes that, Many modern texts present experience obliquely or deal with alienation from an impersonal, industrialized world where spiritual values are absent. Also, although modern and ‘relevant’ English is used, it is often linguistically experimental and can be perplexing even for British undergraduate students. (p. 20) Moody concludes that “many modern works of literature are just as full of puzzling, contemporary allusions as many of the classics of earlier times” (1971, p. 19). But the desire not to exclude the classics, and not to exclude the students either, has led some teachers to ‘paraphrase’ the classics by replacing the study of texts with the study of texts about texts. Paraphrase, in the words of Walter Nash, includes “techniques of explaining, summarizing, imitating, rewriting” (1986, p. 83). Widdowson (1984a) believes that it is possible to paraphrase a conventional discourse because “the form that the message takes other than that dictated by syntactic rule does not matter to its meaning” (p. 144). The message remains unaltered when the form is paraphrased. In poetry, however, meaning is a function of the interplay between textual and contextual elements. Because the poetic context is dislocated from the immediacy of social reality, it “has no generative power outside the message form of the particular poem” (p. 144). Any paraphrase will necessarily “omit, or ‘filter out’, things essential to the
communicative art of the text” (Nash, 1986, p. 70). The remainder of the poetic text after paraphrase can hardly be called poetry. This does not suggest that poetry cannot be paraphrased but that paraphrase should be used in order to show how the original text is structured. Texts about the text do not, indeed can not, substitute for direct experience with the text itself.

In the EFL context, there have been several outcries among educators against the selection of texts solely on the basis of their place in the canon. Thiong’o (1986) regrets that students in Kenya are made to recite poems in praise of the “retiring unreachable haughtily coy mistress”, poems which are “an English writer’s nostalgic response to his landscape”, poems which celebrate “the beauty of England” and its “changing seasons”, and poems on “roses and daffodils and may-poles and yellow fogs, not to mention songs of London burning and Baa Baa Black Sheep!” (pp. 224-225). These students, Thiong’o continues with his outcry, are taught “the history of English literature and language from the unknown author of Beowulf to T.S. Eliot so much that our children are made to look, analyse and evaluate the world as made and seen by Europeans”. Fifteen years later, Bisong (1995) reiterates Thiong’o’s concerns, Literature teaching in secondary and tertiary institutions in Nigeria … is still very much an uncertain business. Now and again concerns are voiced about what literature to teach at school and how to teach it. (p. 290)

But according to Bisong, more texts by African authors now “feature predominantly in the list from which selections are made” (p. 290).

In the Arab world, the debate is no less heated. Marwan Obeidat (1997, para. 2) addresses the issue of introducing Arab students to a literature that “poses a major moral, cultural, and social problem”. To the question whether or not teachers should introduce this ‘threatening’ and ‘culturally superior’ literature, Obeidat’s answer is positive provided that instructors shoulder more responsibility in choosing and teaching literary texts and try to “avoid” the religious, moral, and cultural barriers. Layla Al Maleh (2005), however, takes the opposite view. Though teachers of English literature may find it “more challenging to bring their students to an appreciation of English literature, which offers social, moral, and cultural values different from their own”, these teachers, in order to avoid alienating students, can always teach English literature “amorally and encourage free interpretation” (p. 269). Al Maleh admits that students meet foreign literature with scepticism but argues her defense very strongly,
The choice, then, for Arab teachers of English literature is not to ‘eclipse’ texts from the eyes of their students as much as to encourage them to adopt an amoral stance towards them, and to search for that universal paradigm which is found at the heart of all great literature.

It may be concluded that there is no formulae that teachers can take off the peg into their classrooms. There is “no special magic attached to ‘big names’ or established reputations” either (Moody, 1971, p. 29). The choice of one text or another is eventually a matter of local decision. The classroom teacher knows the students’ abilities and interests better than any theorist or critic, and so only the teacher decides which text to include or exclude regardless of its aesthetic value or established place in the canon.

Approaches to the Teaching of Poetry

There have been several attempts in the literature to define the theories and approaches that teachers of poetry, literature in general, fall back on in their classes. Carter (as cited in Keshta, 2000) identifies three main approaches to teaching literature in EFL classes: a) an information-based approach, b) a personal-response-based approach, and c) a language-based approach. Showalter (2003a) recognizes three theories of teaching literature: subject-centered theories, teacher-centered theories, and student-centered theories. According to Showalter

Subject-centered theories emphasize content and information, often presented as the “correct” answer. Teacher-centered theories focus on what the teacher must do or be, in order to facilitate education and emulation. Student-centered theories focus on the way people learn, and the organization of classroom process to maximize active learning.

(p. 27)

More recently, however, Klarer (2004) distinguishes four theoretical approaches to literature. These are text-oriented approaches (primarily concerned with the ‘materiality’ of texts), author-oriented approaches (which attempt to establish connections between the work of art and the biography of its creator), reader-oriented approaches (which mainly focus on the reception of texts by their audiences and the texts’ general impact on the reading public), and contextual approaches (which try to place literary texts against the background of historical, social, or political developments while at the same time attempting to classify texts according to the genres as well as historical periods).
Clearly there are many theories of and approaches to literature teaching, each with its own advantages and disadvantages. Teachers can draw upon any of these theories, combine elements from different approaches and come up with their own approach that best suits their classroom situation. Showalter (2003a) points out that in actual practices “all of us combine variations of these theories, and apply them intuitively in relation to the circumstances of the course” (p. 27). The approach a teacher uses, according to Showalter, depends on the “intended audience – beginners, advanced, majors, graduate students, dabblers, artists, scientists?” (p. 64). Another important factor is what educational aims teachers bring to the classroom and what educational benefits they want students to walk away with. Whatever approach teachers choose, it will mould their pedagogy, determine their criteria of text selection and shape their testing techniques.

Obviously, there is a plethora of approaches for the poetry teacher to choose from. Of all the diverse theories and approaches, the following section surveys only three: the cultural heritage approach, the new critical approach and the reader response approach to the teaching of literature, poetry in particular. The survey highlights the main emphases of the approaches and discusses their strengths and weaknesses.

The cultural heritage approach. This approach is also referred to as the information-based model or the subject-centered approach. “Teachers in the Cultural Heritage tradition use poems whose place in the canon is well established to teach aesthetic awareness, moral lessons and cultural values” (Westerhof, 2004, p. 45). The reason for teaching English poetry according to this approach is a cultural one: “to acquaint students with ways of looking at the world which characterise the cultures of English-speaking peoples” (Widdowson, 1975, p. 77). This approach leads to the treatment, or mistreatment, of English poetry as a source of factual information about poems, poets and movements – literary or non-literary. The focus is on “the history and characteristics of literary movements; the social, political and historical background to a text” (Lazar, 1993, p. 24). The literary text is used, indeed misused, to exemplify cultural content and matters only in so far as it can be referred to for exemplification. In this approach, it is the cultural information, and nothing beside information, that matters; hence the name ‘Cultural Heritage’ approach.

The overemphasis on information results in a teacher-controlled methodology. Teachers in the cultural heritage class assume the role of the ‘guru’. 
They select the texts, choose the teaching methods and do all the explaining. It is the teacher, and only the teacher, who knows what is best for the students and what the text’s ‘final meaning’ is. The teacher is god-like and is the final authority in the classroom. The students, on the other hand, assume passive roles and remain uninvolved and dependent on their teacher all through the teaching session. Their role is to ‘consume’ what the teacher has to ‘give’. Their feelings and previous world knowledge do not matter and are frowned upon as irrelevant. In effect, the students are not encouraged to think critically about the text and are supposed to ‘receive’ their teacher’s interpretation with respect and admiration. They are also supposed to somehow ‘catch’ the mechanism by which meaning is ‘uncovered’ and make it their own. These students leave the classroom impressed by the artistry of the poet and the penetrating insight of their teacher, but leave it with little, if any, confidence in their own abilities as readers.

Because the ultimate aim of this approach is to introduce cultural and aesthetic values, the texts that are selected have to serve this purpose, no matter their suitability to the students’ language proficiency and their compatibility with the students’ world beliefs. The poems are selected “for their importance as part of a literary canon or tradition” (Lazar, 1993, p. 24). Little attention is paid to the students’ reading proficiency or interests. In fact, the students are treated as a homogenous community with an equal command of English, identical cultural background and uniform interests. Showalter (2003a) designates such a classroom as “a one-man or one-woman show” (p. 32). The text is selected, analyzed, and ‘demystified’ by the ‘charismatic’, sagacious teacher. This approach leads to a view of literary meaning as fixed and ‘un-negotiable’. The poems contain truths which could have remained mysterious if it were not for the teacher. At the end of the teaching session, the teacher has taught but the students have not really learned anything.

The cultural heritage approach, with its emphasis on the transmission of knowledge from the ‘knowledgeable’ teacher to the ‘ignorant’ students, has come under severe criticism. The Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (as cited in Showalter, 2003a, p. 27) called it “the banking model” of education where the students are the depositaries and the teacher is the depositor. The act of teaching becomes an act of depositing. The students are sidelined and all the focus is shifted on to the transmission of information about things and people. For Widdowson (1975), such an approach can do little to help students improve their language skills. If the focus is on
factual information, why should teachers use literature to ‘transmit’ this information and why should they choose to introduce it in a foreign language? Widdowson argues that if literature “is studied for an exclusively cultural purpose there seems little reason why it should not be studied in translation” (p. 78). According to Widdowson, all that the students gain from this approach is

… not an insight into the beliefs, values and so on of the contemporary English-speaking societies but a knowledge of their past culture, and what is sometimes referred to as their ‘cultural heritage’ (p. 79)

Because of all these limitations, the cultural heritage approach has been judged “a flawed approach” and labeled “traditional” (Westerhof, p. 53). Although the cultural heritage approach is still used in some poetry classrooms, it has given way to other approaches in many others.

The new critical approach. Overemphasis on information and background knowledge led the practitioners of the cultural heritage approach to almost neglect the literary text. In many cases background information replaces the text; if ever referred to, the text is only used for demonstration and exemplification. This may be explained by the fact that teaching background knowledge is less demanding or that it fits the teacher-controlled methodology popular among non-native teachers. In any case, the receding of the text to the background has led to the emergence of a ‘reactionary’ approach that focuses on the text and only the text – New Criticism.

According to Klarer (2004), new criticism established itself as the dominant school of literary criticism from the late 40s to the late 60s. Its foundations, however, were laid earlier on in the 1920s and 1930s by I. A. Richards (1929) Practical Criticism and William Empson (1930) Seven Types of Ambiguity. New criticism objects to “investigations of sociohistorical background”, counters “author-centered biographical or psychological approaches” and attempts to “free literary criticism of extrinsic factors” (Klarer, p. 81). All extrinsic factors being pushed to the background, the text itself proceeds to the foreground in an attempt to ‘systemize’ the study of literature and free it from the shackles of impressionistic criticism.

The New Critics maintain that every text is autonomous. Any attempt to relate the author’s life to the text meaning is called the ‘intentional fallacy’, and any attempt to consider the reader’s response is called the ‘affective fallacy’. The New Critic’s main concern is to analyze the work “apart from “extrinsic” concerns, and that meant apart from both poet and reader” (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 3). In effect, then, the text is
seen as a self-contained structure which should be studied carefully and objectively by focusing “solely on textual idiosyncrasies” (Klarer, p. 81). The method of the careful reading of autonomous texts the New Critics developed is known as ‘close reading’. Close reading denotes the “meticulous analysis” of such elementary features as paradox, irony and ambiguity which mirror “larger structures of a text” (Klarer, p. 80). A new critical interpretation will therefore closely examine the words, the structures and the images, all understood to be ambiguous, in order to sort out the ironical and paradoxical elements and establish the central unity of the work of art.

The poetry teacher’s job in the New Critical school is to “help students learn specific knowledge and skills for effective completion of the evaluation tasks” (Westerhof, p. 48). New Critical teachers use “carefully crafted questions, questions that demand analysis of the poetry, and not just recall” (Westerhof, p. 49). They approach the text with a fixed meaning in mind and their job is to help students find it by close reading and careful examination of the linguistic patterns of the text. The students are active participants but only in answering the questions and completing the tasks in order for the class to arrive at the meaning that their teacher wants them to see. They are active participants in the ‘discovery’ of poetic meaning but remain inactive participants in the ‘construction’ of meaning. The teacher still dominates the discussion and the main aim is to explicate poems rather than help students read for themselves. The students enjoy close analysis in the presence of the teacher but feel helpless in the face of ‘unseen’ poems and in the absence of assistance. The charge of promoting fixed meanings and teacher-controlled classes, which were held against the cultural heritage teacher, is shared by the New Critical teacher. By locating poetic meaning in linguistic structures, the New Critical teacher is guilty of propagating fixity and singularity of meaning. For the students, the poems remains an object of analysis, a dead object. In the classroom, they can only go along with the teacher in order to uncover the meaning hidden behind linguistic structure. The same scenario at the end of poetry classes in the cultural heritage tradition repeats here. The students leave the classroom impressed by the artistry of the poet and the analytical skills of their teacher, but with little, if any, confidence in their own abilities to tackle poetic texts on their own.

New Criticism received criticism on many fronts. First, its marginalisation of extrinsic contextual evidence and foregrounding of only textual elements limits the students’ perspective on the poems, inhibits free personal response and strangles the
poetry class with technicalities. The literary text becomes viewed as a “kind of message in a bottle without a sender, a date, or address” (Klarer, p. 80). Secondly, its attempts to discover the ‘correct’ interpretation and to finalize poetic meaning is detrimental not only to the nature of poetic communication but also to the students’ grasp of life at large. The last thing educators would want to promote is fixity of perspectives and finalization of argument. Finally, the practices of the New Critical teacher can be described as ‘elitist’. The teacher remains the authority and the students have no hope of reaching to their teacher’s level of penetration and critical thinking. Despite the attractions of New Criticism and the popularity of close reading in poetry classes, the methodology of new criticism has now been “pushed into the background by reader-oriented approaches” (Klarer, p. 82). The shift of focus continues: from the socio-historical context of production to textual idiosyncrasies and now on to the context of reception.

**The reader response approach.** The teacher-controlled methodology, characteristic of the cultural heritage approach, and its concomitant overemphasis on authorial meaning, together with the New Critical obsession with textual meaning “brought no aid – on the contrary, even more unrelenting invisibility – to the reader” (Rosenblatt, p. 3). The former foregrounds background information and the latter textual patterns, and both relegate the reader to the periphery. In both approaches, the role of the reader is more of an admirer than an active participant. The reaction to this has been an extreme approach that proclaims ‘the death of the author’ and asserts that “a literary text can only produce a response when it is read” (Iser, 1978, p. ix). Reader response theory, also called reception theory, asserts the ‘rights’ of the reader and brings him/her to the foreground.

The name ‘reader response theory’ describes “various kinds of critical approaches popular from the 1970s which focus on the reader in the interpretation of a work” (Wales, p. 331). The emphasis is on what past experiences and present concerns the reader brings to the text and on the dialectic relationship between text and reader. Readers do not ‘discover’ the hidden meaning but ‘construct’ it as they read on. In fact, the reader becomes the sole proprietor of meaning after the author has been declared dead. In effect, the reader assumes the role of the author. The text creates certain expectations which are ‘filled’ by the reader; otherwise, the text would have remained static and its meaning unrealized.
The approach to teaching poetic texts based on reader response theory, specifically on the trends of the theory that exclude everything apart from the reader, focuses on motivating the students to read the text and “draw on their own experiences, feelings and opinions” in interpreting it (Lazar, 1993, p. 39). It encourages a wide range of choice in the curriculum and seeks to involve the students every step of the way. The teacher welcomes multiple interpretations and the wide range of associations and connections that students make. The aim is to help students become more aware of their own experiences by relating them to those represented in the text and to involve the students as active participants, even ‘determiners’, in the construction of poetic meaning. The students’ focus is not on information to be recalled after the reading is over but rather on the experience of reading. Rosenblatt describes the former way of reading as “efferent reading” or “nonaesthetic reading” and describes the latter as “aesthetic” reading. The difference between the two is that

In nonaesthetic reading, the reader’s attention is focused primarily on what will remain as the residue after the reading – the information to be acquired, the logical solution to a problem, the actions to be carried out … In aesthetic reading, in contrast, the reader’s primary concern is with what happens during the actual reading event. (pp. 23-24)

This approach to teaching poetry, literature in general, looks appealing but practice has shown that it is not wholly without problems. The teachers encourage the students to share any associations and conclusions they make. In their attempt to expose the fallacy of authorial and single meaning, teachers often encourage individual opinion and remove themselves from the activity. The result is often an unwelcome celebration of unwarranted responses and untenable conclusions. Students gain little from this methodology. The teachers’ job is not to make their students feel they are the authority and that no one else’s opinion matters. Their job is to enlarge the students’ perspective and make them see themselves in a wider universe to which they belong and from which there is no escape. Any interpretation is not valid unless it can be defended. For Widdowson (1992, p. 88) “it is simply perverse to say that a poem can mean anything”. The interpretation of a literary text, Widdowson argues, is …constrained by the text, for otherwise there could be no interpretation at all … A way of thinking about poetry which encourages absolute freedom (anything goes) misrepresents the nature
The educational value of teaching poetry that Widdowson is concerned with is the promotion of divergence that acknowledges the need for convergence. Much as diversity of opinion is an educational objective, unchecked diversity can unloose anarchy and defeat the very purpose of education. The poetry teacher should encourage multiplicity of interpretation, yet at the same time instruct students that their personal impressions need to be “discussed, substantiated, and compared for cogency in reference to textual evidence” (Widdowson, 1992, p. 89).

**Testing Students of Poetry**

Much as teachers and students alike frown upon exams, they cannot possibly avoid them. Teachers have to submit lists of grades and ‘sort out’ the good students from the ‘bad’, as an indication that their job is done. It is a taxing and exacting task. The future prospect of the students, on the other hand, is largely determined by their exam results. Both teachers and students take exams very seriously; indeed they should. The importance of exams makes it all the more imperative that teachers continually review their testing procedures to accommodate the objectives of their pedagogy, which in turn continually change to accommodate the study objectives of the students.

Moody (1971) lists three professed objections to examinations in literature. Careful analysis, detailed study, and anxiety to succeed in examinations destroy “the interest and the pleasure of the work”, have the effect of “restricting the range of students’ reading”, and drive many students to “examination-passing techniques which are opposed to the proper educational discipline of the subject”. But Moody himself was quick to the defence. Detailed study, he argues, is only likely to increase understanding and appreciation. Restricting the range of reading, he continues with the defence, necessarily results in depth of analysis and quality reading. “To read a carefully selected group of books in a given time, thoroughly and with genuine appreciation, is better than tearing through ten times that number without opportunity for discussion and reflection” (p. 91). The third objection, the resort to exam-passing techniques out of fear of failure, is “more serious” (p. 92). The students become more concerned about passing the exam than with personal experience with the text and spend their time reading for the exam instead of reading for pleasure. Preparation for examinations becomes “a calculated, mechanical business of spotting questions,
memorizing model answers, pleasing the examiners, and so on” (p. 92). In their desperation to outdo each other, students distrust their own critical abilities and reach outside of themselves for various ‘authorities’ – critical notes, teacher’s notes, and even senior students’ notes. Moody attributes this heavy reliance on external authorities to a general lack of confidence on the part of students and teachers in their ability to approach the text without guidance, as well as to the “form of examinations” (p. 93).

The exam form and contents depend to a large extent on the teaching objectives, i.e. what teachers wish their students to have learned by the end of the course. In the formulation of their objectives, teachers observe the students’ level of proficiency and learning objectives. Guided by these variables, teachers may test students on retrievable information or on skills of interpretation. Conventional literature exams have always focused on the retrieval of information about poets, texts or literary movements. Carter and Long (1990) notice that

> In conventional tests of their literary and language skills, students are frequently required to paraphrase and identify the context of a passage, to describe and discuss and to evaluate and criticise... an essential element is the retrieval of information from the text – a process which advantages students with good memories. (pp. 215-216)

These conventional exam-types inhibit personal response and “can easily be prepared for in a mechanical way, by rote-learning” (Moody, 1971, p. 93). There are plenty of help books in the market which are written in a similar question-answer format. The ‘authors’ of these help books also include extracts from critics for students who want to ‘show’ a thorough understanding of the subject. All the students need to do is “digest these comments and either quote them or pass them off as their own opinions” (Carter and Long, 1990, p. 217). Bhatnagar and Bhargava (1986) express concern about the negative backwash effect of such exams on teaching. These types of questions encourage teacher-dominated presentation and dependence on received opinion. “All the teacher has to do is to pass on the definitive views of the established literary critics and, ironically enough, the teachers’ success at this will depend on the ‘negative capability’ of the students” (p. 94). The students quote from authorities and the teachers believe, or would like to believe, that their students have mastered the subject. The teachers keep teaching and the students keep groping. At the end of the day, the teachers have taught but the students have not really learned anything.
There is a pressing demand, therefore, that poetry exams, literature exams in general, be constantly reviewed to remain relevant. They should lead the learners to the point where they relate their personal experiences to those represented in the text. They should be phrased to break dependence on second-hand response and encourage close encounter with the texts. They should test the acquisition of interpretive skills that can be transferred to the interpretation of unseen texts, rather than test the acquisition of factual information. Moody suggests that literature exams should test four things: information (that which is essential to the understanding of the text), concepts (the perception of how the basic data of the work are organized), perspectives (the students’ personal response to the text) and appreciation (both literary and linguistic). Moody’s overriding consideration is the extent to which the exam encourages “a close practical approach to the text” and “tests the student’s personal capacity for genuine response” (Moody, 1971, p. 96). Carter and Long (1990), too, suggest three question types which are less general and more language-based. These are general comprehension questions (to enable students to react to the general themes enacted in the text), text focus questions (to see to what extent the learner is able to make inferences) and personal response and impact questions (to measure a candidate’s imaginative response to the text and ability to use language in order to register that response). These question types are meant to complement language-based approaches to literature. The authors do not claim to cover all of the possible angles on a text but their concern is that “literature examinations should return students to the text and its uses of language as the originating centre of their experiences (p. 221).

A major concern for teachers is what to test students on. Should teachers test what they have taught or what they wish learners have learned? A corollary issue is whether teachers should test what they have taught or teach what they will test? Exams, much as they are necessary for assessing students, do not mark the end of the teaching/learning process. They are important reflection tools. They should help teachers reflect on their teaching practices and learners on their learning strategies. Both teachers and learners should be able to assess their success and take care of what went wrong. This is known as the washback effect of exams.
**Stylistics: An Alternative Approach**

**What is Stylistics?**

“Stylistics is a method of textual interpretation in which primacy of place is assigned to *language*” (Simpson, 2004, p. 2 [original emphasis]). To do stylistics, Simpson continues, is to “explore language, and more specifically, to explore creativity in language use” (p. 3). In making a stylistic analysis, however, “we are not so much focused on every form and structure in a text, as on those which stand out in it” (Verdonk, 2002, p. 6). Stylisticians draw on linguistic techniques, in varying degrees of technicality, in their interpretation of texts, literary and non-literary. According to Simpson (2004), stylistic analyses are rigorous (underpinned by structured models of language and discourse), retrievable (organized through explicit terms and criteria) and replicable (sufficiently transparent as to allow other stylisticians to verify them). This type of analysis, so argues Fish (1973/1996), was born of

…a reaction to the subjectivity and imprecision of literary studies. For the appreciative raptures of the impressionistic critics, stylisticians purport to substitute precise and rigorous linguistic descriptions, and to proceed from those descriptions to interpretations for which they can claim a measure of objectivity”. (p. 94)

“How such analysis and description should be conducted, and how the relationship between them is to be established,” argues Verdonk, “are matters on which different scholars of stylistics, or stylisticians, disagree” (p. 4). Some stylisticians ascribe meaning to linguistic structure, while others believe that meaning resides not in the text but in the reader. Some would start from the text and proceed to unmask ideologies and others are less concerned with ideology and more with the use of stylistics analyses in the teaching of literature. While all these types of practitioners adopt different approaches to the analysis of text, they would all take the language of the text as their starting point. The overriding concern is to provide textual linguistic evidence which can be used to explain an intuition about literary meaning or to warrant a particular interpretation.

Leech (1985) makes a more elementary, yet more comprehensive, distinction between different areas of stylistics. He distinguishes between general stylistics (the study of style in texts of all kinds) and literary stylistics (the study of style in literary texts). Other writers (Carter, 1989a) would make a further distinction between literary
stylistics and linguistic stylistics (the study of style and language variation that aims at contributing to the development of linguistic theory). Within literary stylistics, Leech makes a distinction between descriptive stylistics (which aims to describe style) and explanatory stylistics (which aims to use stylistic analysis in order to explain something). Again, within explanatory stylistics a further distinction is made between extrinsic approaches (whose aim is find out the author(s) and the chronology of a set of writings) and intrinsic approaches (where the purpose is to explain the meaning or the value of the text itself). It is within this latter type, the intrinsic explanatory literary stylistics, that most practitioners work.

Because stylistics draws on linguistic techniques in the interpretation of literary texts, it “emerges as a kind of hybrid activity which is subservient to its two ‘parent’ disciplines of linguistics and literary criticism” (Simpson, 1997, p. 4). This makes stylistics a meeting place but it does not give it a status of autonomy (Widdowson, 1975). Like Simpson, Widdowson views stylistics as an area of mediation, though his concern is more with the pedagogical relevance of stylistics. According to Widdowson, Stylistics is

… neither a discipline nor a subject in its own right, but a means of relating subjects and disciplines. … stylistics can serve as a means whereby literature and language as subjects can by a process of gradual approximation move towards both linguistics and literary criticism, and also a means whereby these disciplines can be pedagogically treated to yield different subjects. (p. 4)

Given a poem, argues Widdowson (1975, pp. 5-6), a linguist will be interested in finding out “how it exemplifies the language system” whereas a literary critic will be interested in finding out “what aesthetic experience or perception of reality the poem is attempting to convey”. The purpose of stylistics is “to link the two approaches by extending the linguist’s literary intuitions and the critic’s linguistic observations and making their relationship explicit”. A linguist treats a literary work as a text, a literary critic as a message, while a stylistician treats it as a discourse.

In their analyses, stylisticians often borrow concepts from other areas and continually modify their methods to accommodate new findings in allied fields. New sub-fields are born and older ones refined. This makes the nature of the discipline rather fugitive. Wales agrees with the French linguist Lecercle that “no one has ever
known exactly what the term *stylistics* comprises yet that the subject is forever being reborn” (p. 373).

**The Case for Stylistics**

Stylistics is a critical approach to text interpretation. It uses the methods and findings of the discipline of linguistics in the analysis of texts in order to show how meaning has been ‘made’. Some stylisticians go one step further and use stylistic methods in the literature classrooms in order to show students how literary meaning is created and, eventually, how they can use stylistic analyses in making their own interpretations and evaluating received opinions. Using stylistics as a critical approach to literature and as a methodology in literature classes has caused much debate between, and among, linguists and literary critics.

There has been much suspicion about the “explanatory potential of stylistics in the teaching and study of literature” (Carter, 1989a, p. 15). Can a concern with analysis at the levels of syntax, pragmatics, phonology and semantics help our students refine their responses to poetry and develop critical interpretive reading strategies? Or will it, instead, take the students further away from the texts and shift their attention from the poetic texts onto to the technicalities of linguistics? Can it help teachers make poetry more accessible to their students or will the linguistic facts stand in the way of immediate contact with poetry? Can the use of stylistics boost the students’ confidence in their ability to tackle literary texts on their own, or will it instead further demystify literature? Can stylistic analysis help at all in the analysis of literary texts?

According to Carter (1989a, p. 14), “one of the main issues is the fundamentally *descriptive* nature of stylistics as a discipline” *[original emphasis]*. Some stylistic analyses stop at description and invite criticism that interpretive dimensions are being ignored. Such analyses stop at the level of ‘counting’ and ‘frequency’, and do not interpret the numbers and frequencies. In other cases where an interpretation is attempted, it is believed to be ‘automatically’ read off the linguistic facts of the text. In other words, the analyst ‘ascribes’ meaning to the linguistic patterns which have been uncovered. So the analyst would either focus on linguistic patterns at the expense of interpretation, or provide an interpretation which assumes an “automatic, one-for-one correlation between linguistic structure and literary effect” (p. 16).
A related objection, also referred to in Carter (1989a), is that stylistics treats literary and non-literary texts alike and juxtaposes them in order to show the communicative potential of language. This juxtaposition of discourses, so argue some critics, serves to “dislocate the ‘literary’, reducing it to the common denominator of a descriptive framework, relegating to the periphery the essentially non-linguistic but distinctive characteristics of literature such as symbolism, allusion and intertextuality” (pp. 14-15). The essential character of the literary text is obliterated and so is the individual, imaginative response to it. This objection leads to the third objection.

“There is popular misconception in literary-critical circles that stylistics is some sort of impersonal mechanical device which is used to dismantle literary texts. Once stripped bare, the texts are then scoured for any significant features of language that influence reading or interpretation” (Simpson, 1997, p. 1). This misconception about the mechanical nature of stylistics leads to another misconception. The impersonal mechanical device of stylistics will, predictably enough, stifle personal response and inhibit creative imagination. Painstaking linguistic exactitude is seen as a menace to the students’ imaginative response and to the poem’s effect and mystery. It is also feared that the basing of interpretation on textual evidence could encourage conformity and further contribute to the denial of the individual response to the text (Widdowson 1975, 1992).

These doubts and concerns have been answered by many stylisticians. Carter (1989a) asserts that it is untrue that stylisticians do not interpret and Widdowson (1975, 1992) validates this assertion by a number of interpretations of poetic texts. The meaning is provoked by the language patterns but “is not in the text, to be animated by the expert reader” (Widdowson, 1992, p. xi). A number of stylisticians (Widdowson, 1975, 1992; Short, 1989; Simpson, 2004) assert that stylistics is interested in language as a function of texts in contexts. The extra-linguistic parameters of time, place, culture and writer are not totally ignored but are not over-emphasised either. Language is at the fore of all stylistic analyses and the (student) reader is expected to explore the text, re-create its dislocated context and produce an interpretation that can be substantiated by textual evidence. Creative imagination and divergence of interpretation are not denied. “Interpretation is constrained by the text, for otherwise there could be no interpretation at all” (Widdowson, 1992, p. 89). Besides, much as teachers of literature would love to encourage individual response and creative imagination, the idea of ‘absolute freedom’ and that anything goes would
do disservice not only to the nature of literary communication but also to the goals of education at large. The crucial part of the purpose of education, according to Widdowson (1992) must be to “develop an awareness of the necessary but expedient nature of social constraint, and so to encourage the exercise of conditional freedom in critical enquiry” (p. 81). And conditional freedom is what stylistic approaches encourage. Free subjective responses are encouraged but need to be discussed and substantiated or else the whole exercise would be nothing but an unwelcome celebration of anarchy and indefensible opinion.

In their attempt to demonstrate the communicative potential of language, stylisticians often compare literary discourse with conventional discourses. While acknowledging that literature is strange and mysterious and an object of reverence, Widdowson (1992) asserts that it is also a use of language and so comparable with other uses. By refusing to teach poetic texts in juxtaposition with conventional texts, Widdowson argues, we are preserving poetry like a sacred relic possessing mysterious potency. Conversely, the attempt to provide textual evidence in support of a particular interpretation sensitizes readers to the ‘mysterious’ dimensions of literary meaning, which would otherwise have remained mysterious. ‘Nothing makes us more perceptive and appreciative of the unaccountable than the attempt to account for it’ (Widdowson, 1992, p. 71). To the objection that stylistic practices are mechanical, Roger Fowler, quoting Chomsky, argues that linguistics, and stylistics by entailment, is not a discovery procedure: not an automatic machine which, fed a text at one end, delivers at the other end some significant generalizations about the character of the text. “Critics who are hostile to the use of linguistics in literary criticism have sometimes misrepresented linguistics as a kind of inhuman machine capable only of soullessly dismantling literary works” (1986, p. 7). Simpson (1997) agrees with Fowler and describes this view of stylistics as highly erroneous and ascribes this misconception about stylistics to inadequate understanding of the nature of stylistics.

After declaring stylistics innocent of all these charges, stylisticians proceed to enumerate the benefits of using stylistics in literature classrooms. Many stylisticians (Collie and Slater, 1987; Short, 1989; Willie van Peer, 1989; Widdowson, 1975, 1983, 1992; Lazar, 1993; Duff and Maley, 1995; Brumfit and Carter, 1986; Simpson, 1997, 2004) argue for the use of stylistics with native and non-native learners of English literature. The starting point in any stylistic interpretation of literary texts is language – choices at the lexical, grammatical and, less frequently, phonological levels. Short
and Candlin (1989) believe that this concern with language structure makes stylistics an appropriate approach for non-native speakers of English. Foreign students “have learned how to analyse sentences grammatically” and this makes them “more consciously aware of linguistic structure and better equipped to analyse it and its relationship to meaning” (p. 183). Short (1989) shares this view and finds stylistics a useful tool for analysing literary texts. According to Short, stylistics is particularly helpful to non-native speaking students because it provides them with a descriptive analytical vocabulary that enables them to appreciate features of literary texts which they would otherwise have overlooked as well as explain explicitly their intuitive responses which would otherwise have remained inexpressible intuitions. To this list, Widdowson (1975) adds the language benefits. The students are learning the rules of the language and by using this language knowledge in the interpretation of literary texts “the learning of the language system is extended into the learning of language use” (p. 81).

The use of stylistics with foreign students in English poetry classes is therefore shown to help students at many levels. It increases their confidence in their ability to handle poetic texts by providing them with the analytic vocabulary needed (Short, 1989) and by treating poetic texts as discourses not singularly different from conventional discourse types (Widdowson, 1975). Language analysis is already a familiar feature of the classroom (Short and Candlin, 1989) and in adopting a stylistic approach, one is moving from the familiar towards the unfamiliar. Stylistics draws on the students’ knowledge of language structure in the interpretation of texts and thus relates the study of poetry to the study of language and makes it relevant to the students’ learning goals. It also increases the students’ general awareness and understanding of the ways in which the possibilities for meaning in language are used to communicate meaning (Widdowson, 1992). The general consensus, as expressed by Wales, is that “stylistics has come to be used as a significant teaching tool in language and literature studies for both native and foreign speakers of English” (p. 373).

Stylistics, however, is not a uniform field of enquiry. There are many theories, or trends, of stylistics, each with its own concerns and practices. If teachers decide to use stylistics in their literature classrooms, the question is which trend to use. The choice of one trend or the other will be determined by factors like the objectives of the course, the objectives of the teacher, the students’ learning objectives, the students’
level of language proficiency, the students’ interest in language, the degree of linguistic exactitude (linguistic terminology) which is involved, the accessibility of the approach to the students, the replicability of the analysis by the students, and the level of learner autonomy that could be achieved. These issues are addressed later in this chapter and in the fourth and fifth chapter of the dissertation.

Trends in Stylistics and their Pedagogical Relevance

Research in stylistics has followed several avenues. Although stylistic analysis has traditionally and predominantly focused on language structure, it has also considered the text’s context of production and its context of reception. In fact, the pendulum of interest swings between text, reader and author, of course with the text always present some where in the center of the picture. Some practitioners of stylistics locate meaning in language structure and attempt to ‘unearth’ it, while others locate it in the reader and endeavour to describe how readers ‘confer’ meaning upon the text. Other practitioners are less concerned with readers as with authors. Their concern is with authorial ideology and their analysis of language structure aims at unmasking these ideologies. Another group of practitioners move away from ideology towards the classroom and their principal concern is with the use of stylistic analyses as an aid in the teaching of literature. The following section provides an overview of all these trends and examines their relevance for the teaching of poetry, and the teaching of literature in general.

Structuralist stylistics. Structuralism, as implied by the term, is concerned with structures. The structuralists, influenced by Sassure’s ideas, view language as a self-contained whole. By virtue of the arbitrariness of its signs, language does not become a reflection of the world but a separate system that constitutes reality. The individual items within the text relate to each other and create larger structures. These individual items are, therefore, relational. Every word in the structure has to be defined in terms of other words in the structure, in terms of difference rather than fixity of meaning. The focus therefore is on patterns and structures and on how this network of connected structures constitutes rather than reflects reality.

When applied to the study literature, structuralist ideas shifted the concern of critics onto textual regularities and irregularities. The interest of critics “centered not so much on the evaluation of individual texts as in literary criticism, but on their structural patterns” (Wales, p. 370). Much in the same way, structuralist ideas have given rise to greater emphasis on textual patterns in stylistic analyses, often to the
exclusion of any non-textual clues. The meaning is believed to exist in the language and the structural stylistician’s job is to ‘unearth’ that meaning or recover it from the textual pattern. Taylor and Toolan (1996) describe the structuralists as “objectivist stylisticians”. Objectivist stylisticians consider style to be “an inherent property of the text itself, taken as an utterance of the language” (p. 88). Taylor and Toolan make a distinction between two factions within the objectivist camp: the formalists and the functionalists.

Formalist stylistics received a strong impetus with the publication of Roman Jakobson’s seminal essay “Closing statement: Linguistics and poetics” in 1960. Jakobson called for “an explicit, objective, scientific and structuralist stylistics, to be modeled on the scientific, structuralist linguistics of the time” (Weber, 1996, p. 1). This objectivity and scientificity is made possible with the exclusion of both writer and reader. For the formalists, a literary text is autonomous from the context of its production and the context of its reception. All that matters is the text and style is seen as a property of the text itself. The formalists set out to study the patterning and structuring of literary texts and single out prominent stylistic features such as deviation, repetition and parallelism. These stylistic features are then ascribed some meaning by the analyst. The meaning is said to reside in the text and re-discovered by the formalist analyst. For the formalists, the form or structure of a literary work is not simply a decorative wrapping of a separable content. It is part of that content. What a text says and how it says it are not different things for the formalist. The language of the text becomes paramount and any approach to the interpretation of texts has to be ‘linguistic’. In fact, Jakobson excludes any other approach and sees linguistics as “the global science of verbal structure” (Jakobson, 1960/1996, p. 10).

The formalists also make a distinction between literary language and non-literary language, with the former being dominated by the poetic function. The language of poetry is not oriented towards the speaker or receiver of the message, but towards the message itself. It is self-referential and calls attention to itself. The message lies timeless in the text and is recoverable by close scrutiny of the stylistic features in which it is wrapped. This type of text analysis opens up a big gap between interpretation and analysis. Textual features are identified and ‘made’ meaningful but the reader is not enlightened on the criteria of ascribing significance and meaning to a particular linguistic feature.
The second division within the objectivist camp is that of *functional stylistics*. Functional stylisticians attempted to narrow the gap between interpretation and analysis that the formalists opened up. They were unhappy with the “lack of a general criteria [sic] for determining whether any particular instance of linguistic prominence is likely to be stylistically relevant or not” (Halliday, 1971/1996, p. 56). In order to close this ‘interpretive gap’, the functionalists introduced a new criterion of stylistic significance, viz. functional relevance to interpretation. A formal linguistic feature is considered stylistically relevant only if it ‘has’ a particular meaning or function. In Halliday’s own words, “a feature that is brought into prominence will be ‘foregrounded’ only if it relates to the meaning of the text as a whole” (p. 64). Halliday regards this relationship as a functional one. He points out that

…if a particular feature of the language contributes, by its prominence, to the total meaning of the work, it does so by virtue of and through the medium of its own value in the language – through the linguistic function from which its meaning is derived. Where that function is relevant to our interpretation of the work, the prominence will appear as motivated. (p. 64 [*my emphasis]*)

Weber agrees that the introduction of the criterion of functional relevance significantly increases the power of stylistic description but argues that it does not really solve the problem. The problem with the formalists is that they opened up a gap between interpretation and textual analysis because they did not provide criteria for determining the relevance to interpretation of linguistic features of the text. While the functionalists have provided functional criteria to solve the problem of the functionalists, they have at the same time opened up another debate: what function does each formal feature have? And does each feature have a fixed function in all texts?

The functionalists, like the formalists, assumed a fixed relation between form and interpretation. It is true that they have restricted the relevant formal features to those that are functionally relevant but the criterion of functional relevance remains oblique. It is ultimately the analyst’s hunches that assign meanings or functions to the formal feature which the analyst singles out but functional stylisticians would make no explicit reference to the role of the reader in the act of interpretation. In effect, therefore, the indeterminacy of linguistic elements remains ignored and the plurality of their functions overlooked. By choosing not to give a prominent role to the reader,
the functionalists did not really done much because the ‘interpretive gaps’ from form to interpretation continued to widen up.

This structuralist, formalist and functionalist, approach to literary texts is closely associated with the New Critical approach. The structuralists and the New Critics focus on linguistic structure and only linguistic structure. Nothing beside matters. When adopted in poetry classes, these approaches result in a methodology that overvalues linguistic patterns and undervalues all non-textual information. The New Critical teacher locates meaning in linguistic patterns and the students’ job is to dig it out of those patterns. Other aspects of the pedagogical treatment of poetry in the New Critical classroom have been detailed earlier under “the New Critical approach”.

**Affective stylistics.** The formalists and functionalists’ interpretive leaps from textual patterns to patterns of meaning brought them under severe criticism by the American critic Stanley Fish. Fish criticizes the formalists and the functionalists for the absence of any connection between their descriptive and interpretive acts. Fish argues that what these stylisticians seem to aim at is the establishment of automatic interpretive procedures based on an inventory of “fixed relationships between observable data and meanings”. These meanings do not vary with context and can be read out “independently of the analyst or observer who need only perform the operations specified by the ‘key’” (Fish, 1973/1996, p. 94). For Fish, these stylisticians assert their interpretations rather than prove them. There is nothing in their data to authorise the leap from description to interpretation.

Fish, however, does not altogether reject the interpretations of the formalists and functionalists. The explanation for that interpretation, Fish counter-argues, is not the capacity of a syntax to express it, but the ability of the reader to confer it. The heart of Fish’s quarrel with the structuralist stylisticians is that

…in their rush to establish an inventory of fixed significances, they bypass the activity in the course of which significances are, if only temporarily, fixed…. As a result they are left with patterns and statistics that have been cut off from their animating source, banks of data that are unattached to anything but their own formal categories, and are therefore, quite literally, meaningless. (p. 94)

Fish does not turn down the formalist distinctions as worthless but argues that they do not ‘possess’ meaning; they ‘acquire’ it in context due to the reader’s active negotiation of meaning. The formal patterns do not possess meaning prior to the
reading act, meaning which is later ‘discovered’ or ‘dug out’ by the reader. Fish gives the reader a more active role in the construction, not discovery, of meaning. He rejects Jakobson’s view of style as an inherent property of the text and sees style as a dynamic effort not in the text but in the activity of reading.

To narrow down the interpretive gaps left open by the formalists and functionalists, Fish calls for an ‘affective stylistics’ in which “the focus of attention is shifted from the spatial context of page and its observable regularities to the temporal context of a mind and its experiences” (p. 109). Instead of ascribing some meaning to a formal pattern, Fish’s interest is in what readers do when they read that pattern, in the expectations they bring to the reading act and the conclusions they draw from the text. The focus shifts from concern with textual regularities to how readers respond to the text and ‘give’ it meaning. This does not mean a return to the impressionism which stylisticians have always disparaged. Every reader will of course bring different expectations to the texts and draw different conclusions, but Fish is not unaware of this relativism. He introduces the notion of ‘interpretive communities’ which should in principle limit the number of possible readings. A reader’s interpretation, Fish argues, is determined by the particular interpretive community he or she belongs to.

Like the formalists and the functionalists, Fish did not go unattacked. Fish’s notion of interpretive communities is introduced to rule out just *any* interpretation and to group readers into communities that share the same basic ideology. The reader interprets a text not as an individual reader but as a member of a particular community. This notion of communities has been found problematic. First, it could eventually lead to a finalization of poetic meaning because, in effect, it denies individual interpretation of the literary texts. Secondly, Fish leaves the notion of interpretive communities unclear. “It is never made clear just what these ‘interpretive communities’ are, where they are, how they are constituted, influenced, and changed” (Toolan, 1990/1996, p. 126).

In the poetry classroom, the affective or reader-response theory has given rise to a methodology that elevates the reader to the status of the author and pays little attention to authorial intentions. To the reader response teacher, poetry has no meaning until it is read. The author is declared dead and the (student) reader assumes the responsibility of making the text meaningful. In the classroom, the focus is on what prior world knowledge and experiences the students bring to the act of reading. The students are encouraged to make their own associations and of course their own
interpretations. The pedagogical strengths and weaknesses of this approach to the teaching of poetry have been outlined earlier under “the reader response approach”.

**Contextualized stylistics.** After the attacks on stylistic practices unleashed by and on Stanley Fish, stylistics developed in different directions. Weber observes that one of these, taking place in the 1980s, was “an orientation towards contextualization” (p. 3). This was prompted by the growing interest in context in allied fields and the increasing importance of pragmatics and discourse analysis. Stylisticians turned their attention away from textual patterns to the context of text production and reception, and began investigating the ways in which ideologies are constructed in texts and people are represented. This concern with ideology and representation gave rise to critical stylistic and feminist stylistic studies.

**Critical stylistics,** according to Weber, rejects “the mimetic view of language as a value-free, transparent medium reflecting reality” (p. 4). There is no neutral, objective representation of reality. Every use of language classifies, organizes or otherwise expresses an interpretation of reality. In this sense, linguistic choices do not ‘reflect’ reality; they ‘construct’ it. Language comes with inbuilt world-views and ideologies and the job of the critical stylistician is to uncover the ideological assumptions embodied in texts.

The critical stylistician is concerned with demystification and aims “to unmask ideologies, to denaturalize common-sense assumptions and, ultimately, to enable and empower readers” (Weber, p. 4). These stylisticians see language as making meaning and constructing social reality and their principle concern is to unveil the ideological assumptions by examining the writer’s linguistic choices and stylistic preferences. Because of this concern with the critique of social and political ideologies, the work of these stylisticians is referred to as ‘critical stylistics’. But this does not imply that a certain linguistic structure will non-problematically correspond to a particular ideological structure. If it did, it would in fact mean slipping into the old form-or-content trap that crippled the work of earlier generations of stylisticians. Weber remarks that

… critical stylisticians have learnt from past mistakes: they insist that the relationship between language and ideology is complex and indirect …, that ideologies should be associated with cultural schemata rather than with individual language items. (pp. 4-5)
Feminist stylisticians, like critical stylisticians, are also concerned with ideology and representation. These stylisticians critically examine the representation of women in male-authored texts. They examine the male-dominated literary canon to expose false assumptions about women who are represented as inferior and subordinate. Women are silenced and marginalized, their images distorted or falsely constructed by male authors. The principal concern of feminist stylisticians is the unmasking of the sexual stereotyping of women within a silencing patriarchal culture.

Feminist stylistics, according to Mills (1995), is a form of politically motivated stylistics which “relates the language of texts to extra-textual political processes” (p. 10). Feminist stylisticians, like critical stylisticians, do not view language as value-free medium which innocently reflects external reality. They argue that all uses of language, therefore all texts, carry ideologies and that their job as readers of texts is to read suspiciously for these ideologies. They use linguistic or language analysis in their examination of the ways in which male authors constrain the images of women in texts and are interested in “unmasking (patriarchal) ideologies and denaturalizing (patriarchal) assumptions” (Weber, p. 5). Feminist stylistic investigations lay stress on “the interaction between the text and the reader in the production of interpretations” (Mills, p. 66). Their aim is to develop awareness of the way gender is handled in texts, and so they “work towards a critical feminist awareness, which might lead to resistance and, ultimately, linguistic and/or social change” (Weber, p. 5). The social change may involve a call for equal rights, equal representation and/or an end to discrimination based on sex. The linguistic change is evident in the widespread preference for sexually neutral expressions like chairperson, flight attendant, principal, and in the avoidance of the gender-biased pronoun ‘he’ in favor of the sexually neutral pronoun ‘they’, and sometimes with ‘she’.

This feminist critique of the male-dominated canon encouraged a discovery or a re-discovery of an entire women’s literature “whose historical and thematic coherence, as well as artistic importance, has been obscured by the patriarchal values that dominate our culture” (Atkins and Morrow, 1989, p. 182). These women-centered studies are relatively young but are gaining increasing popularity and positive reception even among male critics.

Contextualized stylistic approaches to literary text interpretation, critical and feminist, are therefore primarily concerned with the textual decoding of authorial ideologies and the interpretation of these ideologies by readers. The practitioners of
the approach are not at all concerned with pedagogy as with ideology. But if these theoretical assumptions were taken to the poetry classroom, they would give rise to a methodology that emphasizes information (by and about authors) at the expense of the students’ language development. The poetry teachers working in this stylistic trend would be more interested in poetic works that best exemplify particular ideologies than with works appropriate to the students’ language proficiency and world knowledge. The criteria of text selection would naturally be more aesthetic or ‘political’ than linguistic or pedagogic, particularly if the teachers’ exclusive focus is on the unmasking of ideologies. The students could be involved in the investigation into the ideological assumptions of the author(s) but they are likely to be treated as a homogenous community with an equal command of English and uniform interests. The classroom may be dialogic or teacher-controlled, depending on the room allowed for the students by the teacher. In the first case, the students identify features of male domination in the texts and relate them to their own ideologies. In the second, the teacher identifies the features and their interpretive significance. In either case, the students are sensitized to the role of lexical choices and structural patterning of words in the expression of personal ideologies. As learners of language, they become more aware of the significance of the language choices they make. They also become more sensitive and critical users of language. But there is another major problem of the approach, besides ignoring difference of language ability and interests among the students. At the end of the day, teachers have not really taught poetry. The have used it in their search for something else. In other words, poetry has been politically used, perhaps misused, in order to expose the ideological bias of the author. This approach is more appropriate with students studying poetry than with students learning to read poetry. It takes one perspective, the critical perspective, and ignores a host of other elements that contribute to the ‘poeticality’ of the poetic text being studied.

**Cognitive stylistics.** Cognitive stylistics is a relatively new approach to the linguistic analysis of literary texts. It draws on theories of cognitive linguistics, which in turn draw on concepts from cognitive psychology in their attempt to explain the ability to understand and use language. The cognitive linguist is interested in the relation of language and mind and “aims in a theoretical way to account for principles of language behaviour and interpretation from the perspective of general principles of cognition, with particular regard to perception and categorization, and based on what is known about how the mind works” (Wales, p. 64).
Cognitive stylistics, according to Wales, is a comparatively recent development emerging in the 1990s. Wales distinguishes two branches of cognitive stylistics. The first is concerned with the role of ‘conventional’ metaphors in cognition and language, while the other builds on cognitive research into discourse comprehension. The first has led to the development of Lakoff’s theory of metaphor, while the other has given rise to schema theory and relevance theory. These last two theories are important in the reading and interpretation of literature.

According to schema theory, all readers have categorical rules which they use to make sense of and interpret the world. These are called schemata. New information is processed in terms of how well it fits into these schemata (or schemas). If the new information does not fit, readers have a problem understanding and interpreting the text. Schema-based analysis of literary texts attempt to explain how our world knowledge and past experience comes into play when we read and interpret literature. Schemas from different areas of experience are brought together in our attempt to make sense of what we read. Schemas are said to ‘map’. That is, when we metaphorically think of love as a disease, for example, there is a mapping of two domains of experience. But since each individual’s schemata are unique and follow from their life experiences and cognitive processes, our interpretations of texts necessarily diverge. This position is closely allied to that of the reader response theorists.

The other development from cognitive stylistics is Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson’s ‘relevance theory’. Like the schema theorists, Sperber and Wilson focus on the reader’s mental processes and the active role which the reader’s assumptions play in the interpretation of texts. They reject the view that meaning can be ‘decoded’ from the text and maintain that meaning is always indeterminate and ‘constructed’ by the reader. Relevance theory, according to its proponents, explains how the hearer infers the speaker’s meaning on the basis of the evidence provided. The relevance-theoretic account is based, at least partially, on one of Grice’s central claims: that utterances automatically create expectations which guide the hearer towards the speaker’s meaning. The central claim of relevance theory is that the expectations of relevance raised by an utterance are precise and predictable enough to guide the hearer towards the speaker’s meaning. The aim of the theory is to explain in cognitive terms what these expectations amount to, and how they might contribute to an account of comprehension.
According to Pilkington (1996), utterance interpretation, in relevance theoretic terms, involves two distinct phases: (1) a ‘context-independent phase’ yielding semantic representations which provide a schematic but radically incomplete representations of the thoughts communicated, and (2) an ‘inferential phase’ that brings non-linguistic contextual information to bear upon the output of the decoding phase and arrive at the fully-fledged thoughts that are communicated. Clark (1996) remarks that the inferential phase is constrained by a ‘principle of relevance’. This principle guides the reader in working out the implications of an utterance and its higher-level explicatures. The principle also guides the reader in deciding which of the implications of an utterance are implicatures, that is mutually manifestly intentionally conveyed implications. Deciding under what circumstances an implication is taken to be an intentionally conveyed implicature is one of the central aims of relevance theoretic studies.

Sperber and Wilson (2004) observe that writers do not intend to convey a small set of strong implicatures but rather a wide array of weak implicatures. When the addressee is certain that the addressee wishes to communicate a particular implicature, the implicature is said to be a strong one. On the other hand, when the addresser gives clues to the addressee to explore the context further but there is no conclusive evidence that the addresser wishes to communicate a certain implicature, the implicature is said to be a weak one. Pilkington finds the notion of weak implicatures “crucially important for explaining poetic effect” (p. 159). Poetic metaphors communicate a wide array of weak implicatures and this makes them not easy to ‘paraphrase’. Pilkington also observes that “the notion of weak implicature helps to explain the indeterminacy of poetic effect (the problem of saying exactly what range of implicatures are communicated)” (p. 159).

The assumption here is that “texts give rise to effects due to the interaction of knowledge of linguistic meanings, knowledge of how particular forms are typically used, and contextual assumptions” (Clark, p. 163). The reader combines textual knowledge with contextual knowledge in an effort to arrive at an interpretation. The smaller the processing effort involved in interpretation (‘cost’), the greater the relevance (‘benefit’). Relevance theory claims that extra effort in interpretation implies extra effects. If a writer makes use of an unusual image, a refrain or an indirect comparison, for example, it follows that there are extra effects intended and the reader is encouraged to explore the context further. “Where addressees find such
contexts rich enough, the extra processing effort is compensated for by a wide range of contextual effects than would normally be the case” (Pilkington, p. 159).

Cognitive approaches to text interpretation are an interesting development of stylistic theory. These approaches are interested in authorial intentions and how readers manage to reach at them through combining textual clues with contextual knowledge. The author, the reader, the text and the context are all considered. Cognitive stylistic approaches are too ‘mentalistic’ to use with non-native speaking undergraduate students. Their careful, and guided, adoption in the poetry classrooms could have certain pedagogical advantages, though. First, there is no ‘ideology’ involved and so there would be no restrictions on the texts selected. Teachers choose the texts that best suite their students’ interests and language level. Secondly, the teaching would involve the students every step of the way. The teacher’s role is to guide the students towards those textual features that could be said to communicate the author’s meaning. The students work out the implications of the utterances and, by bringing contextual information, work out which of the implications could be said to be “intentionally communicated” by the author. The students relate the author’s context to their own and work out the relevance to their own lives of the thoughts communicated. The students learn that meanings, all meanings, are indeterminate and realize their own active and constructive role as readers. The approach also makes the students consciously aware of who they are as readers and where they stand in the plethora of ideologies surrounding them. The benefits that could be obtained from the application of cognitive stylistic approaches to the teaching of poetry are, therefore, linguistic as well as humanistic.

Research, however, indicates that cognitive approaches are not well suited for use with non-native, undergraduate learners of English. Burke (2004) introduced cognitive stylistics to her undergraduate Dutch and Spanish students who were all non-native speakers of English. Burke reported that the findings of the pedagogical experiment were no favorable. In undergraduate teaching environments, observes Burke, bottom-up analytic processes “must be of equal importance in the text-mind interface”. Burke concludes her study by recommending that “students would benefit from a course in mainstream literary stylistics prior to taking a course in cognitive stylistics” (p. 507).
Pedagogical stylistics. Pedagogical stylisticians are less concerned with the
cognition and with the theoretical debates on the objectivity or otherwise of stylistic
analyses. They do not claim to be objective and do not wish to relegate literary critics
to the periphery and take over. They are not interested in ideologies and
misrepresentations, either. “Their much more modest aim is simply to demonstrate
that stylistic analysis as a way of reading can be of direct use to students, both in
mother-tongue language learning and in an English as a foreign language context”
(Weber, p. 3 [original emphasis]). Stylistic analyses are not seen as a replacement to
the ‘impressionistic’ analyses of literary critics but are rather seen as an aid in the
reading of literature. Students, especially in foreign classes, do not always know how
to read literature and are baffled by its ‘mysterious’ nature. Stylistic analyses draw on
students’ knowledge of language in an attempt to provide the students with a way of
reading. According to Clark and Zyngier (2003), the aim of such analyses and
pedagogical practices is not to “produce the next generation of stylisticians” or “create
even more accurate users of language” but to “promote linguistically aware readers
who can perceive the qualities of language which are manipulated for particular
effects” (p. 342).

In order to make students more aware of how language is used to achieve
particular effects, pedagogical stylisticians borrow established language teaching
strategies such as cloze procedure (random and controlled), prediction, and
paraphrase. These activities are said to be ‘pre-literary’ and their aim is to promote
confidence in the learners and help them find a way into the texts which would
otherwise have remained inaccessible (Carter, 1986, 1989; Collie and Slater, 1987;
Widdowson, 1975, 1992; Lazar, 1993) to the students. The aim is not to get the
students to produce standard interpretations but to enable them to produce individual
interpretations by relating the texts to their own life experiences and by adducing
textual evidence in support of these interpretations.

In the poetry classroom, pedagogical stylistic analyses have a number of
benefits. The criteria of text selection are linguistic and pedagogic (Widdoswon,
1975). The teacher’s job is to help the students become more linguistically aware of
textual structure and its possible significance (Widdowson, 1992). In order to achieve
this aim, the pedagogical stylistic teacher uses language-based activities as a means of
entry into the world of the text. These activities help the students use their existing
knowledge of the language to appreciate literary texts and this naturally deepens their
knowledge of the language itself (Lazar, 1993). The activities are also student-centered. The teacher’s job is to build the right kind of activities that could help students become less dependent on him or her. The students are engaged more actively in the negotiation of meaning. Such approaches, so argue the pedagogical stylisticians, help promote more learner autonomy in the poetry classes. The use of familiar linguistic terminology in the interpretation of unfamiliar texts boosts the students’ confidence in their own ability to make sense of poetic texts without the help of ‘secondary’ resources. Additionally, such stylistic analyses enable the students to be more explicit about the subtleties of language usage (Clark and Zyngier, 2003).

The students get an insight into the working of the English language, that is, how writers exploit the communicative potential of language in the expression of their individual perceptions of reality (Widdowson 1992). But language development is not the ultimate aim of these stylisticians. The analytic skills involved in the reading of texts and the communicative skills, writing skills in particular, that get sharpened and refined are seen as a ‘by-product’ which is welcome but which “does not provide the main aim or reason for teaching stylistics” (Clark and Zyngier, p. 341).

While Widdowson, Carter, Brumfit and others argue for the use of stylistic analyses as a teaching aid in the teaching of strategies for interpretation, there are others like Alan Maley and Alan Duff whose aim is to “use” literature to improve language competence. Duff and Maley (1990) share the belief that students need to be actively engaged in the discussion of meaning and that the text, not information about it, is of central importance, but the primary aim of their approach is “quite simply to use literary texts as a resource … for stimulating language activities” (p. 5 [my emphasis]). The former view aims at the teaching of literary texts through the analysis of language while the latter view, that of Maley and Duff, aims at the teaching of language through literature. In the former view, literature is at the center and knowledge of language serves as a pedagogical aid; in the latter, however, language is at the center and literature is used as a resource for stimulating activities. The objective of the former group is enhancing the students’ literary competence and enabling them to read literature on their own. The proponents of the second view aim at improving language skills through the use of literary texts.

The present study embraces the earlier view but does not reject the latter view altogether. The improvement of language skills is one of the aims why students join the English departments but it should not be allowed to override all others. While
literature provides ample opportunities for improving language skills, it also provides equally ample opportunities for the all-round development of character. It teaches the students, though not always directly, how to make the right decisions by showing them how other people have taken similar decisions and the effects of those decisions. It also exposes students to different cultures and sub-cultures and enlarges their horizon by taking them out of the rigid boundaries of their cultures into the world at large. It urges readers to tolerate cultural differences and accept, without having to agree with, others’ views on common experiences. All these benefits and many others will be denied if we simply ‘use’ literature to teach language. Besides, exclusive concern with teaching language skills could bring university English departments down to the level of vocational training centers. This study, therefore, embraces the view that literature should be taught for what it has to offer and the linguistic benefits that are acquired as spin-offs from this stylistic approach are indeed a welcome bonus.

**Research on the Teaching of English Literature to Arabic-speaking Students**

A number of studies in the Arab world have investigated the perceptions of students towards English literature and attempted to introduce alternative methodologies. The following review considers five PhD theses all of which deal with the teaching of literature to Arab students. Two of these five research works were done in the context of Saudi Arabia, one in Gaza strip, one in Oman and one in Yemen.

Mansouri (1988) identifies the students and the teachers’ perceptions, in Saudi Arabian universities, of the most successful and least successful methodologies of teaching/learning English language and literature. The study samples 727 students and 59 teaching staff from four educational institutions, namely, King Abdul-Aziz University, King Saud University, Umm Al-Qurah University and Jeddah’s College for Women. The conclusions of the study suggest that the students “suffer from limited variations of teaching methodologies” (p. 122) and that the program reflects “a traditional teaching atmosphere where the lecture method is the most frequent method of teaching” (p. 123). Mansouri recommends that “training in instruction and methodology should be provided to present and future English faculty members” (p. 124) and that “faculty members should adapt, modify, and supplement educational materials to suit the needs of the students and to suit personal teaching style” (p. 125). The study,
however, stops at the level of description and does not attempt to suggest any alternative methodologies.

Twelve years later, Keshta carried out another study to examine the perceptions of students in Gaza strip, who were candidates for a BA degree in English, toward English literature. Specifically, the study investigates the perceptions of students toward English drama and short stories with respect to: (a) teaching approaches and strategies, (b) specific problems, (c) benefits, and (d) reasons for studying literature. Keshta (2000) reports that the majority of the students were unhappy with the current methodology and wanted to be involved more actively in the discussions. The students, whose main learning objective was to find jobs, complained that the prescribed texts were long and thematically complex. The study recommends that methodologies must aim to “develop learner autonomy among the students” (p. 129) and that the instructors “must build on the English literature students’ previous knowledge, experience, beliefs, and ideas” (p. 125). The study also recommends “modern” texts which are “linguistically appropriate” (p. 125) and the inclusion of “literature written by native Middle Eastern authors” (p. 124). At the same time, the study recommends “multicultural literary texts” and a “shift from the teaching of just literature to the teaching of culture and literature” (p. 125). Interestingly, the one thing that the study would not recommend is the teaching of poetry. Keshta observes that,

The intense study of poetry (especially in the early stages of language development) is often detrimental to the total language development of the student because it creates a negative attitude towards poetry as a genre and often English literature in general. (p. 124)

Like Mansouri, Keshta does not go beyond ‘diagnosis’. The development of appropriate pedagogical approaches remains ‘a recommendation for further study’.

Shahata (1990) is more specific and more relevant. The purpose of the study was to “determine the relative effectiveness of the response-based method compared to the traditional method in increasing self-engagement with poetry and improving attitudes toward poetry in an advanced level EFL sample” (p. 3). Seven poems were taught to 30 college level students of English in Saudi Arabia. The study applied the separate sample pre-test/post-test design. The findings are interesting. The study records no significant differences in the students’ engagement with poetry prior to and after being taught with the response-based methodology, and no significant
differences in the students’ attitude towards poetry prior to and after being taught with
the response-based method. Shahata attributes the apparent resentment of some
students to the ‘new’ methodology to two reasons: (a) the students were not given
enough time to get accustomed to the new method, and (b) the sample was small. The
study recommends carrying out the same experiment on a larger sample and over a
longer period of time than two weeks so that “students have adequate time to shake
off traditional habits of reading and become more familiar with the response-based
method” (p. 96).

More recently, Al-Mahrooqi (2003) carried out a similar experiment. The
main objective of the study, however, is to determine, using reader response
techniques, how both the cultural and linguistic orientations of Omani female college
students who are majoring in English influence their comprehension and response to
short stories containing familiar and less familiar cultural and linguistic content. The
study used three instruments of data collection, namely, eliciting the free responses of
the participants, a reflection task and personal interviews. The findings of the study
suggest that the influence of familiarity with culture on the responses of the
participants is more salient than the influence of familiarity with language. Regardless
of the level of linguistic difficulty, the students were more confident and expansive
when they were reading the Arabic culture stories than when they were reading the
American culture stories. Al-Mahrooqi designates Arabic cultures as “shame cultures”
which are “community oriented” (p. 244). As members of these cultures, Arab
students cannot identify with texts containing ‘alien’ cultural values. The students
“omitted aspects of the American culture stories or did not talk about them in details”
(p. 251). The study suggests involving the students in the process of selecting
material, either by asking them directly about the topics of their interest or through
conducting a needs analysis survey. The driving concern here is that the selected texts
present familiar cultural content and that the teaching views the students’ world
knowledge as “a reservoir of knowledge that teachers can draw upon and use as the
basis for initial discussions” (pp. 253-254). The study warns against restricting the
teaching of literature to linguistic benefits and recommends the direct teaching of
culture.

Moharram (1997) is even more relevant. The study offers a critique of the
teaching of English literature to undergraduate students pursuing a bachelor degree in
English education at Taiz University. Moharram, however, is more concerned about
the “use of literature in the EFL classes” (p. 139 [my emphasis]) than with teaching literature per se. Her more immediate concern is the use of literature “in the development of the Yemeni students’ communicative competence” (p. 140). Moharram observes that the literary texts taught are “accidently [sic] chosen and unsystematically introduced” and therefore cannot expand “the communicative scope of foreign language teaching” (p. 139). The study cites ‘four’ exam questions from four different literature exam papers and concludes that the literature exams “have the effect of restricting the range of students reading to the information and knowledge which is necessary to pass their examination” (p. 149). The most important conclusion of the study, according to Moharram, is that literature has a “tremendous educational potential” (p. 139) for language classes in Yemen and in other similar contexts and that this potential will not be realized unless literature is systematically integrated in the study of foreign language. The study makes a number of recommendations. It recommends selecting texts which “present themes that are interesting for the learners as well as relevant to their daily life” (p. 143 [my emphasis]). The selected texts should then be ‘adapted’ in order to “minimize students’ difficulties in learning the foreign language as far as possible” (p. 141). True to her ‘use-of-literature’ approach, Moharram recommends ‘controlling’ the linguistic complexity and cultural content of the selected texts. Vocabulary items and sentence structures “should be taught before the students are introduced to the prescribed literary texts”, while cultural content should be presented “gradually” (p. 142). The text selectors should also consider “the age, level, and range of experience of the students” (p. 144) and the selected material should “set up contexts in which learners can express themselves” (p. 143). The study also recommends providing training to the teachers because “without the support of teachers, the curriculum will not succeed” (p. 145). The system of examination should also be changed. Moharram recommends a balance between the more traditional questions and additional language-based questions. While all these are ‘practical’ recommendations, nothing is practically offered. The researcher makes a ‘diagnosis’ and gives a ‘prescription’ but no medication is actually offered.

The present study fills many voids left by the previous researches. Only one of the previous studies has focused specifically on poetry. The present study is an extension of that research orientation. The study investigates the undergraduate students’ perceptions of text selection, methodology and exam questions. Only one of the previous studies, namely, Moharram (1997), included all three elements. But
while Moharram based her observations and conclusions on her personal experience, the researcher, who is also a staff member at the same university, makes a first-hand analysis by verifying his personal experience with four different research instruments. Besides the Student and Teacher Questionnaires, the study makes a detailed and systematic examination of 18 different poetry exam papers and of 27 students’ answer books. The results of this examination are used to ‘verify’ the responses made by teachers and students to the items of the questionnaires, and the three instruments together make valid the conclusions arrived at by the study. None of the other studies uses these ‘verification’ instruments, either. All the investigations into the students’ perceptions of methodologies use only pre-tests, questionnaires and survey designs as instruments of data collection.

Additionally, only two of the previous studies propose alternative methodologies, and the two propose the same alternative, namely, a response-based method inspired by reader response theories. The present study proposes a stylistic methodology. In addition to trialing the methodology, the researcher designed a post-test, to be filled in by the participant students, and an Observer Questionnaire, to be filled in by two faculty members observing the methodology in practice. Both these instruments have not been used in the previous studies. All these additions to existing research in this area give the study a place in the literature on teaching English literature to Arabic-speaking undergraduate students.

Summary

The review presented in this chapter has focused on the most relevant issues in the literature on stylistics and the teaching of poetry. The review has covered such issues as the nature of poetic communication, major approaches to the teaching of poetry and the major trends in stylistics and their pedagogical relevance for the poetry classroom. The review has also examined previous research relevant to the present study. The theoretical assumptions and operational framework of the study, however, will be detailed later in the fourth chapter. This review provides a theoretical background to the rest of the issues discussed in the subsequent chapters of this study. The next chapter details the state of the art at Taiz University, Yemen, with regard to the teaching and learning of English poetry.