

READING A NOVEL EFFECTIVELY

by Prof. Raj Kumar Verma
Professor, Department of English
Sri Aurobindo College
University of Delhi

This lecture is devoted to practical aspects of reading a novel. All of us have first hand experience of reading novels and sometimes also first time experience of seeing a movie based upon read text. So many examples can be at hand – ‘Gone With the Wind’, R.K.Narayan’s ‘The Guide’ etc. And of course recently ‘The Kite Maker’ which has been converted into a quite successful movie. Now if a student is asked that out of the two mediums which one does he or she relates to better. Without any doubt the student is going to speak in favour of the movie. The visual aspect of a film obviously makes you understand a story better. It makes you to remember it for longer and better. Despite that preference which everyone is likely to have my contention is that reading a novel instead of watching a movie based upon that novel is certainly a better option. It is a better option because it triggers your imagination. Whereas, the medium of a movie by its very nature will define, will limit one’s imagination. A novel will evoke your feelings, it will evoke your emotions, and as a result work as a help to activation of your imaginative faculties. Naturally for the time being your understanding of a text, your relation- your capability to relate with the print medium is certainly going to be better. The only thing is as you move along time after having watched a movie and after having read a text. As you move along time it seems that the first medium- The movie medium has a longer lasting impression upon you. It is because of that graphic nature of the thing. That helps you to retain it in your memory for longer. And it is because of that we think movie to be a preferable medium.

Now that being the case, can there be certain exercises, can there be a technique which can help you to retain the graphicality of a story for a longer duration, even though you may have read it as text. This lecture is an attempt to help student retain that graphicality which is of crucial significance, that I wish to provide about effectively reading a novel. I hope are going to be of some use to a beginner. A beginner, who had read novels earlier as well but who has not done it as an academic exercise. I speak from the vantage point of my own experience. This is what I developed for my own benefit when I started as a student of literature. I developed these tips over a period of time and hence I am hopeful they will be of some help to anybody who wishes to launch himself into literary studies as a formal student. Normally, we think that a novel is a text which is to be read over long periods of time. By long periods of time I mean to say over continuous stretches. So, that you are able to finish of the story as soon as possible. The entire effort thus becomes an oral one, granted that for the sake of driving pleasure from a text it may be advice able to sit over long stretches of time and to finish a story as quickly as possible. But as an academic exercise the oral effort is not going to be of that much utility to you as you would like it to be. That is why as an

academic exercise it is better to read a novel, alongside taking notes. Notes, which you gradually will learn what to note down, how much to note down, what to leave a side and so on. If you wish to read a novel of let me say of about 300 pages, your effort should be to take notes in two broad parts- approximately of 10 pages length. Out of which five or six pages are devoted to small jottings and other five or four pages are devoted to preparing a summery. A summary of events .Now if you are to compress- let me speak of the letter aspect. If you are to compress a story of some 300 pages into a summary of four and five pages, obviously you know how mush to reduce. You have to retain roughly one and a half percent of the whole story. One possible way there of course is to write down the whole summery at the end of the text, after you have done with the whole text or a better way would be to keep summarising in a paragraph every one or couple of chapters. Let me say if a chapter is of 30 pages length then of course you can very well summarise it in one paragraph. If it is of a smaller length obviously you can combine more than one chapter, so that you stick to your basic length. Now this exercise is going to help you to retain graphic connections with story for a long period of time. How long period of time? Normally we think that we should be able to retain the salient features of a story by the end of the year at least .When we come to attempt our examinations. Yes, that may be our immediate purpose. But if you jot down the story in those 4 or 5 pages, that immediate purpose is certainly taken care off. What additionally is taken care of is that you can return to that story time and again. For so many different purposes, later on in life. As formal student of literature, many of you would be later on required to appear for interviews of different sorts. Where you may be expected to exhibit all that you have learnt and all that you are required to retain. Naturally if you want to come back to a story and why it is that in interviews and situations like that you are required to discuss these texts.

We are likely to be required to discuss these texts because as prescribe texts they are very often works of canonical significance. There are very often works that have been milestones .That have left a permanent footprint. Your interviewers are quite likely to be familiar with those texts and hence they can easily relate to them. They can serve as common ground along which you are required to truch . But obviously by the time you are at a stage where you are appearing for interviews, may be you will need to retain a 100 such stories in your mind, may be even more. Retaining them otherwise in your mind weather you have seen them as movies or weather you have read them as text, is not going to be an easy task. The best way is that before such a situation, if you have prepared those summaries in your hand, you can return to those 400 pages any day. Even if you have posity of time and refresh those 100s of texts and use them effectively for your requirements, for your professional success. That is one aspect. What I mean to say is that when you jot down summery don't be bogged by this idea that it consume so much of time. Yes, it does consume a lot of time. But it is not time consumed, I would rather call it time invested. It will save you so much of time later on. It will save you so much of confusion, so much of dissipation, so much of doubts later on in your careers for years to come. That is one gain that we as beginners are not aware of.

Now I come to the second aspect of jotting down small notes in another 5 or 6 pages. It is these notes that are going to be of immediate help throughout the year to us. When we prepare a text for writing our questions because by the time you come to prepare your questions for your exams, the aspect of the story will certainly be there in your mind. But certain minute details, which will help you to write a pointed answer, would have gone out of your mind. If you have those small jotting down, you can refer to them quickly. You know the page number where a particular turn of events happens. You can quickly with the help of that jotting down go back to a text and read the relevant portion without wasting much time. If you haven't got those notes naturally you will feel like rummaging through the text. Rummaging for a small fact, which is tentatively there in your mind but which you need to be more specific about. And you are not clear where that particular fact is hidden in the text. If you have to rummage through the text at that point, it is going to be a dissipating exercise. It is going to be an exercise that is going to be punishing, that will discourage you, and that will make you feel that formal reading of literature is a daunting, unrewarding, boring task.

Now let me come to more specifics. What to jot down? How much to jot down? One important aspect of reading a novel is reading about individual characters that do a lot, characters that behave typically, characters that behave unexpectedly. You may require to attempt their character sketch. But salient features of their character are likely to be scattered. If it is a salient character those salient features are likely to be scattered all over the text.

One important aspect is if you keep making small phrasal notes about a character's behaviour- his behaviour in loneliness, his behaviour with close acquaintances, his or her behaviour with unknown people, his behaviour in familiar situations and behaviour in unfamiliar new places, new situations. All of this defines salient features of a character. As you move along a text keep making small notes- Page number 7, unexpected aggressive behaviour, page number 46 depressive moods, page number so and so given favourable circumstances, cooperative. And by the time you will come to the end of the text you will realise you have noted down may be 50 characteristics of that particular person. Now with those 50 characteristics you can easily club them together into 4, 5, 6 main behaviour types. And based upon those main behaviour types you can very well develop your own question on your own without getting bogged down, without ever feeling that it was a tough tasking. You would rather find it enjoyable, rewarding activity. When making notes about character also be complimentary the way the attitude that the writer has to the character. Whether the attitude is patronising, whether the attitude is neutral, whether it is critical and so on.

Similarly you would be making small notes about minor characters as well. And those notes will ultimately help you to attempt effective characterisation skill overall. After all when a novel is written, it may be devoted primarily to a few characters or it may be devoted probably to a large number of characters. If it is devoted to a large number of characters, not all of them can be of similar kind of significance. Now if you have noted down those small characteristics of minor

characters, then by comparing those characteristics you will come to know what is the range of the novelist about presenting characters.

When preparing your notes you should also a trace of the movement of time in the story. How much time in which the story is covered? What are the points when a shift in time takes place? And that shift in time takes place is it accompanied by a consequent shift in attitudes, reaction, behaviour etc as well. So, keeping a trace of time, you can of course devote may be half a page, one fourth of a page to the movement of time and then of course when you jot down those movement of time, you realise that sometimes a story is developed linearly. Sometimes, the novelists are knowingly playing with time, shifting forward and backward in time.

All such jotting will then help you to write about the style of the novelist. One important aspect in your notes should be the narrative person of the story. Novelists can choose to depict people through their own eyes or they can choose to present them through the character's own reaction in the first person. The novelist may remove himself from the scene all together- May remove himself as a mediator between the reader and the character. And let the character themselves do their speaking. The novelist may also choose to present a character speaking to one self and alternatively interacting with others. Being aware of these two aspects, you can than decide what sort of a person does the novelist depicts, somebody who is upright, somebody who is on the learning curve, somebody who is cocksure, who gives concessions to oneself but is exacting towards others and so on.

The narrative strategy of the novel is certainly going to help you to know what sort of story is being presented to you. Then of course the beginning of a work of fiction will always introduce the area that novelist want to pro. It will raise all those questions, all those propositions that are later on analysed, that are later on added to, commented upon and so on. So, in the beginning your small notes should contain the sort of problems, query, questions that are being raised. And later on in the middle part of the novel, you will then see that how those questions, those observations, how those are settled. Weather all of them are settled systematically, all of them are taken along later on as well or the novelist forgets to satisfactorily deal with certain proposition that have been initially made. And then this middle of the novel, which will of course raise the level of the complexity of the story.

Finally effort should be made at noting down that how these complexities are resolved. Weather they are resolved through cause and effect depictions, whether they are resolved through the intervention of the fate, whether they are resolved through human or supernatural agency or they are altogether left unresolved.

If they are left unresolved- why so? Does the text itself represent any evidence that there being left unresolved is synchronous with the purposes of the novelist. Or has the novelist failed in handling

the issues that he or she has raised. One immediate example here can be which has been so much discussed about. George Eliot's Melinda Flo's. It has been time and again said when the novelist could not handle the complexities of her character she all of a sudden decided to deal a deadly blow to the character and end the story suddenly without justification.

There are also others, there are critics who differ with this opinion and present alternative internal evidence. Whereby they say that no, apparently it may not have been visible but this is bound to happen.

If you have made those small notes, when such big events takes place, your small notes are going to be your guide line along which you can walk back once again and trace the developments very systematically without being pert up the least.

Of course as you start developing your notes, you will start realising that there are other factors also which needs to be noted down. There are somethings, which are superfluous. Which don't help, your wider understanding of the text. But there are certain other things, which you have missed out, which you should have taken care of .If you start making small notes, let me tell you that your next effort, at reading the next novel is certainly going to be a better one than the previous one.

One thing, which every beginner is bound to face, is the question of vocabulary. When we start reading a novel, as a beginners, we are likely to come across a lot of new words. Now, if we ignore the words, chances are that our understanding of the text is going to be compromised. On the contrary if we start consulting the dictionary for every new word that you come across, it is going to be counter-productive to our understanding of the text because it is going to slow down our reading to slow it down to considerable levels and then to present so many breaks in it. For Example a novel can present up to 600 new words, for a beginner. Now consulting the meaning and then writing down those meanings of 600 words, is obviously going to require more effort, more time than the reading of the text itself requires. So dealing with the question of vocabulary is an important aspect. My suggestion her is that not all vocabulary is going to be really useful for you. One reason for that simply may be that a lot of vocabulary may have got jettied. A novel that is written a hundred and fifty years ago, a lot of words may be of simply academic interest. They may not be useful for you in your day today academic work or in your day to day interactions. One suggestion than can be, you gloss over as many words as possible, just trying to pick the meaning from the context. But none-the-less there are bound to be certain words on which a meaning or may be a whole paragraph hinges. So there is no way you can ignore such words for such words, it is always better to keep a dictionary alongside while reading the text, and may be allowed out of these possible 600 interruptions around sixty i.e.10 percent of the total. That means that may be every two or three pages you should be considering a word or two or vocabulary, duly consulting its meaning as well as noting it down for future reference.

Now, noting it down again requires a bit of effort, it may be wasteful of time, or it may seem to be wasteful of time. But in the long run you will realise that more such words that you note down from your hand, later on they are going to add to your store house of vocabulary and are going to make your later readings as easier. So your effort here is going to be proportionate to the rewards. Obviously it depends on the level of effort you want to make here.

One aspect while reading a novel, may be dealing with the syntax. When my students whom I always goad, to come with the first hand reading of the text. When they approach me, very often they tell me especially for works that were written somewhere back in time, may be in the 19th century. A lot of syntax defined difficult to understand, to follow.

My suggestion for my student here is that don't be bothered to much about syntax. Don't get bog down over individual expressions, over particular phrases, over idiosyncrasies. Even by ignoring them you will still be able to get the wider meaning of what the novelist wants to say. And that is what your purpose, your aim should be. To bring the talk to a conclusion I can say that your effort in reading a text is going to be commensurate with your rewards. The more effort you put in, the better are going to be your reward. And as I told you that these rewards are not merely short term. These rewards may be long term and they may be of recurring nature. They stand by you at crucial juncture of your academic life.

Hence, it is advice able while reading text of a novel to put in as much effort as you can. Even if that means that you have to exert yourself. Even if that means that you have to compromise with the pleasure of your reading to an extent.