Making Lit a Hit: Using the BRAIN when Teaching Literature in an ESL or EFL Context

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Abstract

The Traditional Literary-Critical Method (TLCM) of literature teaching involves rote memorization of interpretations by literary critics and facts about the texts at hand (Afsar, 2011). Such a pedagogical approach can be disempowering since it does not help students develop their reading proficiency, develop critical thinking, relate to the socio-cultural context present in the text, or contextualize their interpretations. To help literature educators keep their lessons empowering and relevant, guidelines called the BRAIN (an acronym that stands for Balanced, Relevant, Appropriate, Integrated, and Nurturing) were developed by this writer for teaching literature. This innovation is a combination of the pedagogical principles identified by scholars as instrumental to effective literature teaching. Such principles are demonstrated through the lesson plan found at the end of the paper (see Appendix 1).

Introduction

The Traditional Literary-Critical Method (TLCM)

When the field of English studies was still at its dawn in the eighteenth century, no distinction was made between literature and language teaching (Bagherkazemi & Alemi, 2010). At the same time, this area of academic interest was taught only to native speakers of English, with the goal to introduce what the nineteenth century literary critic Matthew Arnold calls the best that has been said and thought in the world in order to redeem the English society from the moral evils of their day (Eagleton, 1983). During this period, language was taught using the grammar translation method (Brown, 1993), which involved the memorization of grammar rules derived from observing language samples from literature classics. At the same time, the literary texts themselves were studied using the Traditional Literary-Critical Method (TLCM), by which instructors appealed to the texts’ moral dimensions and discussed what many literary scholars had said about the texts, including the
contexts in which they were created (Afsar, 2011). Thus, traditionally, literature teaching in the context of English studies did not aim to improve students’ communicative competence (Bagherkazemi & Alemi, 2010) since most of these students were already native speakers of English; it only sought to inculcate students with knowledge about the texts (Carter & Long, 1991).

Nonetheless, as the field of language teaching developed and spread globally, language and literature began to be taught as two separate subjects. Language courses were taught in order to enable students to effectively use and communicate using the English language, while literature courses were still taught using TLCM. Thus, when literature teaching was carried over to English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, it often constituted the memorization of facts about texts, authors, and commentaries made by literary critics. According to Afsar (2011), such an approach mainly gives students “a set of ready-made judgments for rote-learning" (p. 316). It is “a method aimed exclusively at preparing students to get through the examinations rather than developing language skills or literary competence of the students" (p. 315). This is similar to what Freire (1970) calls “the banking model of education,” a paradigm in which the teacher is seen as a depositor of knowledge to students who are presumably perceived as empty vessels that need to be filled.

TLCM may cater well to the needs of literature majors since its main goal is to transfer years of literature scholarship into the minds of the students. When it is used in ESL and EFL classes, however, this approach can actually be dis-empowering. In these contexts, the main goal for the typical university student in studying English is to improve communication skills in order to effectively adapt to a target environment in the case of travel or migration or to succeed in a new academic setting (Johnson, 2001). The problem for many students though is that knowing facts about literature and reading canonical texts does not necessarily translate into better language proficiency. Such proficiency is needed not only to understand and interpret the texts these same students may encounter in class (Afsar, 2011) but also to effectively use the target language in real-life settings. Thus, the use of TLCM can be seen as ironic because, if literature courses are taught in such a manner, this could potentially impede the students’ language learning rather than improve it. In addition, instead of putting a text under intense literary scrutiny, students might tend to passively accept the interpretations of
literary scholars while only having passing an examination in mind. What students actually need in order to develop better language proficiency, however, is a language-based model of studying literature that will enable them to both understand the linguistic nuances of a given text and derive meaning from it (Bagherkazemi & Alemi, 2010).

Moreover, the traditional approach to literature teaching when used in an ESL or EFL context does not establish a connection between the text’s context and the students’ prior knowledge. In the aforementioned approach, the students’ prior knowledge, which is very crucial in developing the students’ analytical skills used in exploring a text (Sandler & Hammond, 2012), is not activated or nurtured through scaffolding, a pedagogical strategy in which a teacher builds upon the students’ schemata through the artful setting of prior tasks and inquiry. As a result, the experience of studying literature does not necessarily become enriching for students because they may not be able to tap into their prior knowledge and relate to the world of the text. In such a case, meaningful learning may not take place since students are not encouraged to explore the world of the text and its sociocultural milieu. Connecting their reading with their respective contexts may prove difficult since they may not be able to “strategically check the text against their existing bank of images, associations, ideas, and information” (Sandler & Hammond, 2012, p. 60).

Unfortunately, TLCM has been adopted as a teaching philosophy in literature teaching in both ESL and EFL classrooms, which are the main types of English classrooms in Asia. This defeats the pedagogical purposes of using literature to teach ESL and EFL students, which are to provide students with authentic texts that they can read and analyze to improve their proficiency, to give them opportunities to analyze language set in real-world contexts, and to familiarize them with different varieties of English (Afsar, 2011). Using literary texts in a language classroom also exposes students to the cultures represented by such texts and provides avenues for personal growth (Carter & Long, 1991).

**The BRAIN framework**

If studying literature is to be empowering for ESL and EFL learners, it should not simply entail an unearthing of what others have said about certain texts, but rather, it should widen “learners’ understanding of their own and other cultures, create opportunities for personal expression and reinforce learners’ linguistic knowledge” (Divsar & Tahriri, 2009, p. 106).
With this end in mind, ESL and EFL educators should make a conscious effort to maximize the opportunities a text presents by exploiting its cultural value, the linguistic elements featured in it, and the life lessons it communicates. Through this alternative approach, literature teaching becomes very much alive and dynamic since it provides students with an opportunity to learn more about the world, language, and themselves through an active engagement with the text at hand.

To address such a need, I would like to propose a literature teaching checklist to help literature teachers in ESL and EFL contexts make their pedagogy truly meaningful and enriching for their students. For literature pedagogy in these contexts to be effective, it should be BRAIN – that is, Balanced, Relevant, Appropriate, Integrated, and Nurturing. The formulation of this framework of principles is an attempt to synthesize what many scholars believe to be effective literature teaching practices. Each respective principle of literature teaching reflected in the BRAIN approach will be discussed in the following subsections of this paper. At the end of each section, I will explain how it can be applied in the teaching of Rabindranath Tagore’s *The Man from Kabul*, an Indian text.

**B – Balanced**

Carter and Long (1991) identified three models that frequently underlie the teaching of literature in an ESL or EFL context. These are:

- the linguistic model - gives attention to the language features of a text;
- the cultural model - focuses on the cultural elements reflected in the text;
- the personal growth model - places importance on how students personally relate to the text.

These models are not mutually exclusive, although there is often a tendency for teachers to favor one model over the others depending on their bias. This, however, should not be the case. Literature teaching should strive to be balanced and integrated because language and culture are inseparable, interactive, and interdependent (Damen, 1986; Divsar & Tahriri, 2009; Kaplan, 1986). In literature, culture is represented through the language devices employed in the text, and the reader is the one in-charge of decoding and personally responding to whatever the text communicates.
Given such a premise, teachers of literature should consciously balance all three models when presenting a text to their students. Being skewed in favor of one model can undermine the richness of the text being studied. For instance, if one gives too much attention to the text’s language, the sociocultural milieu from which it originated might be largely ignored. If such is the case, then the students might fail to appreciate the text in light of the context from which it came, thus retaining an incomplete picture of the selection’s significance. Similarly, if too much attention is given to the cultural model, then the objective of developing the students’ reading proficiency and critical literacy might be left unfulfilled. Again, this is an extreme to be avoided since one of the main objectives of using a literary text in an ESL or EFL classroom is to develop the students’ language proficiency. In the same manner, giving too much attention to personal growth might lead readers to largely neglect the linguistic and cultural elements of the text, which are, in the first place, what constitute its very core.

The lesson plan for *The Man from Kabul* (see Appendix 1) illustrates how all three models can be present in the treatment of one text. To help develop the students’ reading proficiency, which is under the language component, worksheets and guide questions that will aid in their reading and involvement with the text were formulated (see Appendix 2). As they read the text, the students will encounter South Asian and Middle Eastern cultural elements; at this juncture, the teacher can guide the discussion into the sociocultural background in which the text is set so that the students can better appreciate its message. Finally, for a post reading activity, students will be asked to write a composition on parenthood. This activity contributes to the personal growth of the students by allowing them to examine the notions of parenthood found vis-à-vis the text and their own ideas about the topic.

**R – Relevant**

Fernandez (1998) strongly asserts the centrality of culture in the classroom. We teach within a cultural context, the texts we use come from a cultural context, and even the students’ cultural contexts greatly vary. It is the literature teacher’s task to make these cultures relevant and accessible to every individual in the classroom. If this is not done, students might not be able to fully appreciate a text’s cultural nuances. With the help of an effective teacher, literature serves to bridge not only writers and readers, but peoples and cultures as well.
In response to such a situation, literature teachers should adopt a culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) in their classrooms. CRP urges educators to set aside their prejudices and make the classroom environment welcoming for students from different cultural backgrounds (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). This framework has been formulated as a response to the need of teachers in the United States, a multicultural society, to introduce students to new cultures while maintaining their own. Ladson-Billings (1995) enumerates the three propositions of this framework:

1. students must experience academic success – academic skills such as literacy, numeracy, technological, social, and political skills need to be attained by the students in order to become productive members of the society regardless of their ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

2. students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence – this happens when teachers use the students’ cultural backgrounds as the vehicle for learning; this includes teachers’ encouraging students to exercise various modes of cultural expression such as allowing them to wear outfits characteristic of their background or bring in music, poetry, and other interests into the language classroom.

3. students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the current status quo of the social order – students are encouraged to develop a sociopolitical awareness which enables them to critique norms and conventions that promote social inequity.

The principles of CRP have been used in designing the lesson plan for The Man from Kabul.

The lesson begins with a contemporary song presumably familiar to all or at least most of the members of the class, and connects the ideas found there to those of Rabindranath Tagore, an Indian writer and mystic (1861-1941). This activity both taps into the students’ prior knowledge and makes them aware of their current cultural context, thus setting the stage for comparing the milieu in which they belong with the one presented in the text.

In the body of the lesson, students will be asked to closely read The Man from Kabul and encouraged to practice their reading skills. Through scrutiny of the text, students will be engaged in the act of meaning-making, a process enabling them to gain more knowledge of the text (Carter & Long, 1991). This activity addresses the academic component of CRP.
In the lesson there will also be several opportunities for students to ask culture-bridging questions as a corollary to the ones stipulated in the lesson plan. For instance, in answering the second worksheet, the students might notice that although Mini is still a teenager, her wedding has already been arranged by her parents. For many contemporary Asian readers who will probably get to choose their own spouses – and only get married when they already have a stable source of income – this situation would raise certain questions regarding Indian culture, such as why Mini should be married despite her still being a teenager, and why her parents were the ones who arranged her wedding. This addresses the cultural component of the CRP.

The teacher can use the discussion opportunity as a juncture to discuss Indian culture and juxtapose it with the students’ own, in this way making the lesson more relevant to the students. Do the students belong to a society where arranged marriage is not practiced? If this is the case, then the lesson becomes an opportunity for them to learn about the cultural practices of other peoples. Or do the students happen to belong to an Asian culture where arranged marriage is still being practiced? If so, then the text becomes all the more relevant since it validates the students’ shared experiences. In both cases, however, the teacher should take the discussion to a higher level and ask the students to examine if such a practice promotes social inequity or empowers the marginalized, and if it is the former, ask them to imagine a better world for themselves and the future generations and suggest practical ways of realizing it. It is through this activity that the students’ critical consciousness is developed.

A – Appropriate
Lazar (1993) enumerates three criteria for evaluating the appropriateness of a text to be utilized in a literature classroom. All three have to be considered to determine whether a text is accessible to a particular group of students. These three criteria are (adapted from Lazar, 1993):

- **The Students’ Cultural Background:** Is the culture presented in the text too distant from the culture of the students? Are there too many cultural symbols unfamiliar to the students? If the answer to these questions is “yes,” then the teacher might want to reconsider whether a text should still be taught or not. If she still chooses to use the text in her class, she has to make sure that she will help the students navigate through such cultural complexities by providing them with cultural references familiar to them.
If not, the students will not be able to fully appreciate and understand the text at hand. For instance, the novels *Wuthering Heights* and *Pride and Prejudice*, and *The Scarlet Letter*, represent Western culture, specifically British and American, respectively, from the 18th and 19th centuries, which today may be alien to Asian students.

- **The Students’ Linguistic Competence**: Will the students understand the language of the text? Is the formation of the sentences too complex for the students to understand? Did the author use too many difficult words in the text? There are instances when the language of the text may be too unconventional for the students to understand. In such a situation, the teacher has to rethink whether her students would be able to access such texts. Once again, the novels *Wuthering Heights*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *The Scarlet Letter* present a style of English no longer in use today. The teacher might want to rethink whether texts will be linguistically appropriate for her students.

- **The Students’ Literary Background**: Another important question to ask is whether students are able to understand texts that bear deeper meanings. There may be texts too difficult for students to understand because they contain several symbols unfamiliar to students. Examples of these include works of Shakespeare and other poets from the 16th through the 19th centuries. If pieces like these are still to be taught, then the teacher should explain the allusions present in them so that the students will be able to fully appreciate them.

*The Man from Kabul* is a text that is very accessible to ESL and EFL students. Since the plot takes place in India and features the Indian sociocultural milieu, there are clear points of commonality and difference between it and the milieu of other Asian nations. Discussing the story can be an opportunity for students to identify the similarities and differences between their culture and that of India and try to distinguish the elements that are uniquely Indian (or Afghan) from others. Aside from this, one main theme of the text is fatherhood, which is relevant to everyone. The use of such a theme is especially potent in the Asian context since a father is typically afforded the utmost respect by his children and families are often closely knit. If a student grew up without a father’s presence, he would still be able to relate to the text since his loss of a father is also discussed in the text. Lastly, the language is also contemporary and straightforward, making the text very accessible for contemporary readers especially for Asian ESL and EFL learners who might still be struggling with English.
I – Integrated
Integration involves the teaching of literature to ESL and EFL students using the principle of language-literature interfacing. This means that a literary text should be viewed as a vehicle through use of which second language learners can improve their linguistic competence (Ujjwala, 2013). To do this, the teacher has to direct the attention of the students to the linguistic features of a text and ask them how these features contribute to its general reading or interpretation. Examples of language-based activities in the classroom are paraphrasing, jigsaw reading, and style analysis.

How can a teacher execute this principle in the lesson on *The Man from Kabul*?

One way of doing it is by asking the students to pay careful attention to the narration of the speaker in the story to determine the correct order of events through jigsaw reading. The teacher can rewrite the key events in the story on strips of paper and ask the students to arrange them into their proper order. This activity may be used to reinforce students’ knowledge of verbs and familiarize them with the narrative mode of writing.

Furthermore, the lesson may also be used to orient the students with how adjectives function in narratives. The story largely deals with the profile of a father, so to develop such an image, adjectives are needed. The students may also take a closer look at the descriptions provided in the story, and from there, become able to develop their own.

Either way, language lessons can be created from the discussion of the literary text. In this manner, the primary goal of an ESL or EFL learner, which is to become more proficient in English is still addressed through engagement in activities related to the text being discussed.

N – Nurturing
One of the main objectives of education is to aid in the “full-flowering of the human potential” (Zhou, 2009, p.13). Likewise, Freire (1970) argues that education should be a tool for liberation and not subjugation and oppression. If these principles are to be applied in other subject areas, all the more that it should be applied to literature since literature embodies significant human experiences.
In this respect, students should be given opportunities to respond to literature either through speech or writing. Such an activity enables them to reflect on their own situation, empowering them to express their perspective to others; it may even invite them to do something about it. In this way, the study of literature is taken out of the classrooms and ultimately becomes a tool for emancipation and empowerment.

The post-reading activity of *The Man from Kabul* gives the students precisely these opportunities discussed in this paper. By letting them formulate their own opinions, they get to relate the concepts they learned in class to their day-to-day realities, thus giving them something to work on once they leave the classroom. In this manner, the teaching of literature is transformed from being a purely academic activity to being a genuinely transformative one.

**Conclusion**

The BRAIN framework of principles veers from the banking technique of teaching literature. It not only challenges students to fully exploit a text and improve their linguistic and literary competencies, but also enables them to address real-life concerns by incorporating the cultural and personal growth models in their readings and by allowing them to analyze texts that are appropriate to them. Such an approach is very adaptable because of the flexibility it lends both the students and teachers, thus making it a suitable pedagogical framework for both ESL and EFL contexts where students represent a vast range of linguistic and cultural identities. It does not rely on “official” or “correct” textual interpretations but rather, takes into consideration the students’ backgrounds and the innate characteristics of the text as a tool for improved language proficiency and cultural awareness. It also directs students to certain linguistic features of the text in order to further familiarize them with the use of the English language in the contexts provided by the text. If used in modern-day language classrooms, it can indeed be an effective tool not only for language teaching but for empowerment as well.

**References**


Appendix 1: Annotated Lesson Plan for *The Man from Kabul*

**Annotated Lesson Plan on the short story *The Man from Kabul***

Prepared by: John Daryl B. Wyson

**Interpretation:** In the short story *The Man from Kabul*, the unnamed narrator recounts the unlikely relationship that formed between his used-to-be little daughter, Mini, and Rahamat, a male vendor from Kabul. Mini found a father figure in Rahamat because he would always entertain her with jokes and stories, something that her father could not do because he was busy writing his novel. Rahamat, on the other hand, grew fond of Mini because she reminded him of his own daughter. When he was imprisoned, the contact between them dissipated. When he returned to Calcutta to see Mini after eight years in prison, the once little girl, who was now a grown up and about to get married, didn’t show fondness and affection towards him anymore probably because for the grown-up Mini, the man from Kabul was nothing but a figment of her childhood imagination.

**Literature focus:** Characterization

**Themes:** Fatherhood and change

**Teaching Context:** 2nd year science high school students in Metro Manila.

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<th>LESSON PLAN ENTRY</th>
<th>RATIONALE</th>
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| **Objectives:** By the end of the lesson, the students should be able to:  
1. Explain how the narrator and Rahamat exemplified fatherhood.  
2. Compare and contrast the young Mini with the Mini who was about to get married. | The most salient literary feature of the text is characterization. Tagore was able to explore what fatherhood is about and the deep-seated emotions that accompany it as well as how a daughter’s attitudes and perceptions change as she grows older. |
| **Pre-reading:** The students will be asked to listen to the song *Butterfly Kisses*. Then, the teacher will process their listening experience by asking the following questions:  
1. What was the song about?  
2. Who was the persona of the song?  
3. What were the sentiments of the persona? | *Butterfly Kisses* is familiar to the students. In the song, the persona is a father whose daughter is about to get married. He recalls the magical experiences he had with his daughter and expresses his lament over the fact the she would already leave him for her groom.  
The processing questions to be asked after the song are meant to give the students a preview of what fatherhood means, the main theme of *The Man from Kabul*. Thus, it would enable them to infer what the fathers in the story are like. This is important since the main focus of the story is the relationship of a father with his daughter.  
This portion also attempts to connect the students’ immediate context, or at least a context they are familiar with, with that of the text. |
While reading:
The activities and questions in the body of the lesson should help students analyze the characterizations of the narrator, Rahamat, and Mini since characterization is the most salient element of fiction featured in the story.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Establishing Questions:</th>
<th>These questions correspond to the exposition of the story. The details that will be elicited from these questions would serve as the premises from which the story is going to develop.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. When and where was the story set?</td>
<td>2. Who are the main characters in the story?</td>
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Worksheet 1: The Men in Mini’s Life
(please see the sample worksheet after this lesson plan)

**Processing Questions:**
1. Describe the narrator and Rahamat.  
2. Compare and contrast how Mini related to her father with how she related to the Kabuliwala.  
3. In your opinion, which among the two is spending more quality time with Mini? Why do you say so?  
4. Who do you think is a better father? Why?

The worksheet and processing questions are meant to help students understand the dynamics of fatherhood. On the one hand, a father has to work for a living for his family. On the other hand, he is also expected to spend quality time with his children. In the case of Mini, his biological father was very busy working to supply her needs, thus compromising the quality time her daughter expects from him. It was the Kabuliwala who provides Mini with emotional nourishment since he was the one who shares stories and jokes with her.

In this case, it doesn’t mean that the Kabuliwala is a better father either to Mini or his own daughter. Even if he does supply Mini’s emotional needs, he couldn’t provide for her basic needs. In the same way, since the Kabuliwala had to go Calcutta to work, he was largely unable to provide for the emotional needs of his own daughter.

Both fathers, however, would love to spend quality time with their respective daughters had it not been for the economic constraints that they had to address.

In doing this worksheet, the students will be able to both explore the linguistic features of the text and the cultural milieu presented in the text, thus addressing both the literature and language aspects of the material.

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<tr>
<th>Transition Questions:</th>
<th>The transition questions will help the students identify the changes in Mini’s life and her attitude towards Rahamat as a result of their parting. At this point, the students may already start inferring the possible result of</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Why did Rahamat and Mini stop seeing each other?</td>
<td>2. How did Mini’s life go after Rahamat was imprisoned?</td>
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</table>
**Worksheet 2: The Baby is now a Lady.**
(please see the sample worksheet after worksheet 1)

*Processing Questions:*
1. Compare and contrast the young Mini with the Mini who was about to get married. In what ways did Mini change?
2. What would account for the changes she has undergone?
3. What was the effect of these changes to her relationship with the Kabuliwala?
4. Had Mini’s relationship with the Kabuliwala not been broken, would she react to his presence in the wedding the same way? Why do you say so?

**Alternative Activity: Jigsaw Reading**
The teacher may write the key events (lines, phrases, sentences) in the story in separate sheets of paper and ask the students to re-arrange them according to how they transpired in the actual story.

**Synthesis Discussion:** Based on what we have learned about the narrator, Rahamat, and Mini, briefly state what you think is the main message concealed in this text.

**Post reading:**
*Option 1:*
Soon enough, all of you are going to become parents, and you would also face the challenges that the narrator and Rahamat had to grapple with.

For this reason, I would like you to write on a half sheet of pad paper your thoughts about parenthood. I would also want you to discuss the kind of parent you are going to be. You may share your insights to the class afterwards.

*Option 2:*
Write a short essay discussing whether the practice of arranged marriage should be continued or not. Provide at least three (3) examples or arguments to support your point. If you disagree with the practice, suggest ways by which the society can put a stop to it.

**For Option 1:** In response to the discussion of the text, the students will be asked to think of how they can apply the parenting principles they derived from the text. This activity will help the students relate more with the plight of the characters as well as make them realize the things they have to do to become good parents someday. Thus, this once again establishes the connection between the text and students’ contexts.

**For Option 2:** Through this activity, students will get to develop their critical consciousness by examining whether the prevalence of arranged marriage can be considered as empowering or oppressive and suggest ways of improving the living conditions of those who consider it a plight.
Appendix 2: Worksheets for *The Man from Kabul*

**Worksheet 1. The Men in Mini’s Life.** When Mini was a little girl, she had two father figures: her actual father and Rahamat, the Man from Kabul. Your task is to compare and contrast how the relationship of Mini with his father and that with Rahamat by filling out the worksheet below. Cite specific lines from the text to substantiate your answers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Young Mini’s relationship with his father</th>
<th>Young Mini’s relationship with Rahamat</th>
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**Worksheet 2. The Baby is now a Lady.** Just like all of us, Mini changed in certain ways when she became a young adult (bride). Identify what these changes are by specifying how she thought, talked, and acted as a child and the way she thought, talked, and acted when she grew a little older. You may cite specific passages (even phrases) from the text to substantiate your points.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How she thought</th>
<th>Young Mini</th>
<th>Mini as a bride</th>
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<td>How she talked</td>
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<tr>
<td>How she acted</td>
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