

# The folk song “The bridge of Arta”: bridging modern Greek literature and drama in an educational context

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## Abstract

This paper presents the creative use of dramatic tension techniques in teaching literature at secondary school level, with a specific focus on the folk song “The Bridge of Arta.” The paper describes the main principles of the Curriculum for the teaching of Literature in Secondary Education in terms of expanding the teaching of texts within the field of dramatic art. It outlines the objectives of the proposal for employing dramatic techniques in this poem and analyzes the plot of the poem. The paper then suggests applications of experiential practice to enhance the elements of dramatic tension within the literary text. Additionally, it discusses the benefits of theatrical exploration in enriching the students’ points of view.

**Keywords:** dramatic inquiring, drama techniques, folk poetry, modern Greek literature.

## Introduction - theoretical framework

According to the principle of the holistic approach in education, the student is fully engaged in the learning process through cognitive, kinesthetic and emotional abilities (Matsangouras, 2002).

The new Curriculum for the teaching of Literature in Secondary Education (2022) advocates for the broadening of the interdisciplinary approach to literary texts in connection to arts through various activities, in both the organization of the subject’s content and the didactic framework. The main components of literature lesson plans in Secondary Education (2022) include reading comprehension linked to creative writing, drama techniques, intercultural activities, and systematic book reading. Students are expected to adopt the methods and techniques of other art forms (painting, music, theatre / drama, cinema, photography), enhance the use of new technologies, and develop a global approach to literary texts.

Drama techniques play a significant role in achieving these objectives. They help readers and students immerse themselves in the world of texts, engage in creative writing, and participate in dialogues with texts and classmates. The goal is to familiarize students with the basic elements of drama techniques and dramatic inquiring, such as the use of dialogue, the division of the text into scenes, and stage directions (Curriculum for the teaching of Literature for Grades 1, 2, and 3 of Secondary School, 2022).

In the context of Theatre Pedagogy, theatrical expression and communication rely on dialectical and critical thinking, the development of psychomotor skills, the cultivation of aesthetic and artistic criteria, and the deepening of communicative ability and linguistic expression in the exploration and production of texts (Papadopoulos, 2019).

In the pedagogic method of inquiry drama, based on a stimulus (which may be a stand-alone text, written or spoken, literary or non-literary, but may not belong to any textual genre) (Papadopoulos, 2007), adolescent students are actively involved in roles and situations representative of the main canvas of a story (Papadopoulos, 2010). This

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approach aims to solve a problem or issue (Neelands, 1992) and focus on different aspects that constitute its entirety. Through taking on roles and situations, students become motivated to better understand themselves (Papadopoulos, 2007).

Given the experiential, emotional, and reflective nature of inquiry drama using drama techniques, where participants investigate, create, read, write, and listen (Papadopoulos, 2021), we believe that these techniques allow for a deeper understanding of the poetic landscape of the folk song. They give them the opportunity to immerse themselves in the space and time of the song, in order to highlight its theatrical style, develop the scenes, explore the behaviour, thoughts and relationships of the characters, identify the techniques that structure the poem and shape its literariness.

### Learning outcomes

Stone bridges, authentic creations of folk architecture, serve as a rich source of folklore material. The folk song *The bridge of Arta*<sup>1</sup> is part of the folklore of southeastern Europe (Lambrou, 2014) and exists in many variants in Greece, the Balkan peninsula, Hungary, the Black Sea coast and Asia Minor.<sup>2</sup>

The main criterion for the selection of the text is its theatrical style, which ideally allows the poetic narrative to be placed in a stage-dramatic environment (Moudatsakis, 2005). Furthermore, important elements that prove its suitability for dramatic treatment within the framework of the aims and

objectives of Theatre Pedagogy include its narrative character<sup>3</sup>, the conflicting relationships of the protagonists<sup>4</sup>, the potential of enhancing the linguistic and literary literacy of learners, as well as its intercultural dimension.

The proposed educational group for the implementation of this proposal is composed of the students of the third grade of the Greek Secondary School, as this particular folk song is included in the textbook *Texts of Modern Greek Literature for the third grade* (pp. 12-15).

Students are expected to:

- Engage experientially, through theatre, in the study of poetry (Vodickova, 2009).
- Enhance their aesthetic culture and sensitivity.
- Develop confidence and flexibility in engaging with the activities of the theatre workshop.
- Cultivate their communication skills, in the context of collaborative and experiential learning.
- Practice text transformation.

### Plot

The poem is dominated by supernatural and tragic elements, sealed by the catalytic presence of an inexorable fate (Politis, 2015). The construction of the bridge of Arta proves to be a formidable task, ultimately deemed impossible. In a punishingly repetitive manner, the bridge collapses within 24 hours of its construction and fixing, despite the continuous and fruitless efforts of the master builder, craftsmen, and apprentices.<sup>5</sup> The messenger bird in

1. In the past centuries, the construction of bridges was essential in the region of Epirus, which is characterised by numerous mountain ranges and rivers that become raging in winter. In this way, transport between different settlements was facilitated and allowed inhabitants to the areas where they worked, such as their farms and pastures. Bridges were also crucial for the business activities of Epirus merchants, who transported and sold goods by caravan to European countries.

2. For the collection and systematic study of the song's variants, including the recording of motifs present in the content of the texts and the analysis of individual elements, see. Megas, G. (1971). *The song of the bridge of Arta. Laography, Volume KZ*. Athens. In this proposal, we use the variant included in the collection by Nicolaos Politis "Selections from the Songs of Greek people" (1914), pp. 130-131.

3. According to most scholars, this work belongs to the category of narrative folk songs or ballads (in greek: paraloges). They narrate a story with clear stages (beginning, binding, development, climax, resolution), incorporating a dense plot of myth and a rapid rhythm in its development (Parisis, I. & Parisis, N., 2015).

4. "In particular, narrative poems which contain a conflict or a theme of loneliness, refusal, or a complicated relationship are very suitable because they enable students to appear in situations in which they must solve conflicts and think about relationships with people. And it is drama activities that enable them to identify with the characters and to act like them, which leads to some genuine communication" (Vodickova, 2009, p. 147).

5. In the beliefs of traditional societies there is a widespread belief that demonic forces and the elements of nature require human intervention for the completion

the folk songs delivers the harsh mandate of fate: a human sacrifice is required for the solidification of the bridge. Not just any human, but the entombment within the walls of the beloved wife of the chief builder, who, despite his grief, obeys the imperative call of necessity. Attempting to prolong the life of his wife, the chief builder instructs the bird to signal her to approach the bridge slowly. However, the bird disobeys his directive and hastens the arrival of the woman. Using the ruse of a ring supposedly dropped on the first arch, the master builder convinces the woman to voluntarily descend to the foundation to find it. When she realizes her fate, she rebels, wails and rages. However, the mention of family bonds, particularly of a beloved brother who may one day cross the bridge and risk death if the curse is fulfilled and the bridge collapses again, leads to the conversion of Lygeri (the wife) and the transformation of the curse into a wish. The collective good now secured, the woman consents to her death in order to preserve the life of her brother, the only one who can continue her lineage, as she herself dies childless.

### Teaching Method and Techniques

The extension of the learning process of literary exploration and further pedagogical use of the folk song could involve its transcription in a dramatic-stage environment. As an original, authentic learning activity with an interdisciplinary core (language-literature-theatre), dramatic exploration using drama techniques is based on the truth of the moment—it has a unique character

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of important tasks (Simeonidis, 2015). The necessity of human sacrifice for the construction of significant buildings is commonplace in both mythical traditions and in the historical reality of various peoples and countries throughout mankind's history, as indicated by historical sources and archaeological findings demonstrate. As Sebillot (1894, p.85) notes, "The necessity to establish buildings on top of people, who, at times, were sacrificed alive, or to anoint the first stones with their blood, occurred in countries very distant from one another and in different epochs." Once sacrificed, humans are believed to transcend their mortal nature, acquiring supernatural qualities and behaving protectively towards the construction, warding off potential threats from authoritative elements of nature.

(Papadopoulos, 2010).

Among the numerous and intriguing directions explored and systematized by pedagogues and researchers in the field of Theatre Pedagogy, we propose a focus on the elements of dramatic tension. Specifically, we consider that the representational actions and stage communication of group members within the text, which can engage with other folk songs in the dramatic inquiring workshop, can be based on the axis of constraints in the characters' lives (Morgan & Saxton, 1987; O'Toole, 1992; Papadopoulos, 2010).

Dramaturgically, dramatic tension manifests as the gradual articulation of episodes within the myth, constituting a fundamental structural element. The challenges posed by the myth demand resolution and settlement. At critical turning points, heroes must navigate new situations, confront dilemmas, manage conflicts within themselves or with others, and grapple with obstacles, frustrations, and challenges. Consequently, the "high temperature" of one episode carries over and amplifies into the next, so that the tension eventually peaks and subsides, thereby providing resolution to the myth's development, after it has reached the peak of its potential.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, from the spectator's perspective—the recipient of the stage utterance—tension is defined as the psychological attitude induced by the preceding escalation. It is expressed in the emotional uncertainty and heightened interest of the spectator, who becomes increasingly involved in the stage events and gets anxious about the outcome of the plot. This engagement intensifies when the spectator realizes that the hero is confronted with an inevitable tragic outcome (Pavis, 2006).

We mention some forms of dramatic tension applicable to the folk song in question (Papadopoulos, 2010):

- Project assignment;
- Assumption of project responsibility, leading to difficulty in completing the assigned task;
- Dilemma (e.g., a situation where the charac-

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6. As each episode is decisively influenced by the previous one, the dramatic structure could be likened to a bow, the string of which is stretched by each action until the "fatal arrow" (Staiger, 1946).

ter must decide whether to continue the struggle or give up)

- Concealment and ignorance (e.g. withholding important information);
- Secrecy (e.g. keeping secrets from other characters in order for the hero to achieve a personal or collective goal);
- Subversion (upheaval of living conditions, change of economic situation, enslavement, captivity);
- Deception (e.g. gaining power through deceit);
- Conflict (internal or external conflict, e.g., the hero wavering between two opposing desires or confronting someone opposed to his/her choices or interests);
- Surprise (introducing an unexpected new development).

### Dramatic inquiring<sup>7</sup>

The acquaintance with the original stimulus-poem has already occurred during the literary study phase. In the dramatic inquiring, students' learning experiences are activated with new dynamics as the activities transform towards representation. In the environment of drama animation (fran: animation), students' reception of the poetic work gains an interactive dimension, mediated by drama techniques.

The focus on dramatic tension allows the detection of dramatic situations, further exploration of motivations and emotions of the heroes, and delving into the main issue of the story—the sacrifice of the woman. Thematic centers to be explored include the pioneer's sense of responsibility and duty towards the collective good, the sacrificed woman's anger and rebellion, the curse and its recall, and the emotional depth of sisterly love.

The following drama techniques (O'Neill, 1995),

7. Both cooperative learning and experiential learning, which constitute the essence of Theatre in Education, are rooted, among other principles, in John Dewey's theory of learning (Dewey, 1980). The active involvement of students in the process—specifically, in the theatrical action—and the social interaction within the realm of dramatic action imbue an educational dimension to the students' experience. This encompasses emotions, aesthetics, ethics, and knowledge within the context of individuals interacting with their environment.

highlighting elements of dramatic intensity in the text, are indicative: The physical and expressive code of theatre (*gestus*, *still image*, *bodily improvisation*, *pantomime*) can convey the tireless yet futile efforts of the craftsmen and their assistants to build the bridge. The dramatic unexpectedness of the bird, the announcement of the sacrifice, and the invitation of Lygeri, as well as the functionality of the ring in the myth's development,<sup>8</sup> can be portrayed through semi-structured improvisation. The technique of the *still image* is suggested for the phrase "casts a great stone."<sup>9</sup> Techniques such as *conscience alley*, *collective character*, and *conflicting advice* are suitable to make the criticality of the situation and the protagonist's inner dilemma experientially understandable. The direct speech of Lygeri, with its corresponding inner monologue, reflecting anger, rage, regret, bitterness, pain, frustration, and the feeling of betrayal, can be highlighted by the iconic, expressive technique of the *role on the wall* (Neelands, 1990; Papadopoulos, 2009a).<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, *hot seating* could bring to light what the main characters feel.

Students can also practice the technique of *writing in role* (diary, testimony, monologue) to express the thoughts of the master builder after the bird's message and after he has thrown the great stone, completing the woman's haunting of the foundation. Finally, they can narrate the events as if they were craftsmen, initially external observers and then active participants in burying the woman in the foundation.

In the context of dramatic inquiring, students ex-

8. The ring, traditionally a symbol of marriage, unity, love, and faith, takes on a different role here, serving as both a pretext and a deception. It operates as a lever that sets in motion the mechanisms required for the enactment of the sacrifice.

9. This technique isolates snapshots from the dramatic environment, devoid of reason or movement. The action halts, time expands, and the intricacies of the story come to the forefront, highlighting the inner expressions of characters captured in the still yet dynamic images.

10. Participants create life-sized outlines of characters, inscribing in the first person the thoughts they presume the character is experiencing. Simultaneously, outside the outline, they can articulate, again in the first person, their own thoughts, feelings, and admonitions directed towards the hero.

plore different ways of unfolding the story ("What would I do if I were the master craftsman?", "If I were Lygeri, would I change the curse to a wish?")<sup>11</sup> Simultaneously, they gain an understanding of the techniques of the text and its cultural material (images, stereotypical expressions, repetition of phrases, the law of three, hyperbole, personification, magical elements, folk beliefs, tragic irony).

The function of the poem's lyricism in the dramatic environment and the stage enunciation of the 15-syllable iambic verse, can highlight the poetic discourse, its meanings, and its special characteristics in various ways.<sup>12</sup>

Of particular interest, in our opinion, would be the consideration of women's sacrifice in the light of gender identities in the patriarchal social system, with its stereotypical social roles and strict rules of behaviour: Female virtue equals sacrifice, man commands and woman serves.<sup>13</sup> In this context,

11. When dramatizing a story, students' interpretive approaches can vary the original story in many ways. They find themselves interacting with the characters "in an imagined world that is built as much by the text as by their own perspectives, experiences, and ideas" (Enciso, P. & Edmiston, B., 1997, p. 71).

12. According to Vygotsky, the "meaning" of a word transcends its "signification" (the socially and culturally determined aspect shared by all language users). It also encompasses the "psychological" states generated in an individual's consciousness by the word, as language is internalized through their interaction with specific environments (Vygotsky, 2008). In the context of theatrical animation, experientiality plays a pivotal role in this process, enhancing the lexical competence of participants. This is a complex phenomenon involving word frequency, vocabulary growth in native speakers, collocation, register, case relations, underlying forms, word association, and semantic structure (Richards, 1976).

13. "Nature has decreed that man is destined for creations and woman is made for sacrifices" (from the stage composition *The Bridge of Arta and the Lygeres of the Underworld*, dramaturgy and stage direction by M. Kalbari, Karolos Koun Art Theatre, 2022-2023). It is evident, however, that the goal is not for students to necessarily adopt the above examination of the myth from a sociological standpoint. Instead, the aim is to encourage critical reflection and the potential development of stage action based on this perspective, leading to the expression of diverse and compelling views. It's worth noting that, according to the Teacher's Guide-Curriculum for Literature in Secondary School (2022), the spe-

it would be possible to explore and analyse the "forced" nature of sacrifice, considering the role and position of women are defined in the historical time of the story in contrast to the current social conditions.

## Epilogue

Through drama activities, cognitive objectives are achieved as the group members strengthen their ties with Greek (and wider Balkan) cultural heritage. They become culturally aware by engaging with older forms of life, familiarizing themselves with the particular thematic and stylistic features of folk songs, especially narrative folk songs or ballads (in greek: paraloges). The text serves as a stimulus for individual and collective creative action, fostering discourse production, imagination development,<sup>14</sup> critical thinking, and psychomotor goals. The dramatic management of twists and reversals in the characters' attitudes, dilemmas, and emotional transitions of the first-master and Lygeri contributes to strengthening students' empathy and comprehensively enhances their hermeneutic awareness of the literary text itself.

cific aim of tasks and activities during the teaching of literary texts is to connect the texts with their context, time, and the present context (historicity, topicality, cultural literacy, merging of horizons).

14. Imagination is intertwined with Imagination intertwines with daydreaming, a cognitive and psychological process linked to the development of creative thinking and the enhancement of adolescents' intellectual formation through literary reading. "Daydreaming is a process of controlling and transcending conventional ways of thinking and describing reality, allowing students, in particular, to break free from the representations of the empirical world and delve into psychological-intellectual processes. In this way, reading literature and discussing literary texts enhance students' self-esteem and self-expression, contributing to the development of self-awareness. Daydreaming is linked to techniques for enhancing critical thinking and self-activity, such as brainstorming, but also to methods for cultivating creativity, such as dramatization, creative speech production, simulation, theatre play, etc. It was studied by the French philosopher G. Bachelard, who spoke about the poetics of daydreaming (la poétique de la rêverie) and the phenomenology of poetic imagination" (Teacher's Guide- Curriculum for the teaching of Literature for Grades 1, 2, and 3 of Secondary School, 2022, p. 138).

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