

The Meeting of Dance and Literature: IRE

“Baajade taal mridanga murali dhun
Dha dhilaang dhuma kita taka gadi gina
Tana nana sugaand
Nirat karat Krishna Radha
Nirat karat Krishna Radha
Nirat karat Krishna Radha”

(A “kavit,” or poem, used in Kathak, describing the love and relationship between the Hindu Gods, Radha and Krishna. When Krishna plays his flute, and the sounds of the accompanying percussion ring; Radha and Krishna dance together to the tunes of the instruments.)

While much of kathak is storytelling, a large aspect of the art form is pure classical dance with no meaning, meant solely for the purpose of pure aesthetics and viewing pleasure. When I began learning dance, we only learned the latter aspect as an introduction to kathak. The art of storytelling called for a deeper understanding of the world in order to generate the right emotions and feelings needed to depict a story properly, which we simply could not grasp at our young age. Instead, our Guru sculpted our foundation as dancers first through basic technique and grace. My first introduction to the art of storytelling was through a composition called a “Kavit”; a poem or lyrical passage in kathak, to which a dancer showcases the meaning through expressions and gestures. Since these kavits opened up my world to storytelling through dance, my portfolio also opens with a variety of kavits I have learned throughout my dance journey. While I enjoyed learning these new compositions and the way literature was weaved in dance, I found the pure classical aspect exciting because of the swift spins and intricate footwork. Even



better, it reminded me more of the western dance styles I saw in American culture and I felt a sense of familiarity and comfort. I left behind the aspect of storytelling for a while, and I slowly forgot about it despite it being such an important part of the art. Later when analyzing my writing for this portfolio, I realized how my writing was similar to what I was doing in dance. I was writing sentences with overly fancy commentary and repetitive statements that were clouding my main argument and the focal point of my essays. In the same sense, the spins and footwork I wanted to add to my choreography removed the one aspect of kathak that is not only essential to the art but also unique to its form: storytelling.

The comparison between my writing and dance made me realize I was freewriting commentary in my essays that was not only unhelpful but rather harmful to my argument. My second paper, “The Projection of Racial Stereotypes”, was on the short story “Recitatif” by Toni Morrison. Throughout the paper, I struggled with getting straight to the focal point of my essay and instead used a large number of unnecessary sentences to fill the word count. For example, when starting a new paragraph, I could not decide on a clear and concise sentence to introduce the main idea of the paragraph:

Morrison’s way of conveying this aspect of racial identity is characterized by her idea of creating works where race is not the central focus, but still a key element. Using the topic of class and financial positions as the basis for these stereotypes and the girls’ situations helps Morrison explore the “limitations of race” that she sought in her work. Race is a clear part of the reader’s experience when studying the narrative, but throughout the story, Morrison steers clear of explicitly mentioning the topic. In addition, Morrison uses her essay to talk about her goal of examining “the consequences of its centrality in the world and in the lives of the people” (Projection of Stereotypes)

As a result of my uncertainty, this paragraph had many unnecessary sentences that gave the impression of starting this paragraph repeatedly, without having a clear path to lead me to my main point. Not only did I fail to introduce the topic of my paragraph efficiently, but I also made the core of my paragraph less compelling because the introduction was weak and unclear. In kathak, the ultimate goal when dancing is to make the story clear to all audiences, regardless of whether or not they speak Hindi or practice Hinduism. Oftentimes, if the characters, tone, and emotions of a story are not established at the beginning of a performance, audience members struggle to pick up the meaning of the composition. My lack of ability to establish the main topic of the paragraph in an efficient and concise manner is similar to a stage with no clear introduction to the narrative of the performance; both situations set the following parts of their respective works up for failure.

I had to come to terms with the idea that, while thorough commentary is important, I need to find a balance between my explanations and evidence. For instance, when I put too much pure dance into my kathak choreography, I lose the aspect of storytelling. However, this doesn't mean I should drop technique altogether to accommodate for the other element. If I performed every piece in a slow lyrical manner, I would be doing injustice to the complicated footwork and swift movements kathak maestros have spent years cultivating. The only escape to my problem was to find an elegant way to combine the two elements and find the right equilibrium. I then needed to find this same balance in my writing. In some paragraphs, I tried countering my habit of adding too much commentary by using more evidence. I would use an excessive amount of quotes from the text but, ultimately, be unable to support the entirety of the evidence in fear of including too much unnecessary explanation. In others, I would not have enough examples to support my claims. My first essay, "The Consequences of Greed", on the poem "Blackberry Picking" by

Seamus Heaney is a prime example of how I lacked a good balance between commentary and evidence. In one of my body paragraphs, I explained how the speaker wished to continue picking blackberries, the primary subject of the poem, after tasting a select few from their previous harvest. I quoted the lines

Its flesh was sweet/ Like thickened wine: summer's blood was in it/ Leaving
stains upon the tongue and lust for/ Picking (The Consequences)

In my following explanation, I only elaborated on the words “lust” and “sweet” as a way to support my claim. There was no need to quote four lines of the poem if I was not going to use the entirety of the quote to its full potential. In the following paragraph, I had a strong claim and plenty of explanation, but no evidence to support it. I said, “For example, the word “flesh” may seem like a common word to describe fruit, however, it is extremely fitting as a build-up to Heaney’s clear usage of dark imagery” (The Consequences). Aside from the one quotation of “flesh,” this entire paragraph was nothing but a free-write of commentary, and while my explanation may have been sensible, it had no standing without evidence to back it up. Both of these mistakes are detrimental to my main argument. Having too much evidence without just explanation made my argument less compelling, and having too little evidence with nothing but commentary reduced my credibility.

In my final essay, I made some substantial changes to my method of writing as a way to reduce the overbearing commentary. Instead of writing free-flowing commentary without any thought of how I planned to build my argument, I began my paper by writing an outline instead. Often times when dancing, I feel I create my best work when I take the time to listen to the music and think of ideas for choreography. I listen to the words, translate them on paper first, and then choreograph steps that work well with both the rhythm and meaning. Doing this has not

only helped me retain the lyrical aspect of kathak, but it helps me choreograph quicker and produce a better performance overall. In the same sense, creating an outline for my paper allowed me to organize my thoughts and find evidence before I began writing. For example, our final essay was on the famous play by Shakespeare; *The Tempest*. Considering the vast nature of the relationships in *The Tempest*, I wanted to argue a complex thesis regarding the topic but was worried my habit of writing commentary without prior thought would not pair well with an elaborate argument. I countered this dilemma by answering the following questions before every paragraph: “What is the main idea of the paragraph, what am I trying to argue, what evidence do I plan to use, and what connections can I make using my evidence?” (The Role of Self-Centered Motivation). Even if my answers to each question were brief, thinking about the route I wished to take my argument in helped develop clarity in my essay. In past essays, writing in a free-flowing manner removed any potential of connectivity between my paragraphs, as I would start losing focus of my original argument. As the essay would progress, I would stray further and further away from my thesis. Having my thoughts written out in front of me not only helped me develop a complex thesis, but also support it without losing consistency.

In 2021, I graduated from the institute of Nritya Natya Kala Bharti Dance and Music Academy with a certification in Kathak. During my final exam, I performed an expressional piece that depicts the relationship of Radha and Krishna, as described in the “kavit” above, while experimenting with both technique and storytelling. After the practical exams had commenced, the examiner personally told me how she was almost in tears by my expression and the manner in which I conveyed the emotions of the Gods in such a graceful manner. This was the first time I had received a compliment as such, and I truly believe it was because I finally found the balance between the two elements of kathak. I now work towards finding this balance in my writing,

finding ways to build harmony between my explanations and evidence, and include my commentary without forgoing the focal argument of my essays. During my exam, I focused on the storytelling aspect of kathak while using pure dance and technique to elevate the overall aesthetic of the performance. Using this same approach, I work towards developing my commentary as a way to support my argument, but not outshine it. I hope that, through the analysis and revision of my writing, this portfolio gets to play the same gratifying role as my final kathak exam, and that it is able to show my growth as a writer.