

Children's and Young Adults' Literature: An Alternative to Literature Instruction

Suriyan Panlay

"No kind of writing lodges itself so deeply in our memory, echoing there for the rest of our lives, as the books that we met in our childhood."

(Zinsser, 1990, p. 3)

Abstract

This paper explores the possibility of utilizing Children's and Young Adults' (C&YA) Literature in an EFL classroom essentially at a university level. It details why C&YA Literature should be made part of a learning experience of the EFL learners, how it can be implemented or incorporated into a curriculum, and what the learners will gain out of it. Criteria for choosing suitable C&YA books, as well as useful classroom activities and assessment, are also discussed in order to give teachers/researchers a clearer picture and better understanding of this literary genre if it is to be implemented in their schools or universities.

Introduction

In her most melancholic state, Juliet professes,

"Give me my Romeo; and, when he shall die,
Take him and cut him out in little stars,
And he will make the face of heaven so fine,
That all the world will be in love with night,
And pay no worship to the garish sun."

(www.online-literature.com/shakespeare/romeo_and_juliet/16/)

In his most celebrated Meditation (XVII), John Donne brilliantly utters,

"...all mankind is of one author, and is one volume; when one man dies, one chapter is not torn out of the book, but translated into a better language...God's hand is in every translation, and his hand shall bind up all scattered leaves again for that library where every book shall lie open to one another."

(www.online-literature.com/donne/409/)

At the end of each piece, a teacher of English sighs, smiles inwardly, and a look of satisfaction can be clearly seen on his/her face. Turning to the other side of the room, a look of confusion and, perhaps, boredom is distinctly reflected in the students' eyes.

Oftentimes, English major students in Thailand are made to decipher Western literary pieces that are very dense linguistically and awfully distant culturally, ones that deprive them of all the 'fun' they deserve in a literature class. In our defense, we say they have to know those pieces. We equate English literature with the classics; they are simply synonymous. Others are just peripheral. As we witness our students drifting away from what we prescribe year after year, we feel betrayed, hurt, frustrated, and we blame it all on the young minds. Hardly have we realized we too are to blame. After all, English literature does not have to be only about the classics

written specifically for adults. There are other alternatives that we can explore, if we genuinely want to give ourselves and our students a chance.

One alternative that I would like to propose in this paper is Children's and Young Adults' Literature.

What is Children's and Young Adults' Literature?

It might be said, in a very broad sense, that a child's book is a book a child is reading, and an adult book is a book occupying the attention of an adult. When we talk about children's literature, we refer to books released by the juvenile or junior division of a publisher and intended for children from pre-kindergarten to about sixth grade (Donelson & Nilsen, 1989). The content of children's literature is limited by children's experience and understanding. Certain emotional and psychological responses seem outside the realm of childhood. For example, nostalgia is an adult emotion that is foreign to most boys and girls. Children hardly look back on childhood, but always forward. What makes children's literature interesting is that children see beauty where there is ugliness; they are hopeful when adults have given up. However, this is not to suggest that all stories for children must have happy endings. It is only that when you close the door on hope, you have left the realm of childhood. The only limitations, then, that seem binding on literature for children are those that appropriately reflect the emotions and experiences of children today. As indicated by Huck, Hickman & Kiefer (1997), children's books are those that have the child's eye at the center.

As for young adults, we sometimes hear people define them as those who think they are too old to be children but who others think are too young to be adults. By young adults' literature, we mean anything that readers between the approximate ages of twelve and twenty choose to read (Donelson & Nilsen, 1989). Young adults' literature is usually written in a natural, flowing language, much like that which young adults use orally. Writers of young adults' literature avoid long, drawn-out descriptions, the kind of pedantic or overblown language sometimes found in adult writings, and also usually avoid the interweaving of multiple, complex plots. Writers treat a variety of subject matter and themes, including many controversial ideas. Young adults' literature is never intended to replace other forms of literature. Like children's literature, it provides enjoyment, satisfaction, and literary quality while bringing life and hope and reality to young people (Donelson & Nilsen, 1989).

Why Children's and Young Adults' Literature?

Beneath simpler language and less complicated plot structures, children's and young adults' literature offers readers human experiences as complicated and priceless as those found in adults' literature. As suggested by Lukens, literature for children differs from literature for adults in degree, not in kind, and writing for children should be judged by the same standard as writing for adults (Lukens, 1999). There are several reasons why children's and young adults' literature should be integrated into an EFL classroom.

1. It stimulates students' interests, gives them enjoyment and respite. The experience found in children's and young adults' literature is very much relevant and close to students' interests. It is agreed that people simply read more when materials are related to their interests. Interest, according to Barr, Kamil & Mosenthal (1996), accounts for more than 25 times the variance in reading comprehension.

2. It is linguistically accessible. Another integral and appealing feature of children's and young adults' literature is its simpler and more accessible language. In

Charlotte's Web, with such simple, succinct words, Charlotte can eloquently explain to the young readers the very essence of human existence:

“After all, what’s a life, anyway? We’re born, we live a little while, we die. A spider’s life can’t help being something of a mess, with all this trapping and eating flies. By helping you, perhaps I was trying to lift up my life a trifle. Heaven knows anyone’s life can stand a little of that.”

(White, 1952, p. 164)

In *Number the Stars*, Lowry nicely portrays, through simple language, the concept of loyalty and devotion one could have toward the king and the land:

“Who is the man who rides past here every morning on his horse?” the German soldier had asked.

“He is our king,” the boy told the soldier. “He is the King of Denmark.”

“Where is his bodyguard?” the soldier had asked.

The boy looked right at the soldier and he said, “All of Denmark is his bodyguard.”

(Lowry, 1989, pp. 13-14)

3. It equips students with the esthetic need for beauty and provokes their higher-order thinking skills. Beauty, be it in a form of language or images, is ubiquitous in children’s and young adults’ literature. In *When Zachary Beaver Came to Town*, for instance, Holt magically paints the sky with ‘rubies’ employing the image of the ladybugs:

“...The Mozart sonata Dad picked out begins to play. When we hear the first note, we open the sacks and the ladybugs escape through the opening, taking flight. It’s as if someone has dumped rubies from heaven. Soon they will land on the plants in search of the bollworm eggs. But right now they are magic—red ribbons flying over our heads, weaving against the pink sky, dancing up there with the Mozart.”

(Holt, 1999, p. 223)

Also, the issues presented in children’s and young adults’ literature can be as thought-provoking as those found in literature for adults. Curtis, in his acclaimed historical novel centering around racial prejudice in American South, *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*, incites the young readers to pay more attention to the historical and social issues influencing and shaping their present lives:

“...they did it because they’re sick, but I don’t know. I ain’t never heard of no sickness that makes you kill little girls just because you don’t want them in your school. I don’t think they’re sick at all, I think they just let hate eat them up and turn them into monsters.”

(Curtis, 1995, p. 200)

4. The experiences gained from reading children’s and young adults’ literature help students build empathy and respect for others. Hansen-Krening states that for decades experienced educators have reported success stories about using children’s

literature to broaden attitudes toward people from a variety of cultures (Hansen-Krening, 1992). Literature is a potent weapon in the fight against xenophobia. Books can bring us close to characters of every nationality, racial, ethnic, and religious group, lessening the fear of the unknown.

Through literature, students can discover commonalities among peoples, as well as differences, and in so doing begin to think about positive aspects of their own background (Cornett, 2003).

Criteria for Choosing Children's and Young Adults' Books

Most people working with books and young readers have come to accept the idea that there is no such thing as one sacred list of books that every student should read or will like. The best that can be hoped for are agreeable matches between particular books and particular students. To bring about such matches, teachers need to be acquainted with a wide range of books. They should bear in mind that books used or read in their classrooms should help students develop an understanding of literature. The books, as a result, need to be strong aesthetically. They should also raise questions in students' minds concerning various issues around them. As suggested by Espinosa and Fournier (1999), it is important that the literature used in the classroom has some kind of opening for students to enter, that it offers the possibility of being a stepping stone to larger ideas and to the world outside and around them. Here are some of the basic criteria a teacher should take into account when it comes to text selection:

1. Linguistic level. This can be measured in lexical or syntactic terms. Texts that are lexically and syntactically dense are, without a doubt, a 'turn off' for most students. Delving further into such pieces will only make students' reading experience excruciating and unbearable. The good thing, however, about employing children's and young adults' literature in the classroom is that such an experience is hardly found, for most texts of children's and young adults' literature are linguistically accessible.

2. Cultural level. Different works of literature will be close to the cultural and social expectations of different groups of learners. A teacher needs to take this into consideration as s/he selects reading texts. For instance, texts on popular or contemporary cultures are definitely more accessible to EFL students today than the historical ones. This, however, does not mean that historical texts have no place in the classroom. They do, but students should be provided with enough background information to approach them.

3. Length. Text length is still a crucial pedagogical factor. Many a time, linguistically accessible and culturally captivating texts cannot be made part of the course because of their length. Two *Harry Potter* books, *The Goblet of Fire* and *The Order of the Phoenix*, are good examples of lengthy texts. Both are fun, entrancing, definitely an interesting read. Yet, if made part of the course, their length will undoubtedly make students' reading experience too exhausting. A solution to this is perhaps to let students read only parts of those lengthy texts that are relevant to the central theme of the class.

4. Genre representation. Students should be introduced to different genres of writing within the realm of children's and young adults' literature. As suggested by Brumfit (1985), if the course is truly concerned with developing reading capacities, it cannot be restricted only to short stories and poems which can be done in class. All normal types of literature need to be made available.

5. Storyline. To make students' reading experience a pleasant one, the story should be fun, mesmerizing, and one that is relevant and close to the students' young world. For EFL learners, titles like *Dancing on the Edge* by Han Nolan and *When Zachary Beaver Came to Town* by Kimberly Willis Holt should be preferable to Twain's *Huck Finn* and Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. Nolan's *Dancing on the Edge* is a story of a young girl torn between the world of reality and superstition, and Holt's *When Zachary Beaver Came to Town* deals with an overweight boy longing for a true friend.

Classroom Activities and Assessment

There are a number of activities and assessment methods teachers can employ in literature classes. A few practical methods that will be discussed here are (i) a traditional book discussion, (ii) an online book review and (iii) an individual conference.

- *Book Discussion*

Teachers know that one of their most valuable techniques is that of asking questions and responding carefully to student answers so that a genuine exchange of ideas occurs. If this takes place right after or during the reading of a piece of literature, then new information will be taken in, measured, evaluated, and integrated with the tentative conclusions already reached. To bring about this kind of "enlargement through talk," teachers have to walk a middle ground between accepting just any comment that a student makes and having a prepared list of examination-type questions with one and only one acceptable answer. The best discussions resemble the kind of real-life conversations that good friends have when they have both read a new book and are anxious to share opinions and gain insights from each other (Donelson & Nilsen, 1989).

When students are at a stage in their intellectual development in which their primary interest is in finding themselves and their peers in the books they read, it stands to reason that an appropriate approach to use in talking about books will be that of subjective response. The following questions can help elicit their opinions.

1. What was your immediate (first) response to the story? What was your immediate (first) feeling about the story? What were your immediate (first) associations? (What did the story remind you of?)
2. Does the story remind you of anything you have seen on TV, anything you have read before, and so forth?
3. Can you relate the story to anything in your own experience?
4. Can you relate any characters in the story to anyone you know?
5. What question does the story raise in your mind?

- *Online Book Review*

One activity that is often utilized in a literature class is writing a book review, which can range from a short paragraph showing students' feelings toward the assigned book to an elaborate, sophisticated one covering four or five pages depending on the level of the students. With the advent and popularity of online bookstores, teachers can now assign students to do a book review online. Giant online bookstores like *Barnes & Noble* and *Amazon.com* offer an excellent arena for students to express themselves 'literally' to the world. This is a brilliant activity that should be encouraged because its ultimate outcome is self-accomplishment and self-esteem. It is absolutely fantastic for the students to see their own works getting published. And since the whole world can gain access to their reviews, students are automatically

made to pay more attention to their own writing (e.g. lexical items and syntactic structures are more carefully chosen and self-correction is noticeably employed).

- *Individual Conference.* As suggested by Cornett (2003), this gives teachers a chance to discuss goals and progress and do additional assessment. For instance, students may be asked to read a favorite part of a book and give reasons why the section was important or meaningful touching or disturbing. A checklist of skills and concepts demonstrated can be included in a student's folder, along with anecdotal notes taken. These short individual conferences give valuable insight into students' thinking and set the expectation of working toward common goals.

Conclusion

When students stumble on these immortal words, "No man is an island, entire of itself," we want them to quickly realize that Donne envisions a global unity, that we all are part of a bigger picture; when they chance upon Rossetti's *Uphill*, we want them to understand that it is an allegory symbolizing life journey; when they come across Frost's *The Road Not Taken*, we want them to take in the very idea that life is about making choices. To grasp those concepts, however, we have to make them realize, first and foremost, that reading can be such a feast, that it can tremendously help improve their language skills, and that the experience is truly fulfilling. Whatever we 'prescribe' for them, therefore, needs to be accessible. The experience tells me that children's and young adults' literature can do just that. Its simpler language and less complicated plot structures truly help students grasp complicated human experience on their own, thus enabling them to become independent learners. Once the students see that reading is such a pleasant experience, that it is not beyond their abilities, in time they will move up to those major authors whom you have always wanted them to tackle...on their own.

References

Barr, R., Kamil, M., & Mosenthal, P. (eds.). 1996. *Handbook of Reading Research*. Vol. 2. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Brumfit, C. J. 1985. *Language and Literature Teaching: From Practice to Principle*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.

Cornett, C. E. 2003. *Creating Meaning through Literature and the Arts: An Integration Resource for Classroom Teachers*, 2nd ed. New Jersey: Merrill Prentice Hall.

Curtis, C. P. 1995. *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*. New York: A Yearling Book.

Donelson, K. L. and Nilsen, A. P. 1989. *Literature for Today's Young Adults*, 3rd ed. New York: Harper Collins.

Giff, P. R. 1997. *Lily's Crossing*. New York: A Yearling Book.

Golding, W. 1954. *Lord of the Flies*. London: Faber and Faber.

Hansen-Krening, N. 1992. Authors of color: A multicultural perspective. *Journal of Reading*, 26(2), 124-129.

Holt, K. W. 1999. *When Zachary Beaver Came to Town*. New York: Random House.

Huck, C. S., Hepler, S., Hickman, J. and Kiefer, B. Z. 1997. *Children's Literature in the Elementary School*, 6th ed. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Langer, J. A. (ed.). 1992. *Literature Instruction: A Focus on Student Response*. Illinois: NCTE.

Lindfors, J. W. and Townsend, J. S., (eds.). 1999. *Teaching Language Arts: Learning through Dialogue*. Illinois: NCTE.

Lowry, L. 1989. *Number the Stars*. New York: A Yearling Book.

Lukens, R. J. 1999. *A Critical Handbook of Children's Literature*, 6th ed. New York: Longman.

Meek, M. (ed.). 2001. *Children's Literature and National Identity*. Sterling: Trentham Books.

Nelms, B. F. (ed.). 1988. *Literature in the Classroom: Readers, Texts, and Contexts*. Illinois: NCTE.

Nolan, H. 1997. *Dancing on the Edge*. New York: Puffing Books.

Reynolds, K. 1994. *Children's Literature in the 1890s and the 1990s*. Plymouth: Northcote House.

Rowling, J. K. 2000. *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. London: Bloomsbury.

Rowling, J. K. 2003. *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. London: Bloomsbury.

Russel, D. L. 1997. *Literature for Children: A Short Introduction*. New York: Longman.

Stewig, J. W. and Sebesta, S. L. (eds.). 1989. *Using Literature in the Elementary Classroom*. Illinois: NCTE.

Twain, M. 1993. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. New York: Barnes and Noble.

White, E. B. 1952. *Charlotte's Web*. New York: Harper Collins.

Zinsser, W. (ed.). 1990. *Worlds of Childhood: The Art and Craft of Writing for Children*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Online Sources

http://www.online-literature.com/shakespeare/romeo_and_juliet/16/
<http://www.online-literature.com/donne/409/>