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Reading the Word and the World: Critically and Culturally Reflexive**Conversations in the LangLit Classroom**

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Reading does not merely consist of decoding the written word or language; rather, it is preceded and intertwined with knowledge of the world. Language and reality are dynamically interconnected. The understanding attained by a critical reading of a text implies perceiving the relationship between text and context. (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 29)

This chapter discusses how literature can be used in the langlit classroom towards learning about language and the world. Literary texts are rich sources for conversations about culturally relevant issues (Applebee, 1996), and if well-chosen, can become discursive spaces for thinking and talking about what is critical and meaningful in today's world. I argue that literary texts are rich sources for learning how to read the word and the world (Freire, 1991; Freire & Macedo, 1987), and that it is important to teach students to read in what I term a *critically and culturally reflexive* manner. I then use Tan Hwee Hwee's (2007) *Mid-Autumn*, a short story from *Island Voices: A Collection of Short Stories from Singapore* (Poon & Sim, 2007) to illustrate how awareness of language and worldviews can provide a framework for thinking about the use of literature in the language classroom.

Literature in the Langlit curriculum

In the Singapore context, with a division between the teaching of English Language and English Literature as two separate subjects, Literature has often been viewed as a subject for the elite, those who possess a certain competence in the use of the English language (Poon, 2007). This view of English language and literature teaching is problematic in that it has led to the often-held view that teachers of English who are not teachers of English literature need not be familiar with literature. By literature, I refer to literature with a small 'l' (McRae, 1991), any literary text that can be used in the classroom for teaching purposes, as opposed to a set of canonized literary works. Literary texts provide a rich resource for language learning in the classroom, and an understanding of how they may be used in the language classroom extends the language teacher's repertoire. While the teacher of English language may not be an expert in teaching Literature, it is important that s/he has an awareness of how to use literary texts in the English classroom and is knowledgeable in choosing literary texts for use in the language classroom. In fact, given the variety and complexity of communication modes in today's world of mass media and migration (Appadurai, 1996), reading is no longer just about mere decoding of words on a page. Learning to read requires critical skills of interpretation and understanding of multiple semiotic modes (e.g., Luke & Carrington, 2004; New London Group, 1996).

Wolf's description of the evolution of functional literacy parallels the situation in the Singapore context, albeit condensed into the last 50 years:

Colonists were literate enough if they could sign their name, or even an X, on loans and deeds. When immigrants arrived in large numbers in the 1800s,

educators urged schools to deliver “recitation literacy” to the foreign children who filled the schoolrooms. That literacy was the ability to hold a book and reel off memorized portions of basic American texts such as the opening paragraph of the Declaration of Independence... With the coming of World War I, and the prospect of large numbers of men handling new equipment in foreign countries, Army testers redefined reading. Suddenly, to the dismay of men used to reading familiar passages, passing the army reading test meant being able to make sense, on the spot, of never-before-seen text. Currently, that kind of “extraction literacy,” so revolutionary in 1914, looks meagre. Finding out who, what, when, where, or even how simply does not yield the inferences, questions, or ideas we now think of as defining full or “higher” literacy.” (1988, p. 1 in Rogoff, 1990, p. 5)

Thus, the definition of functional literacy has shifted from the ability to read and write to include the ability to think (as epitomised by the *Thinking Schools, Learning Nation* movement). The literate student by definition is a thinking student (Langer, 1995) who is able to critically assess readings, read between the lines, and understand multiple perspectives that may or may not be present in a text.

How is literature relevant in this context? First, literary texts whether in the form of poetry or prose provide material for learning about language and language use. Second, literary texts, particularly narratives, are rich repositories of stories from different cultures. These stories provide discursive spaces for discussion of self and others in order for students to understand self and world better. Third, literary texts can be used for learning to think critically about language, about stories, and about the world

we live in. Since much has been written about literature for learning language and language use in other chapters in this collection and elsewhere (e.g. McRae & Vethamani, 1999; Short, 1996), I will focus on the other two reasons that literature is relevant in the context of literacy education.

Besides being a resource for learning about language and language use, literary texts, particularly narratives, are rich repositories of stories from different cultures. Chinweizu, a Nigerian poet, critic and journalist writes in the introduction to the anthology, *Voices from Twentieth Century Africa*:

What kind of people we are depend crucially on the stories we are nurtured on; which is why every sensible society takes pains to prepare its members for participation in its affairs by, among other things, teaching them the best and most instructive from its inheritance of stories. (1988, p. xxviii)

The stories that we are nurtured on may include stories of particular cultures within the nation and region. However, in this fast-changing world of constant interaction with others from other places and spaces, it can be argued that it is a world literature that is our inheritance, and that it is important to expose students to a variety of literature from different cultures from different parts of the world for them to understand the variety and depth of their cultural inheritance.

In our globalized world where there is constant cross-fertilization of cultures, learning to read requires an understanding of the variety and hybridity of cultures embedded in texts and in the world. In the area of literatures in English, we find writers from different parts of the world and different cultures bringing their own background to their writing, writing that is not necessarily Eurocentric in origin. This springs in part

from the recognition of the hybrid resources that writers draw on and the celebration of the varied voices that exist in today's world. Seamus Heaney, in his 1994 Nobel Lecture speech, sums up the prevailing mood of our time:

Even if we have learnt to be rightly and deeply fearful of elevating the cultural forms and conservations of any nation into normative and exclusivist systems, even if we have terrible proof that pride in the ethnic and religious heritage that can quickly denigrate into the fascistic, our vigilance on that score should not displace our love and trust in the good of the indigenous *per se*. On the contrary, a trust in the staying power and travel-worthiness of such good should encourage use to credit the possibility of a world where respect for the validity of every tradition will issue in the creation and maintenance of a salubrious political space.

Understanding that different cultures have their different stories and that same stories can be told differently helps us to see the multiplicity and complexity of the world we live in. Reading these varied voices in turn helps us become aware of the variety of voices and hence, cultures, that are present in the world we live in.

When reading, it is not just the words students learn to read but particular dispositions of reading or ways with words (Heath, 1986). Literary texts provide the material for learning critical dispositions – to think critically about language, about stories, and about the world we live in. Literary texts can provide a way for thinking about how language is used *to form* the short story, how language *is used* in the short story, and how culture is embedded in language itself. Stories can be used to think critically about the world we live in when students engage in the issues and relationships that emerge from these stories. Thinking critically does not just involve scientific

thinking or what Bruner (1996) terms paradigmatic thinking which is logical and generally associated with scientific thinking. The narrative mode of thinking and organizing is just as important since narrative focuses on the process – the how we get there – as opposed to the what is out there – of paradigmatic thinking. They serve as case histories for us to talk and think about human relationships and the human condition (Bruner, 2002). Exposure to conversations about culturally relevant issues in the classroom allow students to reflect on life even as they reflect on literature; and reflection on language allow them a better grasp of how their very perception of the world is guided by the language they have at their disposal.

Reading the Word and the World

We must expand the horizon against which the questions of how and what to read and write are posed and answered.” (Said, 1993, p. 385)

What I am concern with in this chapter is how awareness to both language and worldviews can provide a framework for thinking about curriculum and instructional choices. Understanding both the word and the world, using Freire’s (1991) oft-quoted phrase, allows us to learn more about both language and the world in which language is used. It is through language that we communicate our experiences, and much of our culture is embedded in language (Lee, 1997; Whorf, 1941). Words as well as the way words are organized are “isolates of experience and meaning” (Lee, 1997, p. 86) that are often tied to location and place and the culture of particular peoples.

Critical reading of word and world occur when students realize that writers as well as readers write and read from their personal stances, and learn to view the text as

putting forth a particular worldview or particular worldviews which they negotiate thoughtfully rather than unquestioningly accepted. Postcolonial theories remind us of the multiplicity of stories, and hence worldviews, that are present or absent in texts. McRae & Vethamani (1999) talk about the need for “aware” reading with reference to paying attention to language in literary texts. I extend the notion of *aware* reading to encapsulate awareness of both text and context, suggesting that paying attention to both language and worldviews in a text sharpens our awareness and understanding of both the word and the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Aware reading requires an awareness of the different voices within a text and between texts. Aware reading reminds us to read contrapuntally, to read multiple texts and read from multiple perspectives in order to truly understand more of the world. Understanding that there are different perspectives and different stories to be told depending on who the teller is helps us to recognize the multiplicity of voices that contribute to a world literature. The reader is more aware of how writers and readers position themselves, and thus becomes more aware of how other people may take particular positions because of their background and different contexts (see Poon, 2007, for a similar argument for literature teaching).

As both national and global citizens, the capacity of our students to understand others who are different or who do things differently are essential. Stories provide opportunities for having conversations about self and others, and students learn particular views of self and others as they work through the stories in the classroom and in their own readings. When students learn to read these stories in a *critically and culturally reflexive* manner, they learn to be attentive to language and to culture even as they read a variety of stories from different worlds. Critical readings occur when students are able to

ask questions of the text, to take on multiple perspectives, and to examine their own stances as readers. To read with cultural awareness is to read with culture in mind. Students understand that the unconscious beliefs, customs and values of a group of people built up over time are reflected in the writing and the writing stance as well as the reading and reading stance.

A two-prong approach is needed for in teaching in a critically and culturally reflexive manner. First, students must be exposed to culturally relevant conversations, including issues of nationality, gender, race, and ethnicity. These marked categories are relevant lenses through which to think about our world today and other conversations relevant to each particular classroom (e.g. parent-child relations, religion, gang matters) may arise. The teacher as a navigator (DeLawter, 1992) actively seeks to find out what is relevant in order to bring these issues through literature to the classroom. Second, since students do not read naturally read critically (Mackey, 1993) or for culture (Jordan, 1997; Jordan & Purves, 1993), providing a classroom environment where students can learn to read in a critically and culturally reflexive manner requires a change in the way we view literary texts and the use of literary texts, whether in the literature or language classroom. Instructional design needs to provide opportunities for such conversations to arise in genuine discussion in the classroom, whether through class or small group discussions (Langer, 1995), written reflections (DeLawter, 1992), or online discussion (Grisham & Wosley, 2006).

This instructional approach involves paying attention to literary texts as repositories of worldviews for conversations about self, others and the world, and being cognitively aware of what to look out for in language in the reading of literary texts, and

correspondingly, the world. Reflexive readings happen when the reader turns from reflection of others to reflection of self and back to others again. This praxis of “reflection and action” (Freire, 1970, p. 51) results in a transformative reading experience. Through their engagement with literary texts, students learn to read the world in the word and to understand themselves as part of a larger community. Our role as educators includes providing the means by which students can engage in active conversations through their readings to see the world “afresh” (Bruner, 1996).

A Note on National Education

One area where such conversations are relevant in the Singapore context is the idea of nation and what it means to be Singaporean, a preoccupation or national anxiety that is manifested in the National Education (NE) initiative (Koh, 2005). Literary texts are textual resources that mediate collective remembering of individuals (Wertsch, 2002), which is why it is not surprising that governments take an active role in the prescription of curriculum (Apple, 1992). However, what counts as knowledge for this globalized world (Kelly, Luke, & Green, 2008) requires us to look not just at content-matter but at how content-matter is learned, which brings us back to the idea of enculturation of critical dispositions in reading habits.

Koh (2005) points out the paradoxical nature of the NE curriculum which presupposes unadulterated transmission of particular values and ideas in a fast-changing globalized world. A transmission view of education is at odds with the idea of critical thinking. Viewing literary texts as discursive spaces for conversations about identity, nationhood and community moves away from the transmission view. Engaging in

critically and culturally reflexive thinking prevents the promotion of a “fixed, essentialist vision of the nation, a museum-like representation to national culture, a tableau which is prescribed, prematurely fixed, and impervious to change” (Holden, 1999, p. 88). A transformative, critical view of NE sees the reading of literary texts as discursive spaces for engaging in meaningful conversations about self and community, based on the recognition that there is diversity even within the official discourse of homogeneity within the nation (Bokhorst-Heng, 2007; Velayutham, 2007). It is important to understand that examining difference does not necessarily lead to division. Instead, selection of texts rich in dialogic potential and instructional practices that encourage conversations allow meaningful dialogue about self and others to take place, creating room for building understanding of self and others.

It is necessary in this age of globalization to see issues of citizenship as expanding beyond the nation to the world. We are all travellers in this day and age, and as Bauman writes, “[A]ll of us are, willy-nilly, by design or default, on the move. We are on the move even if, physically, we stay put: immobility is not a realistic option in a world of permanent change” (Bauman, 1998, p. 2). Being on the move necessitates interaction within others who are different from us, both within and beyond the nation-state. Thus, Holden’s (1999) warning against essentialism applies not just to visions of the nation but to static visions of others, leading to a monolithic, closed view of those who are different from oneself, whether from another country, race, or culture.

Reading *Mid-Autumn* by Tan Hwee Hwee (2007)

In this section, I use Tan Hwee Hwee's *Mid-Autumn* to illustrate one possible way of using a local literary text for as a transformative discursive space for conversations about self and others in relation to community, nation, and world. I also show how paying attention to language allows a way into the text and into the story itself for richer discussions of literature and life. This story allows me to focus on conversations about mother-child relations, traditions and values, and change. A short story set elsewhere might provide room for conversations any of these issues, but this particular setting in Singapore with its Chinese characters, allow for discussions that deal with issues that are closer to home.

Told from the perspective of the mother, the story draws on the story and meaning of *Mid-Autumn*, and can be seen on one level as a simple story about a mother and her child. Yet, at another level, there are tiers of complexity dealing with generational gaps, cultural mismatches, layers conveyed through repeated use of religious (Christian) and cultural (Chinese) symbols. At the risk of simplification, it is the story of one mother's sacrifice for her daughter and the growing gulf between the two.

Awareness of Worldviews

It is important to see the nature of literary reading as conversation, in the sense of the many internal dialogues within the text, between the text and reader, and within the reader interacting as in a conversation, responding and reacting, accepting and rejecting, all to build the reader-listener's understanding of an issue. The reader is a listener too because he actively listens to the multiple voices within a text to understand what they

are trying to say. Bakhtin (1981) points out that the novel is a heteroglot, an intersection of socio-ideological contradictions between cultures, between worldviews which are laid out and juxtaposed for the reader to engage with and make sense of, not just the text, but his or her own understanding of the world around. The dialogue continues at the level of the reader and the text as the reader brings to the text his own context and his way of reading a text and this active engagement with the text results in new meaning for the reader as the reader responds to it.

In *Mid-Autumn*, we see clearly the interaction of opposing voices belonging to two different worldviews in the binaries present, in the clash of cultures embedded in the story. There is the clash of Chinese culture versus English culture, obvious in the mother's ties to the Mid-Autumn festivals and upbringing and her own daughter's mission school upbringing and Christian beliefs. There is the clash of tradition versus modernity, evident in the symbolic paper lantern versus the battery-operated lantern. There is the clash of family obligations versus self-independence, seen in the tension between fulfilling duties as a daughter worked out in the contexts and different choices of both the lives of the mother and daughter in the story. It is simplistic to think only in binaries but here, the opposition clearly serves to highlight the existence of different "languages" or discourses within the short story and brings to view clearly the tension as two voices interact in trying to work out a resolution. The story does not end with a resolution of the conflict but what the reader does see are the perspectives of the mother and the daughter, perhaps more so the mother as the focalization is taken from the mother's perspective. The reader is then free to (given her own resources for reading and

understanding) decide which internal dialogue in the text will meld with her own internal dialogue. Both voices may resonate in some way with the reader.

Viewing literary texts as discursive spaces where worldviews collide and intermingle allow for deliberate discussion of the perspectives that are brought up in the text, as well as the perspectives that are absent from the text. Learning to understand how the student (and teacher) as reader tends to focus on particular aspects and from particular perspectives helps students to become aware of their own biases and to understand how standing in a different pair of shoes will bring new light to the issue. Questions that can be raised include: Why the focus on mother and daughter rather than father in the story? What themes emerge from the way the worldviews are represented in the short story? How do we react to the reading? What are our own worldviews and how does that affect our own reading?

Language Awareness

One way to help students see the world is through paying attention to the language used in a literary text. Learning about language helps to bring greater awareness to understanding the world and learning about the world helps us to see how language is inextricably connected with the world we live in. A linguistic approach focuses on “*how* a text expresses what it says, to read a fuller understanding of *what* it says and *why*” (McRae & Vethamani, 2002, p. xiiii). Paying attention to text develops a sharper eye for language and understanding, and provides a way for students to learn about how the nuances of culture that are embedded in language. Here, we discuss three possible points

of entry at a “technical” level which can deepen understanding of the story in *Mid-Autumn*. Discussing the significance of beginnings, word choice and imagery help the students to understand better the story and the worldviews of the characters. In addition, students learn particular ways of looking at language that they carry across the reading of this short story.

Understanding the form of a short story and looking for significance in beginnings and endings help students to be attentive to important points in a story. Before the story is even read in full, students can learn to ask questions by looking at the following excerpt from the beginning of *Mid-Autumn*:

I wonder if she remembers the Mid-Autumn Festival? It is the fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month, when the moon shines the brightest. I eat the mooncake I baked for my daughter. Inside the soft golden biscuit shell is red bean paste, sunflower seeds, and *two* salted egg yolks – high in cholesterol, but I know she likes them.

I hope she would appear on the doorstep – surprise! But no. Instead, she grinned from the photo she sent, spreading her bloodied hands beside the brick kiln in another continent.

The mooncake, if don't eat, must throw away. But like that waste money, very *gek sim* – it hurts my heart. So I eat the mooncake for her.

Asking questions is often a good way to move in and through a story, and to discuss the expectations of reader that the form of the short story may encourage. Questions that may arise from the very first three paragraphs of *Mid-Autumn* include: What is the Mid-Autumn Festival? What is the significance of the two salted duck egg

yolks? Why is the mother waiting for her daughter? Where is the daughter? What does *gek sim* mean? Why does the Mid-Autumn festival make the mother *gek sim*? What is the significance of the writer using the dialect *gek sim* instead of using an English word? Paying attention to items made significant in the beginning alert students to themes and ideas. In addition, they begin to see how language can be shaped to create expectations and communicate to others through the familiar form of storytelling.

At word level, it is interesting in that Tan chooses to use the Chinese dialect word, *gek sim*, rather than an English word to express the mother's feelings. In the story, even the reader with no initial understanding of the word begins to build his or her understanding of the voice of the mother through the repetition that reveals new tiers to the word. In the first section, we see the word *gek sim* explained as "hurts my heart". The mother explains that when she loses money, the waste pains her. The second time we see the recurrence of the word is when her daughter loses the new battery-operated lantern the mother had bought at her daughter's insistence. The mother's hand action of putting her hand against her heart accentuates the pain felt at the loss of the lantern, at the waste of a new lantern just a moment ago precious now carelessly thrown away. In a later section, when her daughter has graduated from medical school and decides to become a missionary instead of using her education to earn money and gain financial independence, her mother refers to the lantern again, a symbolic reminder of the differences between their worldviews. This time, what is reflected is the attitude of the mother as opposed to the daughter. The mother sees the daughter as not valuing what she has by giving up a financially stable medical career in Singapore to go away to Uganda as a missionary while the daughter misreads her mother's concerns as unnecessary worry.

Finally, in the last part of the short story, we realise that the mother's own socio-historical background of lack and her desire for freedom and independence (symbolic in the Mid-Autumn story, another layer of voice in the story) affects her perception of what is good for her daughter. It is the reason she feels *gek sim*. But more than that, the poignancy results from the final insight the reader gains, that in the internal dialogue of the mother's reasoning is her own fear that her daughter will treat her like the lantern, once something precious now to be carelessly thrown away.

I shake my head. My lantern whirls, as the breeze spins the string on the stick.

The wind cannot extinguish the red glow that flickers in the darkness. I raise the red lantern, and pray for her deliverance.

In this final paragraph in the short story, we see the culmination of the meanings raised by the lantern motif as the associations of the Mid-Autumn festival. The lantern that signalled the call to "rise and fight" for the Chinese against the Mongolians becomes symbolic of the mother's own struggle. She fights in praying for her daughter's "deliverance." Ironically, deliverance from the mother's worldview is freedom from financial dependence and yet for her daughter, it is precisely this financial dependence (but on God) that is the daughter's deliverance.

The imagery of Jesus hanging on the cross provides another point of entry into the text and life. New life occurs for the daughter as she dies to her old cultures and beliefs to serve God in her work in Uganda (foregrounded again in the likeness of her posture in the picture to Jesus hanging on the cross – the act of crucifixion the promise of new life in this case) but for the mother, the posture is one of impending death for which her daughter requires deliverance. The clash of two cultures does not resolve itself within the

story but becomes fodder for internal dialogue with and within the reader who may be led to re-examine her own views about mother-daughter relationships, traditions and modernity, and notions of self-sacrifice and deliverance, amongst others.

Conclusion

Stories are a way to enter into discussions about both the word and the world, as this illustration using *Mid-Autumn* shows. Awareness of how language is used and how stories are repositories of worldviews help us to think about the kinds of stories we bring into the classroom, and the instructional practices that we design to accompany the stories we bring. Well-written narratives can provide discursive spaces for meaningful conversations about self and others in community, nation, and world, given appropriate instructional practices that encourage conversations about culturally relevant issues. Learning about how language is used, and paying attention to culture that is embedded in language and worldviews allow for deeper, and more complex understanding of both language and the world in which language exists. If we see the aim of the language classroom as developing students who are literate thinkers who “have the disposition to engage appropriately with texts of different types in order to empower action, feeling, and thinking in the context of purposeful social activity,” (Wells, 1990, p. 14), we need to begin to bring culturally relevant conversations into the classroom and encourage students to read in a critically and culturally reflexive manner that foregrounds awareness of language and worldview as an essential skill for our times.

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Bio-data

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