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USING ABRIDGED LITERATURE TEXTS IN SECONDARY 1–3 – CAN IT BE JUSTIFIED?

ROBERT YEO

As the title of my talk* suggests, there may be two parts to the topic. The first has to do, implicitly, with

- i) Who selects the literature texts for Secondary 1–3 in our secondary schools?

The second asks

- ii) Have teachers responsible for the selection taken into account the relatively large number of abridged texts in **use** and justified its **use**?

The answer to who **selects** is easily given. In the Preliminary Report on ***The Teaching of Literature in Secondary Schools Seminar***, 21–22 March 1980, organised by the Institute of Education, about 450 teachers present was asked, in a questionnaire, to identify the persons largely responsible for text selection. This is the detailed reply:

“In most of the schools where the participants were teaching, the senior English teacher seemed to be the person responsible for selecting the literature texts. In some schools, however, the senior English teacher collaborated with either the principal or the subject teacher or both.

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| a) | Principal/Vice Principal | 1.4% |
| b) | Senior English Teacher | 46.2% |
| c) | Subject Teacher | 16.5% |
| d) | Committee | 9.0% |
| | Combination of (a), (b) & (c) | 4.1% |
| | Combination of (b) & (c) | 22.8% "1 |

What is selected is also easily answered. The Ministry of Education issues yearly the List of Recommended Books for Literature/Supplementary Reading/Teachers' Reference/For Primary and Secondary Schools. For teaching, as opposed to supplementary reading, teachers generally choose from Section 1, Books recommended for Literature.

In the Introduction, the List is referred to as an Approved Booklist, and it cautions that the "Booklist is not exhaustive. It is meant only as a reference guide. It is not obligatory for schools to restrict their choice of books to the Booklist." (Introduction, January 1983).

Nevertheless, most teachers are guided by this list. I do not wish to inquire into the reasons for this practice because I want to focus on an issue related to it, which is, the presence of a relatively large number of abridged books. I need only refer to the List of Recommended Books for Literature, Volume 2, 1984, to these simplified titles for Secondary 3: ***Close Encounters of the Third Kind, 1 Robot, 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea, Liar! and Other Modern Stories, The War of the Worlds, A Fall of Moondust, From Earth to Moon, The Time Machine and The Snow Goose and Other Stories.***

This prompts my next question, the question of ***why***. Specifically, ***why*** are there so many books, especially novels, which are abridged, adapted, retold or simplified, for use in Secondary 1 – 3?

What Happens When A Classic Is Altered?

This talk is largely an attempt to find satisfactory answers to the question, if at all satisfactory answers can be found. In the course of examining such books, I came to three conclusions about such books. The first is,

- i) that a book may be abridged, adapted, retold or simplified;

- ii) related to i), it appears that abridgement and simplification amount to the same in that the book is reduced in the number of words and the vocabulary is restricted, whereas adaptation and retelling **usually** means reduction in vocabulary but not necessarily in length.

Secondly,

- iii) that abridgement, adaptation, retelling and simplification only happens to fiction, especially novels, very seldom to plays and never to poetry.

One of the best discussions of what happens when fiction is simplified is to be found in Ch 5 of Marckwardt, ***The Place of Literature in The Teaching of English as a Second or Foreign Language***. He takes as example a passage from H. G. Wells ***The Invisible Man*** and its simplified version, which is reduced to two-thirds the length of the original down to the level of 2,000 words of Michael West's ***A General Service List***. The example comes from the beginning of the story.

Mr Teddy Henfrey's First Impression (Original)

At Gleeson's corner he saw Hall, who had recently married the stranger's hostess at the 'Coach and Horses,' and who now drove the lopping conveyance, when occasional people required it, to Sidderbridge Junction, coming towards him on his return from that place. Hall had evidently been "stopping a bit" at Sidderbridge, to judge by his driving. "Ow do, Teddy?" he said, passing.

"You got a rum un up home!" said Teddy.

Hall very sociably **pulled up**. "What's that?" he asked.

"Rum-looking **customer** stopping at the 'Coach and Hones,'" said Teddy. "My sakes!"

And he proceeded to give Hall a vivid description of his wife's grotesque guest. "Looks a bit like a disguise, don't it? I'd like to see a man's face **if I** had him stopping in my place," said Henfrey. "But women are that trustful — where strangers are concerned. He's took your rooms, and he ain't even given a name, Hall."

First Impressions (Abridged)

At the street corner he saw Hall, who had lately married the lady of the inn. "How do, Teddy?" said Hall as he passed.

"You've got a strange visitor!" said Teddy.

Hall stopped. "What's that?" he asked.

"Queer man stopping at the inn," said Teddy.

And he described Mrs Hall's guest. "Looks a bit funny, doesn't it? I'd like to see a man's face if I had him stopping in my house," said Henfrey. "But women are so simple with strangers. He's taken your rooms, and he hasn't even given a name." 2

Marckwardt's comments are so succinct that I shall not simplify, abridge or adapt him but shall quote him in full:

The first thing to observe is that the 153 words of the original have been reduced to 92 in the abridgment, thus maintaining roughly the one-third scale of reduction which was mentioned earlier. What is most surprising about this is that upon casually reading the two versions, the scale of reduction seems rather more drastic than the figure given. This impression probably derives from the fact that the passages of direct quotation, though often reworded, are about the same length as the original, unless they are omitted altogether. This leaves the burden of reduction to fall primarily upon the descriptive and narrative passages, especially the former.

As an illustration of the previous point, the 62 words of the first paragraph in Wells' original are cut to 24. The result is a loss of virtually all concrete, descriptive detail, and a reduction to whatever bare statements are necessary to keep the narrative moving. The treatment of the directly quoted passages is notably chiefly for the elimination of all dialect forms, those which might be considered local, and the rather more general markers of social dialect. Cockney 'ow, the expression *rum un, took* used as a past participle, and *ain't* are all changed, laundered so to speak. The very specific "looks like a disguise" becomes "looks funny." The first sentence of the final paragraph again illustrates drastic reduction of descriptive language.

In short, what is lost in the abridgment is specifying detail, non-standard language which can be helpful in characterizing a speaker, and also (though not illustrated in the specimens quoted above) passages which serve to indicate connection and sequence. One seems

to have the bones of a skeleton rather than a fleshe'd-out body. The gain is in the ease of reading and the **speed** of getting through the selection.

These comparisons have been made not for the purpose of putting the simplified and abridged versions in an unfavourable light but rather to try to show what is lost and what may be gained in them. If unintentionally the approach here has seemed to be somewhat negative, it is only because what has been excised or changed shows up very concretely, whereas the gains can only be surmised. 3

The ethics of abridgment could perhaps be put simply in this way. Is the reader (in this case the student) harmed in any way by reading a simplified story? If it could be demonstrated (probably a difficult thing to do) that he is not harmed, then the practice of making him read and study simplified texts should continue, for the benefits he may derive.

But perhaps a more fruitful line of reasoning might be to ask, Are you doing injury to the novel in simplifying it, because in so doing you are tampering with the novel as it is written?

What Is A Classic?

This is a particularly pertinent question to ask if the novel is a classic. What, after all, is a classic?

We may approach the answer indirectly by examining three pertinent pronouncements on what makes a piece of writing good, i.e. good enough to be regarded as a classic:

- i) "Poetry is the best words in the best' order." (S. T. Coleridge)
- ii) "Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree." (Ezra Pound A.B.C. of Reading, p 28)
- iii) "A classic is a classic not because it conforms to certain structural rules, or fits certain definitions (of which its author had quite probably never heard.) It is

a classic because of a certain eternal and irrepressible freshness." (Pound, *A.B.C of Reading*, pp 13–14)

The first two quotations provide clues about the elements in a poem, play, novel or any work of literary merit that gives to it classic status, and chief among these elements in the use of language. Coleridge draws attention not only to vocabulary, "the best words" but to what is indivisible from it, "the best order". The best order refers to the arrangement of words in a way that communicates, from the point of view of the writer, the maximum effect. Largely it is a matter of syntax and vocabulary, and often both operate to compress language and, as Pound says, "charge (it) with meaning to the utmost possible degree." This loading of meaning is what is popularly known as **style**, a way of writing peculiar to a writer.

Teachers of literature recognise **style** as an important element or feature to teach. Another feature is **plot**, the narrative, the story or what it is about. And if we **accept** the definitions (and implications) of the statements of Coleridge and Pound, that language **is** paramount, then the story is of secondary importance. The story is merely an outline, the page of contents of a book and not the book. ~~The~~ page of contents of a book is a statement of intention, what the author proposes to deliver. For some story-tellers, especially writers of detective fiction and thrillers, the plot is important; for others, the plot is merely a skeleton that has to be fleshed. It is just one feature out of many other features like theme, character, style. People who abridge stories assume that the plot is the **most** important aspect of a classic. A classic, to them, is essentially a classic **story** and this they want to convey, albeit in its reduced form, to school students. They justify it with statements like,

- i) Children must read ***Moby Dick***, it is a classic story of a sea-captain who hunts a whale, or
- ii) Children must be exposed to ***The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn***, it is the classic story of a boy who meets a slave and sails down the Mississippi with him.

They make it appear that the story is everything and the other features – theme, character, style – are nothing. To reduce a novel is merely to make the story more accessible but the other characteristics, which are frequently more important and which make the book a classic, are reduced beyond recognition and often disappear completely.

In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain wrote this Explanatory note to his novel:

In this book a number of dialects are used, to wit: the Missouri negro dialect; the extremist form of the backwoods Southwestern dialect; the ordinary 'Pike County' dialect; and four modified varieties of this last. The shadings have not been done in a haphazard fashion, or by guesswork; but painstakingly, and with the trustworthy guidance and support of personal familiarity with these several forms of speech.

I make this explanation for the reason that without it many readers would suppose that all these characters were trying to talk alike and not succeeding. 4

The use of various dialects of American English is the basis of much of the humour of this great novel and its disappearance, as in the many simplified versions of it, make it just a story about a young boy who runs away with a slave and sails down the Mississippi on a raft.

Against Abridgement

In a paper I presented recently at an RELC Seminar *Literature Across the Curriculum: Choosing Texts Relevant to Other Subjects in the Singapore Secondary School Curriculum*, I argued for authenticity and against abridgement by asserting

"That a literature text should be authentic i.e., read as it was written. The notion of authenticity is well-known in language teaching and may be applied to literature-teaching. Anything that interferes with the interaction between the text and the reader, such as abridgement, must be looked upon as adversely affecting authenticity." 5

I went on to say:

"Perhaps there may be justification for their use in Secondary 1 and 2 because of the need to expose students to guided reading consistent with their abilities; but such an argument becomes more difficult to justify at the Secondary 3 level, the level just before the GCE 'O', when they are expected to study authentic texts... Instead of these adapted books, it may be better for the sake of authenticity, to choose unabridged titles from the thousands of books that appear every year in English for young readers in England and America. It is, of course, a difficult task but if the criteria of authenticity is accepted, then simplified texts clearly do not satisfy the criteria." 6

I will end by drawing to your attention to the idea that the secondary syllabus for literature be looked at as a whole, beginning from Secondary 1 and going on to 'O' level. The books used should provide for graded and extensive reading as students progress up. For this purpose, my former colleague, Marcia P. Liu has developed A ***Hypothetical Syllabus for Secondary Literature Classes***, mentioned in the book ***To Cipher and to Sing Ideas and Activities for Literature Teachers*** which we jointly wrote.

A Hypothetical Syllabus For Secondary Literature Classes

In addition to a selection of books like the following, pupils should also read many poems, a variety of books both fiction and non-fiction for extensive reading, and a few plays read aloud in class.

Secondary One – Simplified Texts

1. ***Tales of Si Kabayan***, Murphy, Oxford Progressive English Readers Grade 1 (1900 headwords).
2. ***The House of Sixty Fathers***, Dejong, OPER I.
3. ***The Crocodile Dies Twice***, Fraser, OPER II (2600 headwords).
4. ***Tales of Mystery and Imagination***, Poe, OPER III (3500 headwords).
5. ***Frankenstein***, Shelley, OPER IV (5000 headwords).

Secondary Two – Unsimplified Children's/Adolescents' Novels

1. ***On the Run***, Bawden, Heinemann.

3. *Sing to the Dawn*, Ho, Eastern universities Press.
4. *A Wrinkle in Time*, L'Engle, Puffin.
5. *Cue for Treason*, Trease, Puffin.

Secondary Three – Adult Reading

1. *The Pearl*, Steinbeck.
2. *Animal Farm*, Orwell.
3. *Shane*, Schaeffer.
4. *The Millstone*, Drabble.
5. *Lord of the Flies*, Golding.

Secondary Four – Examination Texts

Three set texts, plus three or four related titles as extensive reading. 7

Hopefully, what we have recommended may provide a better alternative to the practice in some schools where abridged texts are used in Secondary 2 and 3.

NOTES

1. Preliminary Report on *The Teaching of Literature in Secondary Schools Seminar*, 21–22 March 1980, Institute of Education, Singapore. (Unpublished).
2. Albert H. Marckwardt. *The Place of Literature in the Teaching of English as a Second or Foreign Language*, The East-West Center, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1978, p. 58.
3. Marckwardt. pp. 58, 59.
4. Mark Twain. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1948.
5. Robert Yeo. *Literature Across the Curriculum*, Guidelines, Vol 7, No. 1, June 1985, RELC, Singapore.
6. Yeo, p. 4.
7. Marcia P. Liu & Robert Yeo. *To Cipher and To Sing Ideas and Activities for Literature Teachers*, Federal Publications, Singapore, 1984, pp. 19–20.