

USING THE STORY “THE CORN PLANTING” IN AN EFL CLASS

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When one is moved by the beauty of a literary work, chances are that he/she will feel compelled to tell others about that work, to share with them his/her feelings. This is really the case when I read “The Corn Planting” by Sherwood Anderson. I could not help telling and showing it to my friends and family, anyone who would spend some time to read it or listen to me. And if I have a chance at all, I would surely bring the story to my students, who I believe will undoubtedly enjoy it, not only as readers but also as foreign language learners. And I started to reflect, from an EFL teacher’s perspective, on how I would use the story to its best in the classroom if I am completely free to choose everything, to whom, how and why should I teach the story?

Regarding the first question “to whom” this story should be taught, there are a few issues to be considered. “The Corn Planting”, as a short story, in the first place, is “a complete work” and it can be “taught for its own sake without overt connection with other texts”. In terms of genre, short stories is one of the genres most favored and least feared by EFL students, as the research on student attitudes done by Alan Hiverla and Joseph Boyle (1988:180) revealed. The results of their research also reflect the attitudes of students in almost all EFL contexts toward genres. Vietnamese EFL students are no exception. I can tell from my own learning experience at university that short stories were more welcome than poems or plays or novels in our classroom. Moreover, this short story is really short, covering only three pages, so it would take less time to read and study, and would allow for more opportunities to investigate it more closely.

In terms of the style adopted, the story, written in the early twentieth century, is really modern. And it is absolutely not literary. Rather, the language used in the story is very close to the language of everyday life. Just like other stories by Sherwood Anderson, “The Corn Planting” is composed of short, syntactically

simple sentences and most of the lexical items are of spoken style. This makes the story accessible even to non-major students of English.

In terms of themes, the story deals centrally with dreams and hopes, life and death, human relationship, family, and the love of people for the land. Most of these themes are universal and thus potentially engaging. With regard to the last one, I would say Vietnamese students are more likely to understand the Hutchensons' behavior in their relationship with the land because this is an agricultural country; many students are children or grandchildren of farmers, whose lives are attached to the land. This would make the last theme not too difficult to them.

All of the aspects considered, the story is a perfect choice for EFL teachers. And while most other literary works can be fitting for use only in a restricted range of contexts, this story can be used in an exceptionally wide range of classes at various levels, from pre-intermediate to advanced classes and serves numerous purposes, depending upon the levels of the students. Lower level classes can approach the story as a model of grammar in context with numerous tenses in combination, or they can also use the story to enrich their spoken vocabulary, because it is particularly rich in idioms, phrase verbs and collocations used in everyday life. More advanced classes, possibly second year English majors, may learn how to write a narrative basing on this story, or they may well practice some speaking and listening when retelling the story or debating some certain topics stemming from the story. And even a third or fourth year English major would have a lot to learn from the story as part of a literature course.

And it is for this audience that I think the story would be most appropriate although it might be useful in other contexts as well. Many people may argue that this story is much too easy to teach a third year English major, and therefore may “do nothing to build up” their “language” (Marilyn Lewis, 1999:197) because “the difficulty of” the “text in terms of vocabulary, syntax and style” does not match “the student’s proficiency levels” (Tran Thi Nga, 2003:23). However, “The Corn Planting” is really a case where the simplicity in form does not mean simplicity in

content. That is why in order to study it, to understand it fully, and appreciate it just as it is deserved to be, we need to put it in a context where the class can spend more time discussing the story as a work of art and not just as a reading text.

Then comes the second question: how to teach the story to these students. Again, there could be an endless list of possible ways to organize the classroom activities. In the warm-up phase, which in my opinion is optional in teaching this story, I may have the students listen to a song with the same theme (“Child”, a Philippine song might be a good choice) and later on discuss the theme as a lead-in to the story. Alternatively, I may show them on the PowerPoint the picture “The Sower” by Van Gogh and ask them to discuss the possible meanings attached to the image of a sower, This would help to activate the students’ existing knowledge about conventionality in literature, and thus enhance their interpretation greatly in the later phases.

After the aloud reading and a few comprehension-checking close ended questions, I will have the students read the story while filling a chart with facts about the characters (see Carter and Long, 1991:68), including Old Hatch and his wife, Will Hutchenson, Hal Weyman and the narrator. The activity, involving some scanning and note-taking, will enable the students to collect all the possible details about every character, which will pave the way for the following task of writing character poems on Hatch and Will. These can be done in pairs first, then in pair clusters, where students will have more chances to justify their word choices. Attention can be drawn to Old Hatch in the relationship with the land and with the son by the way the chart and the poem are structured.

What follows is a class discussion on the two old people’s reaction toward their son’s tragic death. The discussion will be guided with a series of open ended questions aiming at activating the student’s experience and eliciting their responses. For example, the teacher may ask: “How do you feel about Will’s death?” “Have you ever seen anyone in real life or in another book or film in that situation? What did those people do when their children died unexpectedly?” This

class discussion is really like a forum where all “the voices” will be heard and “compete with each other”, as described in Bakhtin’s words.

In letting them to articulate all their personal ideas in the classroom, I aim at maximizing the interaction between the students and the characters and the author, and also that among the student themselves. After the discussion, I will focus more on the imagery of the two people “planting corn” by asking the students to complete the sentence “When one sows a seed down, he” to explore the possible meanings of the image. The next step is to finish the sentence “When the Hutchensons planted corn that night, they”, which will help the students to realize the conventionality and the creativity of the author in using the symbol.

After all these activities, I will ask the students to work in group to fill out a chart on the truths, the beauty and pleasure, and the moral lessons they get from the story. This activity will help the students to synthesize all the things they have learned so far, and at the same time allow for more interpretation of the themes of “The Corn Planting”

A post activity might be writing a paragraph on the students’ responses toward a message – the most important message – in the student’s opinion – that the author want to send to us through the story. This can possibly be better done with some background music like The Moonlight Sonata by Beethoven.

If everything can be done as planned, various learning benefits can be exploited: the students will have chances to practice all of the linguistic skills and more importantly, they will be able to improve their literary competence through the diverse activities which help to consolidate the pattern of interpretation: from images to ideas. They will also learn how to use their existing knowledge and experience in reading a literary work interactively.

With regards to the *why* of teaching this story in my class, the answer can be as simple as this: because it is a literary work; it is literature. And many scholars have discussed at length the pedagogical values of literature in a language classroom.

They are in complete agreement on some main points, though each of them would express those points a little differently.

The first point is that literature “encourages language acquisition” (Lazar, 1993:17), “both on usage and use level” (McKay, 1982:531). Beside the linguistic skills, literature is frequently taught for the purpose of sharpening the student’s interpretive skills and improving their literary competence in general. The third point scholars all agree on is that literature helps “increase cultural understanding” (McKay, 1982:531) and cultural tolerance. Another major point they put an emphasis on is the holistic value of literature: it educates the whole person, by which they mean “to develop their critical abilities and to increase their emotional awareness” (Lazar, 1993:19).

All of these purposes can apply perfectly to this short story in one way or another. And if we look back at the activities above, we may find these purposes realized in various steps of the lesson. However, in a limited time and for that particular audience, I would teach the story for two main purposes only: first, to develop the students' interpretive skills and second, to contribute to their personal growth emotionally and morally.

The students' literary competence will be significantly improved when they study this story. As analyzed in the previous part, the students will learn how to go from concrete details to more general judgments about the characters and the themes of the story. Also, they will learn how to make a connection between the text and other works of art and that between the text and life in order to imagine - interpret and respond to the text. Particularly, they will get acquainted with the fundamental elements of a short story, including plot, character, theme, style, point of view and setting and start to practice analyzing these elements in reading fiction. They will also be sensitized to some rhetorical features as well as the artistic use of language in the text. Another noteworthy contribution of the lesson to the students' literary competence is that it may help the students to realize the impression of a literary work on them (through the synthesizing activity of filling out the chart of truths,

beauty, and moral lessons) and therefore can “infuse a continuous love and appreciation of literary text, which would continue beyond the classroom”.

In a speech Anderson made on "The obligations of the writer" in the University of Colorado in 1937, he said: "The job that terribly wants doing is the creation of more and more understanding of man for man. I think that is the most important of the story tellers' jobs." And this story, written with that purpose in mind, provides readers with a window to human feelings and experience, through which they do not only see and somehow go inside the internal world of other human beings but also change themselves into better and spiritually richer people.

For example, my undergraduate students, mostly at the age of 21 or 22, who have never been a parent, when reading this story may understand how it feels to be a mother or a father. They may think of their own parents and see how exactly and sensitively the story conveys that universal truth about parents' love for their children. The way the narrator tells the story may also teach the students how to look at people with a warmer heart, always striving to understand them and find the hidden beauty in the hearts of those little ordinary people.

In this essay, I have made an attempt to address the three questions: to whom, how and why should I teach “The Corn Planting” in the EFL classroom. Though it needs much more effort to investigate these issues thoroughly and each teacher may have his own way to teach and his own preferences as to what to teach the students in the story, there is one thing I am sure: this story can be worthwhile for both language teachers and learners alike. So if you are teaching English in an EFL classroom, just give it a try.

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