

TEACHING LITERATURE WITH TOUGH TOPICS IN ELT CLASS: BULLYING AND BIGOTRY

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Abstract

Literature is an important vehicle to teach character building in language education. Sensitive topics like bullying and prejudice in literary works are helpful to promote understanding and empathy toward others. This article aims to discuss two short stories, namely “All Summer in a Day” by Ray Bradbury and “Shame” by Dick Gregory that can be used to increase students’ critical thinking, conscience, and compassion in language learning. The first half of the article examines the rationale for using short stories with such topics to impart values in language learning. The other half explores the significance of the two stories to use in ELT class. The article concludes that studying literature is, by default, practicing character education and that good support and reinforcement for that purpose can be done by addressing delicate issues that sometimes may appear harsh and unpleasant.

Keywords: bigotry, bullying, empathy, short stories

Introduction

The wealth of scholarships on the use of literature in teaching language have mostly focused on its benefits (Ghosn, 2002; Showalter, 2003; Vural, 2013), limitations (Akyel, & Yalcin, 1990; O’Sullivan, 2017), and practical application (Shelton-Strong, 2011; Burke, Csabi, Week, & Zerkowitz, 2012). The pro-literature circle argues that literature provides appealing and authentic materials to motivate students whilst broadening their cultural awareness that is part-and-parcel in language learning. Meanwhile, those who are unlikely interested in using literature in ELT claim that unfamiliarity and difficulty of the language used in literature may thwart the students, especially the beginners. It would seem, however, that inclusion of literary works like poems, short stories, novels, etc. in ELT remain popular, thanks to practitioners who continually search and share their lived-experience and praxis in using literature to develop teaching methodology as well as to sustain passion in literature. Added to this enduring interest of using literature in ELT is today’s emphasis on the learner-centered teaching paradigm. Teachers no longer ask the students an outmoded question on literature’s relevance to life. The question is now changed into: “What is the story’s relevance to your life?”

This article therefore attempts to engage in the debate on the kind of literature that is relevant to students’ life. It should be born in mind that the chief purpose of

ELT is to enable students to think creatively and analytically about the English language. The discussion will focus on two sampled short stories to help students understand and appreciate literature by increasing their empathy, sensitivity, and understanding of human experiences as they learn English. When the students are assigned to analyze, interpret, and evaluate the stories, it is important that they grasp what the texts mean, how they shape meaning, and why such meaning-making takes place. In other words, this article intends to show the relevance of using the chosen short stories to develop students' competence, conscience, and compassion.

The Texts

To begin with the précis of the first story, "All Summer in a Day" is a story about a pupil named Margot, recently arrived from Earth via tunnel's exit, who becomes the target of intimidation by her classmates in an elementary school on the planet Venus because she says that she remembers having seen the sun. Life on Venus is all rain and heavy showers except for one day in seven years when the rain stops and the sun is observable. Margot can still recollect her vision of the sun a few years shorter than her classmates who may forget their experience of seeing the sun when they were only two years old. Out of jealousy, Margot's classmates then isolate and mock her because she can tell the warmth of the sun and write poems about it. On the day when the rain is predicted to stop, the school children lock Margot up in a cupboard. The rain does stop and the sun appears to the delight of the children who celebrate the rare cosmic event by screaming, running, and playing about heartily that they forget all about Margot. When the rain starts to fall again, they remember Margot and quickly unlock her. They regret and feel pity on Margot for having to wait for another seven years to enjoy the sun again.

Next, the second story, "Shame," is also a story of growing pain. Written by Dick Gregory, it tells of the fatherless Richard, an Afro-American child who has a crush on his classmate, the rich, clean, and smart Helene Tucker. Growing up in profound poverty, Richard goes to school with no breakfast and hardly learns anything there. He wears his only clothes that he has to wash, dry off, and put on again to school only to see Helen. Despite everybody's disapproval of his behavior, Richard is like any ordinary boys who demand recognition and attention from the loved ones until one day he learns about shame. It is the day when his teacher calls out each name of the students whose father would like to donate how much money to the Community Chest for the poor Black families in the neighborhood. Richard would like to donate the money he already saved in bigger amount than Helen's father to impress the girl, but the teacher leaves out his name. She, in contrast, makes the little boy embarrassed by her comments that the donation is for people of similar social status with Richard and that he does not even have a father. The shame he encountered at a young age has deeply impacted his life until he is 21 and has his own family.

The Context

“All Summer in a Day” and “Shame” are classroom stories set in different time and place. However, the stories can be related to Indonesian current school situations whereby bullying and bigotry sometimes occur to different levels of intensity. Based on the review made by the Judicial Watch Society of the Indonesian University, perpetrators of robbery, murder, threats, blackmail, etc. that occurred in 1.276 district court rulings in 2010 to 2015 were low-educated youngsters between 15 and 34 years old (Wijaya, 2017). Juvenile delinquency has increased from just mischief mediocre (or fad) to criminality owing to unfulfilled desire for recognition or money. Greater crimes like destruction and robbery which are more prevalent nowadays are resulted from intense law-breaking exposure through film, news, social media, and direct association or with the criminals (Unayah & Sabarisman, 2015), to say nothing of psycho-social problems like the youth’s craving for self-esteem and peer pressure (Hidayati, 2016). Most studies conclude that character education from parents and schools since the early years is of supreme importance. Here we see that children’s capacity to bully and hate other people who look different can manifest to greater crimes in the future.

Another serious issue is bigotry. Just as the Venusian school children in the story dislike Margot who comes from different planet, little Richard’s classmates and his teacher loathe him for his skin-color and poverty. Given the rising xenophobia throughout the world, educators are at the forefront to instill the values of tolerance and pluralism for the young people. Intolerance and “Othering” has started to tear away the pluralistic fabric of Indonesian society for the past three years. It is easy to call to mind that some private universities in Yogyakarta were accused of religious proselytization to students of different beliefs by Muslim hardliners in 2016; they demanded that the universities display no billboards showing picture of hijab-worn female students. Fortunately, recent studies show that respect toward others’ belief among students can still be kept at bay. For example, tolerance is still upheld among students across religions in three universities in Yogyakarta, thanks to the inter-religious dialogue sessions held by each university (Khasanah, 2017); University bulletin promoting religious harmony can help fight back radicalism in Cilacap (Purnomo, 2017); and a broad game based on one local wisdom from the Moluccas works well to promote tolerance among the youths (Tangidy & Setiawan, 2016). Thus being said, there is no exaggeration to affirm that the two American short stories discussed can serve as precautionary tales. Given the simple narratives and less than 2.000-level vocabularies (Adolphs & Schmitt, 2003), both stories can appeal students in ELT class.

The Text-in-Context

At first, “All Summer in a Day” reads like a familiar school prank story. A closer reading of the story shows that the author is in doubt of technology when it outweighs humankind. Known more by the millennial generation as the author of a novel made into a 2018 Hollywood dystopian movie *Fahrenheit 451*, Ray Bradbury is a science-fiction story teller, whose fantastic but sometimes weird imagination helps people to reflect on the importance of empathy and how the

lack of it is precarious. Bradbury's stories depict human thirst of knowledge and inventions but at the same time they warn the evil of technology (Panasenka & Šestáková, 2013). Following the seminal work "The Artistry of Bradbury" (Reilly, 1971), several studies cited Reilly's conviction that Bradbury's penchant for technology allows the author to create diverse characters in their relation with technology, such as mass exploitation (McGiveron, 1996) and human being's emptiness (Fry, 2003) especially seen in Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451. Imagine, for instance, a man whose habit of walking along the pedestrian at night is considered odd and antisocial in 2053 in Bradbury's other famous short story "The Pedestrian". When the man is arrested for giving unsatisfactory answers to interrogation by an automated police car; and when in his hysteria he is robotically taken to a psychiatrist, Bradbury seemingly questions technology that prevails over humanity. Nobody walks in all-automated, pre-set, and unemotional society of 2053. It seems here that being different is not tolerated. The theme of excluding someone who is different from the rest of the group is repeated in "All Summer in a Day" discussed herein.

In the beginning, the school children ostracize Margot for she is different. They scorn her first-hand experience with the sun's glory and warmth similarly felt by people on Earth. On the planet Venus with rains every day, Margot's experience is abnormal and intolerable to accept. Formerly planned as a practical joke by locking Margot up in a closet as a punishment, this incident dearly costs her. The poor girl is punished for her belief and denied the long awaiting moment of the sun's arrival. Here we see that children have the capacity of becoming cruel and criminal. This is harsh, but at the same time the event helps transform the children. Bradbury's story allows readers to see the students' transformation: They formerly bully Margot but later regret their wrongdoing and feel sorry and sympathetic to her. Presumably, their treatment to Margot will be different hereafter.

Told in the first person narrator, "Shame" is yet another bullying story with a school setting, but this time the teacher is the bully. The story is set in the author's own time when African Americans were hardly considered noteworthy people in the society. In his essay about Dick Gregory and other Afro-American authors, Arnez says "To be a Negro in white America is to be branded as a lesser mortal. Yet even against these tremendous obstacles, the Negro has forged a culture which Americans of every race are only now coming to understand and to appreciate" (1969, p. 61). In the story under discussion, the narrator has to wait for years to recover from his bully experience by his teacher. The fact that he thence can forgive and forget makes the story a lesson of empathy.

Reading Literature, Saying "No" to Bully and Bigotry

Research shows that ample opportunities are available to teach character education in ELT while fostering students' linguistic and literature competencies (e.g. Gunawan, 2014; Mariani, 2016; & Ilyas, 2016). This part is to discuss the educational aspects of the two short stories when taught with three pillars in Ignatian Pedagogy applied in Jesuit education, i.e. Competence, Conscience, and

Compassion in mind. *Competence* is the students' ability to analyze the intrinsic elements of the short stories (plot, setting, character, theme, point of view, figurative languages, symbols, etc.) and to identify the literary devices (symbolism, allusion, imagery, etc.). By *Conscience*, it means that the students are able to develop their habits of reading while increasing their creativity and innovation for their own joy of learning as well as cultivation of their personal reflexivity and societal sensitivity. *Compassion* is one distinct feature in reflective teaching that helps students develop the capacity to be in solidarity with the other people's suffering. By reading different literature throughout the world, the students may manifest in their life greater concerns, empathy, and respect for others with which they work toward God's greater glory (Dewi, 2014).

In order to achieve all of this, the use of literature in ELT should be geared toward human life quality. The view of literature being a social laboratory is rather outdated now because of the multiplicity of meanings – a reading concept introduced by poststructuralist thinking. The discussion of characters in literary works involves critical thinking. Here, the students are not to lay judgments that A is good, B is bad, and C is neutral, and so forth. Instead, teaching literature in ELT class should enable students to see that A and B so behave because of some reasons that ask for other people to understand. Why C is neutral, likewise, should become the students' query. It is noted here that building a character means doing good and positive things with which a person exercises her/his conscience. There are times when character traits overlap with personality traits, e.g. being honest but insensitive may make someone come across as impolite (Pines et al., 2006, p. 1). Bullying and bigotry shown in the two stories are among delicate problems that young people often encounter in their daily experiences. By examining the character (means persona) in the short stories, the students can learn about showing empathy toward others. The Six Pillars of character are useful to detail the discussion, namely trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, caring, fairness, and citizenship (CHARACTER COUNTS!). These values are indeed the practical manifestation of religious values which are frequently emphasized in Indonesian curriculum as critically looked into in ELT owing to its evaluation mechanics (e.g. Mambu, 2014; Mambu, 2015).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthy is a character trait to instill as early as possible. Someone is trustworthy if other people can count on her/him. In "All Summer in a Day," Margot is not trustworthy in the eyes of her classmates. Neither is the narrator in "Shame" according to his teacher. Margot eventually gains trust when the Venusian children experience the sun. Like Margot's classmates, Richard's teacher distrusts him. She is annoyed by his behavior when protesting why his name is left out:

She turned toward the blackboard. “I don’t have time to be playing with you, Richard.”

“My daddy said he’d...” “Sit down, Richard, you’re disturbing the class.” “My daddy said he’d give...fifteen dollars.”

She turned around and looked mad. “We are collecting this money for you and your kind, Richard Gregory. If your daddy can give fifteen dollars you have no business being on relief.”

“I got it right now, I got it right now, my Daddy gave it to me to turn in today, my daddy said...”

“And furthermore,” she said, looking right at me, her nostrils getting big and her lips getting thin and her eyes opening wide, “We know you don’t have a daddy.” (Gregory, p. 2)

On the one hand the narrator is wrong for lying that his “father” would like to donate some amount of money. On the other hand, he is not truly at fault either because he genuinely wants to give the money albeit his infatuation to Helen. At this point, ELT students can learn about conscience. They can reflect on how today’s young people measure their self-esteem from the many “like” hits they get on the social media. In attempting to gain putative acceptance, they go the extra mile to publish online photos or news on their make-believe actions, hence they lack trustworthiness.

Respect

Respect is taken to mean honoring other people either for their achievement/rectitude or dissimilarities. It is a key to prevent bully in bigotry.

Margot is cast differently from the rest of the class. “She was an old photograph dusted from an album, whitened away, and if she spoke at all her voice would be a ghost” (Bradbury, p. 2). She gains no respect because she is different.

They hated her pale snow face, her waiting silence, her thinness, and her possible future.

“Get away!” The boy gave her another push. “What’re you waiting for?” Then, for the first time, she turned and looked at him. And what she was waiting for was in her eyes.

“Well, don’t wait around here!” cried the boy savagely. “You won’t see nothing!” (Bradbury, p. 3)

Like Margot, Richard in “Shame” is outcast because he is different from his affluent classmates due to his ethnicity and abject poverty. Going to school with empty stomach makes him unable to stay focus. He fails to earn his teacher’s respect, thus:

The teacher thought I was a troublemaker. All she saw from the front of the room was a little black boy who squirmed in his idiot's seat and made noises and poked the kids around him. I guess she couldn't see a kid who made noises because he wanted someone to know he was there. (Gregory, p. 2)

It is not wrong for the narrator to ask his teacher why she gives him no chance to participate in the Community Chest. The teacher insults him by revealing his identity as a fatherless child. This incident left the narrator a painful experience because thereafter he is weighed down by shame. He recounts how reluctant he is to attend the school Christmas dinner, to ask rotten peaches from Mr. Ben or Mrs. Simmons' spoonful of sugar, and to get food from the relief truck. He recapitulates once more: "Yeah, the whole world heard the teacher that day-we all know you don't have a Daddy" (Gregory, p. 4). The teacher gives Richard no respect although the young boy wants to earn self-respect by his donation attempt.

It is clear here that people affected with lack of respect can lead to low self-esteem. Lack of respect is a growing problem in society that ELT can effectively address through these simple short stories with challenging topics.

Responsibility

Responsibility is an important character trait that makes other people able to count on us. A person is responsible when any duty entrusted to her/him can be completed. Margot is responsible as a child to obey the decision made by her parents in leaving the Earth planet. She does not quit school despite the distressing situation. Like a captive, she is alienated in her new school environment but the 7-year-old-girl has to stay on. The author says:

There was talk that her father and mother were taking her back to Earth next year; it seemed vital to her that they do so, though it would mean the loss 80 of thousands of dollars to her family. (Bradbury, p. 2)

Responsibility is, in one way or another, present in little Richard's personality. This seven-year old boy makes an effort to go to school by wearing clean clothes. His daily routine is making sure that his clothes are ready despite the trouble involved as follows.

The pipes were frozen again, there was no water in the house, but I washed my socks and shirt every night. I'd get a pot, and go over to Mister Ben's grocery store, and stick my pot down into his soda machine and scoop out some chopped ice. By evening the ice melted to water for washing. I got sick a lot that winter because the fire would go out at night before the clothes were dry. In the morning I'd put them on, wet or dry, because they were the only clothes I had. (Gregory, p. 1)

The readers are told later that he, too, is responsible to earn money since he cannot rely on his widowed mother: “I’d been out hustling all day, shining shoes, selling newspapers, and I had goo gobs of money in my pocket” (Gregory, p. 3). With the money Richard attends to his own little enjoyment. He says, “Bought me a bowl of chili for fifteen cents, and a cheese- burger for fifteen cents, and a Pepsi for five cents, and a piece of chocolate cake for ten cents” (Gregory, p. 3).

ELT students can therefore learn about responsibility from the child’s characters in both stories.

Caring

Caring is showing concern and kindness to others. Neither bullying nor bigotry may occur if people care.

Though poor, Richard is a caring person. Despite his ulterior motive, Richard saves money to enable him to contribute to helping the needy. Thus when his teacher says that the money is for people of his kind, she negates the idea and possibility that poor people can care for one another. Here, ELT students learn to exercise their Conscience about caring for others. Near the end of the story, the narrator gives another sad incident about his failed attempt to help his fellow citizen; this time is a wino. This homeless man is beaten to bleed for not paying the 25-cent-food he ordered. Little Richard intends to pay for him from the money collected from selling newspapers and shining shoes, but the wino, feeling offended refuses it outright, saying: “Keep your twenty-six cents. You don’t have to pay, not now. I just finished paying for it.” (Gregory, p. 3) Although the narrator old man later apologizes, the narrator cannot help lamenting, “I was pretty sick about that. I waited too long to help another man” (Gregory, p. 4). Here, beneath the story is Gregory’s pretext: The society comprises of people who are selfish and ignorant. They do not care and unwilling to help each other.

Indeed, care and compassion seem to overlap in “Shame.” If loving is caring, Helen, the “light-complexioned little girl with pigtails and nice manners” (Gregory, p. 1) cares for Richard and she can feel the pain of the black boy after being humiliated by the teacher. The narrator says, “Helene Tucker turned around, her eyes full of tears. She felt sorry for me. Then I could not see her too well because I was crying, too” (Gregory, p. 3). Compassion is palpably felt by the whole class for he says that “everyone had heard what the teacher had said, everyone had turned around and felt sorry for me” (Gregory, p. 3).

A lesson about caring is also seen in the final paragraph of Bradbury’s short story when the children feel sorry for having unlocked Margot and given her no chance to see the sun. Compassion is shown because the formerly malicious Venusian kids turn to feel pity for Margot.

Caring is significant in every learning process. The success of ELT by way of cooperative learning method, for example, largely depends on learners who are

willing to cooperate with, care for, and learn from each other as shown by research in countries like Vietnam (Tuan, 2010), China (Ning, 2010), Taiwan (Pan & Wu, 2013). Similarly, in Sanata Dharma University alone, several case studies in the use of cooperative learning in ELT confirm the finding that reflective teaching-learning helps to develop students' cognition and affection (Ardi, 2017; Ferianda & Mukarto, 2017; & Kuswando, 2017). As such, the two stories are reflective.

Fairness

To be fair is to give impartial treatment without discrimination. Bullying and bigotry are two social ills caused by lack of fairness. The two stories here provide ELT class with theme of social (in) justice.

Bradbury wrote "All Summer in a Day" in 1959 at the height of US vs. USSR spaceship race. The short story tells us of a competition between Earth power and that of the other planet. Although seemingly Margot is lost in the race, her classmates in the end give in. Margot sticks to her conviction about the warmth of the sun, while others hardly remember the sun's glory. Unfairly, they lock Margot up although in the end they acknowledge that Margot is right and they are wrong. They thus repent, if too late. Bradbury wants readers to ponder upon the meaning of fairness and the value of competition in the age of technology.

In "Shame," fairness is not shown at all. The wino orders some food but refuses at first to pay until he is tortured. It is not unfair either for Mister Williams the restaurateur to treat the poor man this way for the food of its worth:

Mister Williams jumped over the counter and knocked the wino off his stool and beat him over the head with a pop bottle. Then he stepped back and watched the wino bleed. Then he kicked him. And he kicked him again. (Gregory, p. 4)

The narrator sees this injustice and says, "Leave him alone, Mister Williams. I'll pay the twenty-six cents" (Gregory, p. 4). The story depicts the society's incapability to feel for others. A lesson of compassion is clear herein.

Citizenship

Citizenship is simply defined as the status of being a citizen in a state. But in character education, it means "to conduct oneself in accordance with the rights, duties, and privileges of being an inhabitant of a geographical location by means of birth or naturalization" (Huitt, 2005). Written in 1964 by a humorist, Civil Rights activist, and social critic, "Shame" invites the readers to see how American society at that time denied the rights of the black people their status as the United States citizens. Gregory was committed to helping the oppressed to voice out their rights without insulting their dignity. Although little Richard's action to top up the welfare money is reproachable for its hidden reason, he makes an attempt to

perform his duty as a good citizen of the class. ELT students can again learn about conscience and compassion from the character in the final part of the story when he tries to help the wino for the meals.

In “All Summer in a Day,” citizenship is purely for inhabitants of Venus, not for an Earth immigrant like Margot. The school children of the host planet, however, do not use their citizenship wisely. They behave what they like. They hardly respect diversity. Margot is not a good Venusian citizen either because of her alienation. She refuses to play games and sing joyful songs in class, thanks to the awkward social situation that leads to her depression. Thus, the discussion on citizenry in an ELT class allows the students to empathize with refugees, victims of civil war and/or natural disasters, and many other oppressed people.

Conclusion

This article has shown that two American short stories, namely “All Summer in a Day” by Ray Bradbury and “Shame” by Dick Gregory, are suitable to be used in ELT class. The vocabulary level and linguistic complexity in both short stories is of upper-intermediate level. Thus, it can help students to develop their cognitive skills as well as to spark their interest in literature without discouraging them. This study has also shown that the narrative of two children aged 7 being bullied by their respective classmates is appropriate to read critically and contextually to enhance students’ competence, conscience, and compassion. Through the two stories, it is revealed that bullying and bigotry can occur in early childhood. It is worrying that young people learn to hate others simply because they are of different culture/habit, ethnicity, and social class. Reading each story, ELT students can reflect on six golden traits proved useful in studying English, namely trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, care, and citizenship. It is at this particular point that character education is important to be incorporated into ELT through short stories with various themes including the heartbreaking ones. This article therefore is supportive of using literature in ELT for purposeful language learning with which each student can ask transformative question mused about at the start of this article, i.e. the story’s relevance to her/his own life.

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