Teaching Literature and British Culture Through Film

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Introduction

This may sound odd, but my first experience of English Literature curriculae in Japanese universities was at an English conversation school in Saitama. I asked a young student what she was studying and, on learning that she was doing English Literature, became excited at the prospect of an interesting 40 minutes talking about books. Thinking I'd start simple, I asked what authors she had studied. A long silence was followed by an embarrassed "Shakespeare" and that was the end of the discussion. Thirty nine minutes to go and counting! Over the next few years this experience was repeated several times and, three and a half years later, when I had served my time in *eikaiwa* and various state and adult education contexts, I still had not met a Japanese student with whom I could maintain a conversation about books for more than a few minutes. Thus, when I got my first job in a university (Shumei University in Chiba) and was offered an English Literature class to take charge of it was not without reservations that I accepted. Of course, the curriculum I inherited from the previous teacher included several Shakespeare plays, but also many classics from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the unforgettable side note: 'Non-English language Commonwealth literature in translation if there is time'. Back in the real world, I spent the whole semester teaching what I grandiosely termed 'genre fiction', but was in reality the Cohen Brothers' film Miller's Crossing which, to be fair, *is* based on two Dashiell Hammett novels. Twenty five years later, when asked in interviews to recall my greatest achievement as a teacher I am still tempted to say it is getting an A-level quality essay out of 14 of the original 19 students who were enrolled in that class (5 dropped out early because the class was too difficult) and seeing the cogs turning in the minds of the front row of students as they

ISSN 0910-500X

英文學思潮

THOUGHT CURRENTS IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

VOLUME XCVII

2024

THE ENGLISH LITERARY SOCIETY
OF
AOYAMA GAKUIN UNIVERSITY

青山学院大学英文学会

nearly burst a blood vessel trying to work out what had happened to Rug Daniels' wig after he had been found bare-headed and murdered in an alley.

What is the Purpose of a Literature Class in an ESL Context?

I have now taught a version of my Miller's Crossing class in many university courses both with English Literature in the title and as more general content classes, usually to higher level learners. In both cases my purposes have been broadly similar. I find it heartening that I was able to come up with ten in just a few minutes. They are, in no particular order: to engage minds (by introducing something enjoyable and interesting); to exercise minds (initially by getting to know the plot and characters and recalling key details); to stimulate thought about important issues that are relevant to the students; to learn something about and gain a perspective on social, historical, cultural, psychological and other phenomena; to have a shared focus that stimulates discussion; to get better at coming up with and organising thoughts and expressing them coherently, persuasively and engagingly (in essays, presentations or guided discussions); to inspire and energise constructive thought and action; to motivate language learning; to learn and/or consolidate vocabulary, expressions, sentence patterns (I have deliberately avoided the 'g' word here) and natural pronunciation; to encourage students to think about and discuss what they read and watch and to give them a rough framework for doing this productively.

Why Film?

Obviously the above list is my own point of view and some readers may be surprised or even disturbed to note that reasons such as: 'to get students to read a lot', 'to introduce students to the literary greats', 'to gain exposure to dominant theories about the literary classics' are not mentioned. These reasons undoubtedly have their place on English literature courses taught to native speakers who are striving to become specialists or simply want exposure to the academic study of literature. However, my strong impression is that such attitudes lie behind the sad and disappointing experiences I spoke about in the introduction. This impression finds support among various authors such as Johanna W. Istanto who also

argues that using film in a language classroom serves to: "motivate students' interest in learning, to make the lessons more interesting and to nurture students' understanding of the target culture" (quoted in Vazquez, M. M. V., 2009)

Many years ago I read an article about the woeful state of science teaching in UK schools. The detail that has stuck in my mind is that only 13% of 18 year-old secondary school leavers were prepared to go on record as saying that they had some interest in and knowledge of science. In the article an important voice, Baroness Warnocke as I recall, was railing against the fall in standards and insisting that proposed new methods, such as analysing the science in episodes of Star Trek, represented an unacceptable dumbing down that would lead to the demise of the gold standard A-level which had traditionally laid the foundation for the pantheon of great British minds (such as her own no doubt). My first thought was: 'How much worse do you think it can get?' My second thought was: Starting with Star Trek, which about 98% of British 18 year olds at that time would have been delighted to talk about openly and at length, was an excellent idea. It appears that lessons were not learned as a later report into school students' attitudes towards science concluded that: "The status of science as being difficult is a major factor in discouraging students from choosing to study it." (White et al., 2012) Thus my opinion has not changed: if you cannot engage the existing interests of young minds, and start with what they know, like and find relevant then you have faltered at the first step and far from setting students off on a path to excellence have made it less likely that they will ever reach their potential in that field.

The truth is that many students in Japanese universities simply do not enjoy reading, especially in English, either because they have not developed the habit or because their rudimentary language skills make it extremely hard work and time-consuming. I wish this was not true and over the years I have made efforts to encourage reading, but the results have been patchy at best. As Einstein said, doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result is the very definition of madness. Thus, in order to retain my sanity, I decided not to give up on reading, but to change my perspective. I started to think of literature as stories rather than particular forms of stories. Looking at this way, I realised that the

starting point should be to present the story to a class in a way that allows the maximum number to get a handle on the plot and characters in a workable time frame. Only after this has happened does exploring the themes in a way that encourages independent thought become possible. Film is the best way I have found to do this.

Which Films?

If the word 'Literature' is included in the class title, I choose films of books. As I have already stated, I work with a broad definition of literature so that films such as Miller's Crossing (crime fiction); The Devil Wears Prada (popular literature); Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone (fantasy) are all legitimate choices. I have two basic criteria. Firstly, is the story engaging to the majority of students to the extent that they will give it their full attention from start to finish? Secondly, does it present a variety of themes which are relevant to the lives of the students and have enough depth to stimulate thought and warrant a serious essay or presentation? There are of course other considerations. It is not possible or even desirable to protect students from watching violent scenes. However, too much violence is off-putting or even upsetting to some and can be a distraction and there is some evidence to suggest that exposure to too much violence in film can be detrimental to development (e.g. Sargent et al., 2002; Brown et al., 2005). Miller's Crossing is just on the right side of this borderline. Equally, some romance is engaging, but explicit sex scenes are at best a little embarrassing to watch in a group and too much bad language is a distraction and has obvious disadvantages in a language learning context (although a few well chosen curse words can be motivating and are strangely easy to remember!) As a general rule a British Board of Film Classification rating of 15 is accepteable, whereas anything rated 18 or over is probably best avoided. Finally, if my goal in a class is to teach language, I probably won't choose to use a film and if I do it will be a short clip. However, it is obviously an advantage to select films where the original language used is accessible to students so that they have a chance at least of following it without subtitles, if not the first time then in future viewings.

How to Present Films and Work with Themes

There are various ways to present the films. Where possible I use the DVD with original English language soundtrack and Japanese subtitles which allows the less advanced students to follow the plot and stay engaged while the more able can, in theory at least, focus on the spoken English, though I am aware that it can be hard to resist the urge to read your native language when it is presented. With higher level students it is possible to use English subtitles, which gives them two options for grasping the dialogue and makes the learning of new vocabulary more likely. Finally, if subtitles are not available, I will show the film in chunks of around twenty minutes, stopping after each one to ask questions and review what they have watched. Again this method only works well with a class where at least some students have a relatively high ability level.

A typical film, if it is suitable by the above mentioned criteria, will yield 8-12 theme questions without too much difficulty. Here are some questions I use for Never Let Me Go, a story written by the Japanese born but British educated and acculturated Kazuo Ishiguro about a group of cloned children who are raised with the purpose of providing organs to prolong the lives of non-cloned citzens in a fictionalised, but recognisable, dystopian Britain.

1. Was Miss Lucy (the new teacher) right to tell the truth to the students in her class? Refer to both the film and your own ideas about/experience of honesty.
2. At the end of the film (and near the end of her life) Kathy asks whether the lives of the Hailsham clones were really so different from the lives of the people they donated organs to. What is your opinion? Talk about your own ideas and use scenes from the film to explain your opinion.
3. Who are the strongest and weakest characters in Never Let Me Go? Refer to scenes from the film to support your opinion.
4. What does the film say about the morality of cloning some humans to allow others to live a longer and more healthy life? What is *your* opinion?
5. In this film, has cloning technology improved society or made it worse? Compare the society in the film with the one you grew up in and refer to scenes from the film to support your opinion.

When I first started doing this I used to offer students the option of creating

their own questions. Perhaps predictably, they rarely took the opportunity. What I do now is, for the first film we study in a class, give them about 10 questions to choose from and the option to make their own. Then, for the second film of the course, I ask them to brainstorm questions in groups and then add these to the list of questions I already have. I find that doing it this way yields some really good questions which are uniquely tailored to the view individuals have of what is interesting and important in the film whilst at the same time not putting undue pressure on those who struggle to come up with their own ideas. It also means that the size and quality of my question bank increases every time a film is taught.

The themes above are relatable to students: honesty, the ethics of cloning, strength and weakness, the health of society are all concepts which can be easily grasped by any 18+ year old. Consequently they are engaging and invariably lead to focused work and resulting presentations or essays which vary from acceptable to genuinely illuminating. However, it is sometimes a good idea to dream big and there are times when I have dared to be more ambitious. Could we read at least a chapter or two of the book? Could we somehow compare the book and the film and discuss how the story changes when it is adapted to a different medium? Is there a way to re-introduce Shakespeare and other canonical literary creations into the mix? Could themes include more technical aspects of the film such as the use of camera work or music to show mental states such as tension and confusion? I believe all of these things *are* possible, but I'm still working out how to achieve them and would welcome ideas from anyone who has read this far and is interested enough to contact me. One thing I have tried is giving mini lectures on the differences between the book and the film and including that information in a final test. I also tried looking at J.K. Rowling's influences when creating the Harry Potter series. These include the Christian Bible, The Iliad and Macbeth, all of which can be illustrated by carefully chosen scenes from the films and compared to YouTube clips of filmed versions of the originals. For example Cedric's death in Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire is directly influenced by the killing of Petroclus by Hector in the battle for Troy and the final scene in Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows where Harry comes back to life is

influenced by the resurrection of Christ (Scott, J., 2010).

Using Film to Teach British Culture

I believe British culture can be broadly understood as a series of binaries some of the main ones of which are: left and right politics; working and middle class; town and country; the geographical north and south; pro- Royal and anti-Royal; pro-Europe and Eurosceptic: Catholic and Protestant. Of course none of these crude contrasts will hold firm under scrutiny, but they do provide an excellent entry point to an understanding of Britain for the uninitiated. Using the same screening criteria as for literature, i.e. if it does not engage students and feel relatable to them, nothing but an uphill struggle lies ahead, immediately suggests some friendly entry points into these ultimately very complex oppositions. Music is perhaps the most obvious one and I like it because it immediately opens up possibilities to deepen and expand. For example almost everyone has some idea about Britpop which, besides the entertaining documentary films about the pop chart wars between Blur and Oasis, also allows for discussion of the role it played in expanding the appeal of Tony Blair's Labour government (1997-2008) amongst younger voters. 'Rock Family Trees: The Birth of Cool Britannia' and 'Live Forever: The Rise and Fall of Britpop' are both good choices for higher level students. Starting with this period in British cultural history, when the New Labour reinvention of the post war socialist policies which created the National Health Service, the Welfare State and extensive social housing held sway, makes it logical to go back to the 1980s and compare and contrast with the Thatcher years, a time when the cold war had been all but won and market forces, aided and abetted by Ronald Regan's laissez faire administration, began to gather momentum and reign unchecked by an increasingly out of touch and disorganised socialist opposition.

There are several relatable features of 1980s Britain that are key to an understanding of British culture. Firstly, there is Thatcher herself and the policies she introduced. Britain's first female Prime Minister and the daughter of a northern grocery store owner who gained a degree from Oxford University, she rose to the top in the male dominated politics of Whitehall by means of obsessive hard

work, a clear idea what needed to be done, ruthless use of state resources to reduce union power and cast iron determination. There are numerous films both about Thatcher (for example 'The Iron Lady') and the effects of Thatcher's policies on groups and individuals in a variety of socio-economic positions. These include Mike Leigh's 'Meantime' and 'High Hopes', Stephen Frear's adaptation of Hanif Kereishi's book 'My Beautiful Launderette' and the more recent 'Blue Jean' which addresses Section 28, a law passed by the Conservative government in 1988 banning schools and councils from promoting and teaching homosexuality as being acceptable to society. This latter is something which has become of more interest to Japanese students in recent years as awareness of LGBT+ issues leads younger generations to embrace the freedom to question their own sexuality and to advocate for more tolerance in attitudes and policy.

Another notable feature of the Thatcher years in the UK is industrial action and in particular the miner's strike (1984-1985). Although article 28 of the Japanese constitution contains the basic right to strike, or take collective action in defence of workers' interests ("Japanese Labour Law," 2024), overt industrial action is rare in Japan and images of pitched battles between miners and the police from UK news programs of the time open a stark window on how troubled the UK was at a time when Japan was riding the crest of the bubble years. Returning to the comparatively civilised world of popular films, 'Brassed Off' depicts a northern town 10 years after the strike and the difficulties faced by its brass band following the closure of the town's coal pit. 'Billy Eliot' is another accessible film this time set *during* the strike in a fictionalised town in County Durham, again in the north of England. It tackles entrenched class attitudes, gender stereotypes, and the family conflicts that were created and exacerbated by the pit closures and differing perspectives on the wisdom and value of the strike actions themselves.

Conclusion

In this brief review of the benefits of using film to teach literature and culture I have tried to communicate my enthusiasm for this medium and the strength of my belief in the methods I have developed, based as they are on decades of

trial and error ultimately guided by my quest for the satisfaction I feel when I experience a group of students (or even one or two) becoming excited and inspired as they begin to understand just how profound and uplifting can be the effect of a heartflet and well told story on the human spirit. I hope I have 'walked my talk' and written in an engaging and accessible manner and that those with a taste for greater academic rigor in their journal articles will forgive me for allowing experience to be my authority. In the final analysis I have one sincere hope that I would like to share wth anyone who has been interested (or generous) enough to read to the end. My hope is that wherever those 14 former Shumei students from my class of 2002 are now, that if anyone over the years has asked them what books they studied at university they quickly answered "Millers' Crossing and, if you're curious, a passing child stole Rug Daniel's wig for a souvenir!"

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