Research

SHARING COMMONALITIES, CELEBRATING DIFFERENCES: THE ROLE OF LITERATURE IN THE EFL CURRICULUM

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Abstract

This paper makes a case for using literature in English in the Thai EFL classroom even with learners who may not have a background in literature either in Thai or in English. The paper begins with the reasons for using literature in the language classroom as proposed by Carter and Long (1991), Widdowson (1975) and others before suggesting ways of dealing with literary texts such as poems, lyrics, short stories (translations included) and other creative texts which are likely to motivate learners. The final section of this paper provides activities based on translated texts, songs and poems which have been used with Thai EFL learners.

Key words: literature, translation, foreign language teaching.

Introduction

Rationale

It has now been more than three decades since attention was first being strongly drawn to using literature in the EFL classroom. Among scholars who have waxed enthusiastic about using literature in the teaching of English have been Carter and Long (1991) Widdowson (1975) Duff and Maley (1990) and Saviddou (2004) However, their enthusiasm has failed to take root, as evidenced by the lingering prejudice against the inclusion of literature in the EFL syllabus in general, resulting in a perceived under-representation—if not a distinct lack—of English literature in any shape or form (poetry, plays, short stories and novels) in the EFL curriculum, even at the tertiary (university) level, where it is often relegated to the rather dubious category of "elective".

One could list any number of reasons for this. Short (cited in Saviddou 2004)), for example, refers to the demarcation lines that are still drawn between language on the one hand and literature on the other as a "border dispute over territory" between linguists and literary critics, a self-imposed divergence that has resulted in the teaching of the two subjects as "disconnected pedagogic practices" (Carter and McRae, cited in. Saviddou 2004).

As such, this brings us to the overarching question: "Why literature?" There are a number of clear-cut reasons why teachers of EFL would profit from the inclusion of literature in the EFL curriculum, not least of which is that it provides a window on the world outside. This is of particular significance in a country such as Thailand, which has its own set of problems rooted in its own, rather unique history. For one thing, despite a rich oral tradition of folk tales and the existence of a formerly vibrant tradition of folk drama, the number of such drama troupes travelling the Thai countryside is sadly dwindling even if there are occasional performances of the Khōn masked drama, an expression of traditional Thai high culture, in both metropolitan and provincial venues. Furthermore, most traditional Thai writing fell into the overall genre of courtly literature with the products of this genre more often than not becoming the sole preserve of the royal court and members of the titled nobility, even apart from this genre being overwhelmingly marked by conformity of both form and content. In other words, the hierarchical—not to say patriarchal—nature of Siam, an essentially feudal society that revolved around age-old Brahminical rites and rituals and the making of merit at royally sponsored Buddhist temples, together with an insistence on external decorum, on the preservation of "face" at all costs, and the long absence of an emergent middle class (in contrast to the US, Britain, France and elsewhere in Europe, not to speak of Japan), meant that the intellectual landscape was comparatively barren.

In addition, unlike its neighbors, Siam was never colonized and retained much of its feudal culture and its conservative outlook—at least until the reigns of King Mongkut (Rama IV; 18 October 1804 – 1 October

1868) and his son King Chulalongkorn (Rama V; 20 September 1853 – 23 October 1910), when a number of reforms were gradually introduced, including a nascent education system, initially limited to the offspring of the nobility and the upper classes, with females being admitted somewhat reluctantly.

Furthermore, subsequent top-down attempts at nation-building, particularly after the abolition of the absolute monarchy in 1932, included a top-down definition of "Thainess" alongside centralized efforts to unite a rather disparate patchwork of ethnic groups, resulted in a rather inward-looking, Thai-centric mindset that tended to conveniently ignore the outside world almost entirely. This is reflected, for instance, in the teaching of history in Thai government schools, which heavily concentrates on the history of the Siamese Kingdom and modern-day Thailand. Unfortunately, this is also accompanied by a distinct failure to encourage critical thinking, the ever-present threat of censorship, whether in top-down form or in the guise of self-censorship, as well as the all-important notion of saving "face", of preserving outward appearances at all costs. This has led to fixed ideas as to what could be discussed or written about in "polite society", which in turn often proved inimical to the flowering of world-class literature. These problems have been further compounded by the tardiness in which a fully developed and extensive formal public education system has been instituted with the result that until recent times elementary education has often been provided by local Buddhist temples. Consequently, one could argue that, on the whole, Thailand has never been a nation of avid readers, as compared, for example, with the educated middle classes of Bombay (Mumbai), Calcutta (Kolkata), Delhi, Madras (Chennai) or elsewhere on the subcontinent and who furthermore have access to a huge body of excellent literature written by Indian nationals in English as well.

To make matters worse, during the latter half of the twentieth century, certainly during the last two decades or so, the problem of getting young Thais (not to mention young Westerners and other Asians as well) interested in the written word, i.e., in reading both for the enhancement of one's own individual knowledge and for one's own personal pleasure, has been further exacerbated by the availability of more instant forms of gratification (the cinema, video movies, computer and video games, MTV, social networks and so on). These distractions constitute a formidable problem indeed for any teacher wishing to inculcate in his or her students a love of literacy for its own sake or an appreciation of the true value of reading in all its forms.

In the current digital era in which we find ourselves, an era of Facebook and Twitter, where brevity is the name of the game, even a work of literature twenty to thirty pages in length, whether it is a long short story or a novella, seems to require a gargantuan effort to the young students of today. As a result, many young Thais consider reading an unpleasant chore, something that you *have* to do at school or at university, not something you do for pleasure or even personal inquiry. Within Thai society in general, particularly among the younger generation, the general notion is that too much reading makes you serious. Too much reading and that famous Thai smile might disappear forever. Thus, quite apart from the linguistic capacity of the majority of our students, there are, as we have seen, a number of critical problems that are distinctly cultural in nature, which in turn frequently make the teaching of English—not even to speak of literature itself—in Thailand a veritable uphill battle.

On the other hand, if one can get one's students to view the reading of literature as an enriching experience, one to be savored, as a fascinating and immensely enjoyable adventure and a uniquely rewarding quest, then it is perhaps one of the only forms of written expression that, when wisely chosen, comes close to the students' experience in their own daily lives when compared with other forms of communications media. As Magnet (2003) vividly puts the matter in his essay "What Use Is Literature? ":

> Literature…mobilizes all our faculties of knowledge at once: not just our ability to analyze the outer world but our introspection and intuition as well. We can understand what is going on in the hearts of others because we know what stirs our own hearts, and what could stir them… Literature is the great school of motivation: it teaches us how, out of the complex welter of impulses churning within us, we make the choices that define us and seal our fate. Furthermore, it dramatizes for us the consequences of those choices. Do they lead to happiness or misery, decency or not—and for whom? <journal.org/html/13_3_what_use.html>.

Elsewhere in the same essay, Magnet (2003) goes on to make the following, equally cogent point:

> Two or three decades ago, the belief that literature was a repository of knowledge—and important knowledge—was usual… At the very least, everybody understood that literature was a storehouse of documentary knowledge. We could learn about how

> others lived—the Greeks, the men of the Middle Ages, our own contemporaries: how they judged one another, what they considered good manners, how they fell in love, what their family life was like, how they structured their society, when they dined, how they grew up and took their place in the world of adults <journal.org/html/13_3_what_use.html>.

Magnet (2003) concludes that literature can teach us more about the complexities of human nature and human interaction than psychologists, social scientists, or traditional historians can, since it elucidates in a uniquely holistic way how "the universal in our nature takes on the fashion and the garb of a particular age" (Magnet 2003: <journal.org/html/13_3_what_use.html>.). It is precisely *here* that we find fertile ground for "sharing the commonalities and celebrating the differences" among people from the vast tapestry of cultures that make up our modern world. (At this point, it is perhaps worth noting that, although the material referred to in this paper is culled from American, British and Thai sources, for the purposes of comparison and contrast, there is a vast repository of English literatures from Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the West Indies, the Philippines and the works of postcolonial writers from the Indian subcontinent and Sri Lanka, Africa and so on, not to mention a wealth of material available in translation from European, South American, Far Eastern, Asian-Pacific sources, etc.)

Another point I would like to make is that whatever text one chooses should—preferably—be contemporary, or at least of contemporary relevance. At the same time, however, it should also be noted that many 19th-century writers, despite the specificity of the socio-historical context, often deal with themes that are timeless or still of relevance today. In nineteenth century America, Fanny Fern, wrote about the problems faced by ordinary women, by wives and mothers who were concerned about their children, current fashions, difficult husbands, and aggravating relatives.

> Concerned with women's oppressive situations, Fanny Fern strongly and diligently defends women who prize their individuality and who do not allow themselves to be subjected to conformity and obedience (Rapin 1995: 44).

As such, Fern was always concerned when women justifiably felt oppressed, depressed, or stressed. Fern expressed their problems in plain language, addressing women's suffrage, the woman's right to her children in a divorce, unfaithful husbands and social customs that restricted women's freedom (Rapin 1995).

These are things all of us can easily comprehend—even today. Thus, studying such texts not only fosters an affinity with the past, but also helps to illuminate the commonalities we share on the basis of freshly obtained historical, sociological and anthropological perspectives. Such perspectives are uniquely engendered by the habitual reading of a wide array of works of literature produced by writers of both the past and the present throughout the world. By way of invidious contrast, this body of literature shows how poverty stricken in both form and content are the trendy and highly popular alternatives brought into being by technological advance.

In a similar vein, Allen (Cited in McKay, 1982: 535), notes that it is vital that students understand a broad range of cultural issues, pointing out the obvious perhaps, namely that "Literature is a facet of a culture." In other words, literature and culture are inextricably bound together. Thus, students come to understand cultural differences through exposure to a wide diversity of literary texts. It is in this way that literature promotes cultural and intercultural awareness (Van Troung, 2009), especially in the current era of globalization, where there is a growing concern for universally shared needs and wants rather than those which are individualized (Tayebipour, 2009). Globalization requires close collaboration on a multinational and multicultural scale, not only with regard to the economy, politics, sociology, etc., but also in terms of language-related fields such as EFL. Furthermore, according to Maley (1989), literature deals with universal concepts such as love, hatred, death, nature, etc. which are common to all languages and cultures; consequently, the similarities—and even the differences—between cultures and languages can further our mutual understanding of the world at large.

Broadening Vistas, Changing Minds

There is compelling evidence, some of it anecdotal (e.g., from my own classes) and some research-based that literature also has "the potential to change attitudes and perceptions, to diminish negative conduct and prejudices, while at the same time boosting catharsis, empathy, sympathy, forgiveness, tolerance, etc." (Ghosn, 2002: 172). Since different stories encompass diverse themes, students can familiarize themselves with those themes, which can then be extrapolated to real-world situations. Ghosn

(2002) also refers to Bettelheim who posits the notion that "through literature learners come to appreciate and perceive themselves and others at a deeper level, thereby enabling them to both sympathize and empathize with the characters portrayed in works of literature and to generalize those feelings and emotions to real-world contexts" (Bettelheim, cited in Ghosn 2002: 175).

There are also a number of other reasons why literature should be introduced into the EFL classroom, not the least of which is that it increases the students' exposure to the target language, reinforcing— and optimally expanding upon—items of linguistic structure and lexis already touched upon in the language classroom proper. This is not to say, however, that a short story, for example, should be exploited for its linguistic value alone. In this regard, Widdowson (1975) once made a memorable distinction between merely learning to use the language, by which he meant learning the basics, the nuts and bolts of language as it were, the rules of grammar, syntax and lexis, for instance, as opposed to using the language to learn about the world at large, a stage which in my own particular case involves the teaching of undergraduates at the tertiary (i.e., university) level, a stage in which the goal is to lead students to the point where, in accordance with Widdowson's (1975) observation, they are using the language to learn rather than merely learning to use the language *per se* (Widdowson, 1975). This is in line with at least two of the following three main approaches to the teaching of literature as were described in detail by Carter and Long (1991).

The Cultural Model

This represents the traditional approach to teaching literature in that it requires learners to explore and interpret the social, political, literary and historical context of a given text. By using such a model to teach literature, we as teachers not only reveal the universality of specific thoughts and ideas, but encourage learners to understand different cultures and ideologies in relation to their own.

The Language Model

The most common approach to literature in the EFL classroom is what Carter and Long (1991) refer to as the "language-based approach"

(Cited in Saviddou: <http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Savvidou-Literature>.). Such an approach enables learners to access a text in a systematic and methodical way in order to exemplify specific linguistic features, e.g., literal and figurative language, direct and indirect speech, plus a whole range of rhetorical devices which, as Widdowson (1975) quite rightly points out, are not confined to literature with a capital 'L', but can be found, for example, in the language of modern advertising, in pop songs, in rap music, hip-hop and so on (Widdowson, 1975).

This approach, as noted elsewhere, well lends itself to the whole repertoire of strategies used in language teaching, including cloze procedure, prediction exercises, jumbled sentences, summary writing, creative writing and role play—all of which form part of a wider range of activities employed by EFL teachers to deconstruct literary texts in order to serve specific linguistic goals. In Carter and McRae (1996) however, described this model as taking a "reductive" approach to literature (xxiv, Cited in Saviddou: <http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Savvidou-Literature>.), the downside being that these activities are "disconnected from the literary goals of the text itself in that they can be applied to any form of text-based discourse" (Saviddou: http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Savvidou-Literature.). Thus, there is little engagement on the part of the learner with the text other than for purely linguistic practice; literature is used in a rather purposeless and mechanistic way in order to pave the way for a series of language activities orchestrated by the teacher.

The Personal Growth Model

This model represents an attempt to bridge the cultural model and the language model by focusing on the task of interpretation, on the particular use of language in a text, as well as placing it in a specific cultural context. In this approach, learners are encouraged to express their opinions, as well as their feelings, and to build upon existing schemata, thereby enabling them to make connections between their own personal and cultural experiences and those expressed in the text.

Another positive aspect of this model is that it helps learners develop their knowledge of ideas and language—content and formal schemata—through different themes and topics. This function correlates with established theories of reading (Goodman, 1970) which emphasize the interaction of the reader with the text. Furthermore, Cadorath and Harris (cited in Saviddou) point out "text itself has no meaning, it merely provides direction for the reader to construct meaning from the reader's own experience", (http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Savvidou-Literature.), thereby showing another application of schema theory in action (Cadorath and Harris cited in Saviddou: http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Savvidou-Literature.).). In this regard, "learning is said to take place when readers discover they are able to interpret text and construct meaning on the basis of their own experience" (Saviddou: http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Savvidou-Literature.).), whether actual, potential or imagined.

Taken separately, of course, these three approaches to teaching literature differ in terms of which specific elements of the text they choose to focus upon. In the first approach, for example, the text is viewed as a cultural artifact; in the second approach, on the other hand, the text is used as a focus for grammatical and structural analysis, while in the third, the text is used as a springboard for critical thinking, for self-examination, and consequently for personal growth. Although each has its strengths and weaknesses, what is needed is an approach to teaching literature in the EFL classroom which attempts to integrate all of these elements in a way that makes literature accessible to learners and renders it beneficial for their linguistic and cognitive development, for our purposes the emphasis being on the latter.

An Integrated Model for Teaching Literature

According to Duff and Maley (1990), the three main reasons for integrating these elements are linguistic, methodological and motivational. Linguistically, by using a wide range of authentic texts, learners are introduced to a variety of types of English discourse as well as language of varying levels of difficulty. Methodologically, literary discourse sensitizes readers to the processes of reading, for example the use of schemata, strategies for intensive and extensive reading, etc. And lastly, from a motivational perspective, literary texts prioritize the enjoyment of reading itself since, as Short and Candlin assert:

> If literature is worth teaching...then it seems axiomatic that it is the response to literature itself which is important' (Short and Candlin, 1986: 90).

As already noted, the interpretation of texts by learners is vital in that it can elicit personal responses from readers by touching on significant and engaging themes. This also involves the systematic and detailed analysis of the stylistic features of a text— vocabulary, structure, register, etc.—in order to determine "not just what a text means, but also how it comes to mean what it does" (Short 1996, cited in Saviddou: http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Savvidou-Literature.).. The aim of this model is to integrate linguistic description with interpretation of the text, "although as far as the foreign language learner or student of EFL is concerned, it is not as technical, rigorous or analytical as the stylistics approach" (O'Brien, cited in Saviddou: http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Savvidou-Literature.). More importantly, given the appropriate amount of care and attention in selecting a suitable text, it can be adapted for all levels.

What Counts As Literature?

According to Alan Maley (1989), literature covers a vast range of genres, not merely novels, poems, short stories and plays, but also song lyrics, chants, limericks, excerpts from movie scripts, sketches, monologues, travelogues, diary entries, and personal journals.

Criteria for Selection

So precisely what criteria do you use in choosing a literary text for use in your EFL classroom? Some experienced EFL teachers indicate that teachers should use their intuition—intuition based on years of teaching experience and an intimate knowledge of their students. It would be hoped, however, one would choose a text that is both linguistically and culturally accessible to one's students. Preferably, too, the text should be entertaining—and at the same time thought-provoking—in some way.

If one accepts the division of literature into highbrow, middlebrow and lowbrow, one should opt for the median: choose from the vast store of contemporary middlebrow writers currently available on the market or one could even draw upon such lowbrow material as song lyrics, graphic novels, or interesting dialogues (or monologues) from movies, the scripts of which are often available online.

Of course, intuition may—and often does—fail you; as teachers, all of us have had great ideas as to what material to use in the EFL classroom, only to discover that it failed abysmally in practice. The reason for this may be that the teacher is not sufficiently conversant with the text he or she has chosen, has failed to form a clear idea of the goal he or she is trying to reach, and has failed to prepare for the presentation of the material in a thorough enough manner. Take away the element of preparation, and what you are left with will lack a sound pedagogical base, and will not, however entertaining, result in learning. The only way to reduce the chances of this happening, of course, is to plan well in advance, to have a clear idea of what you are trying to achieve at each stage of the process, and to try—as far as possible—to keep the lesson student-centered, rather than teacher-directed.

Methodology

***Step one: warm-up*:** This stage is designed to elicit the students' existing (or possibly non-existent) schemata with regard to the topic or theme of the piece you have chosen for the class to study, whether the students are asked to do the task you have chosen for them individually, in pairs, or in groups. For example, a table can be filled out individually, or the class can form groups in order to share information, while at the same time performing a notional-functional role, reinforcing structures already learned in class.

For instance, a warm-up can be created as a lead-in to a cloze listening exercise linked to the first few verses of "Union Sundown", a song from Bob Dylan's album *Infidels* (1983), the main topic of which is the effects of globalization on the national economy (which, by the way, can be read aloud if the actual song would prove too much of a challenge at the introductory stage). Although language plays a part, however, albeit a relatively small one, on the whole it reflects the cultural model of teaching literature mentioned above (Dylan).

The aim of the aforementioned exercise would be to encourage students to think about the foreign products they have in their home and to elicit their ideas as to what effect this might have on the development of the Thai industrial sector. The objective of cloze listening exercises in this context, apart from testing students' listening skills and their recognition of the pre-taught lexis, is to help students identify the fact that their own situation is much the same as that implied by Dylan's observations regarding the American economic landscape.

With regard to the song, a set of comprehension questions should be created to elicit students' understanding of certain lines in the song

("When it costs too much to build it at home, You just build it cheaper someplace else." etc.) and to foster a discussion of what effect this has had, for example, on the US workforce as well as on Thai workers.

There are dozens of similarly gritty subjects one could tackle that are of relevance to all of us in an increasingly globalized world and could lead on to other topics that are all interconnected in one way or another—topics such as economic meltdown, outsourcing and its effects, migrant labor, and human trafficking (both internal and transnational). Or one could examine different concepts of love, beginning with an initially lighthearted look at dating and romantic notions of love, followed by a more serious examination of "love gone wrong", changing notions of marriage, divorce, separation and abandonment, as well as the effects on all those involved, especially the children, and so on. These are issues that are of growing concern to countries, both East and West. The activity outlined above, for example, could lead on to the effects of outsourcing, to joblessness, homelessness, and to the suffering and exploitation of migrant labor, common problems shared by many countries worldwide.

This, in turn could be an appropriate point at which to introduce the figure of Woody Guthrie (especially his ballads dealing with poverty, joblessness, homelessness, and migrant labor), his influence on the songs (both new and old) of social consciousness that marked much of the music of the 1960s, including the earlier work of Dylan (among others), and the influence such songs had on the "*phleng phuea chiwit*" (Songs for Life) movement in Thailand in the 1970s. The themes of such songs mirrored those of the folk movement in the West and the so-called protest songs of the young Bob Dylan in that they were concerned mainly with the day-to-day experiences of ordinary people, particularly the hardships suffered by members of the working class. As in the West, Thai bands such as Caravan, the earliest of the "*phleng pheua chiwit*" bands, were at the forefront of a movement for social justice and a more equitable democracy which reached boiling point in 1976 when police and right-wing elements attacked students at Thammasat University, with many (including Caravan) fleeing to the jungles and mountains (McConnachie and Ellingham: 242-45).

What's Love Got to Do with It?

The approach so far would involve the liberal use of tables or visual cues during the warm-up phase to activate students' schemata, which nevertheless has the advantage of sharpening the self-same interpretative abilities they will need to interpret the discourse of whatever literary text with which they may be presented. Matching text for text for comparative purposes is a little more problematic, however, made even more so by the fact that there is comparatively little Thai material available in translation, the two main sources being *The Lioness in Bloom*, a valuable anthology of Thai fiction in translation compiled with an introduction and running commentary by Susan Fulop Kepner, and a burgeoning anthology compiled by the prolific French translator Marcel Barang, which is readily accessible online (see List of References). Given enough research into the English-speaking literary canon and the availability of sufficient material in translation on the Thai side, however, virtually any subject is fair game (again, the List of References should provide initial guidance).

The subject of interpersonal relationships, for example, is a fertile ground for cross-cultural examination, particularly notions of romantic love, courtship (or if you like the more prosaic modern term "the dating game"), marriage and alternative forms of cohabitation, spousal abuse (to which we could also add the issue of child abuse), divorce, single-parent families—all of which provide fertile ground for exploring the similarities we all share, as well as the differences that are shaped by the unique cultural currents coursing through our respective societies. A third approach would be to select an appropriate English-language text, create a series of comprehension questions to ensure that students grasp the gist of the passage at hand and then follow it up with a series of questions potentially leading to a broader discussion of points of comparison and divergence.

Here are a few quotations from short stories, in Thai, English translation and in English, which should provide fruitful material for classroom discussion on a whole range of issues pertaining to interpersonal relationships.

Love Is Forever

Can romantic love survive the rigors of married life?

This is a theme broached by Raymond Carver in the short story excerpted below, as well as by Dorothy Parker in works such as "The Big Blonde". It is also an issue that is commonly explored in a number of Thai stories contained in the anthologies cited above, in particular "A Pot That

Scouring Will Not Save" by Anchan (1996: 172-202)—who, like Carver, also touches on the issue of domestic abuse and why women tolerate it—and "Grandmother the Progressive" by Phakdiphumin (1996:43), a humorous look at a marriage that is outwardly "perfect" but seriously dysfunctional and another that looks chaotic but is full or warmth and love.

> What do any of us really know about love?" Mel said. "It seems to me we're just beginners at love. We say we love each other and we do, I don't doubt it…. "There was a time when I thought I loved my first wife more than life itself. But now I hate her guts. I do. How do you explain that? What happened to that love? What happened to it, is what I'd like to know. I wish someone could tell me (Carver, 2001: 130).

HAPPILY EVER AFTER?

Unrealistic Expectations of Marriage

DOROTHY PARKER: "The Big Blonde"

This story outlines the tale of Hazel Morse who turns her back on her social life, feeling the urge to settle down ("She wanted to be married. She was nearing thirty now…") to embrace what she believes will be a happy married life, only to be met by bitter disappointment (Parker, 2001: 1163).

> She missed nobody. The old crowd, the people who had brought her and Herbie together, dropped from their lives, lingeringly at first. When she thought of this at all, it was only to consider it fitting. This was marriage. This was peace.
>
> "But the thing was that Herbie was not amused"
> (Parker, 2001: 1163).
>
> She was completely bewildered by what happened to their marriage. First they were lovers; and then, it seemed without transition, they were enemies. She never understood it.
> (Parker, 2001: 1164).
>
> It seemed to her that almost everything she read—novels from the drugstore lending library, magazine stories, women's pages in the papers—dealt with wives who lost their husbands' love. She

> could bear those, at that, better than accounts of neat, companionable marriage and living happily ever after
> (Parker, 2001: 1164).

The previous comment, in particular, should provide fertile ground for classroom discussion of the influence of the media on social behavior from different cultural perspectives. In this regard, Reynolds (cited in Kepner 1996: 102) points out: "Films and novels in contemporary Thai popular culture are still overwhelmingly concerned with the theme of the family…. The complicated tangles of relationships in family life are what people want to watch and read about." And of course this includes threats from "the other woman" (and occasionally "the other man").

A QUESTION OF INDEPENDENCE

KATE CHOPIN (1851—1904): "The Story of an Hour"

In this celebrated story by Kate Chopin, the main character, Mrs. Mallard, learns of her husband's untimely demise in a railroad accident, to which she reacts in a rather surprising manner, savoring what proves to be a tragically short-lived hour of freedom.

> There would be no one to live for her during those coming years: she would live for herself. There would be no powerful will bending hers in that blind persistence with which men and women believe they have a right to impose a private will upon a fellow-creature… And yet she had loved him—sometimes. Often she had not. What did it matter! What could love, the unsolved mystery, count for in face of this possession of self-assertion which she suddenly recognized as the strongest impulse of her being!
> (Chopin, 2001: 213).

> "Free! Body and soul free!" she kept whispering
> (Chopin, 2001: 213).

> This fleeting sense of awakening, of freedom, is also expressed, albeit in more sexual –and far more subtle—terms in "The Chrysanthemums" (1938), a much anthologized short story by John Steinbeck (2001: 1260-67).

The latter, in turn, bears comparison with Sri Dao Ruang's "Sai-Roong's Dream of Love" (Sri Dao Ruang, 218-29), which, unlike the Nobel Prize-winning author's offering, charts the (apparently satisfying) sexual fantasies the main character evokes in her "dreaming state" in a humorous, self-mocking tone (Kepner, 1996: 229). What is noteworthy, as Kepner (1996) points out, is that Thai audiences (at least in 1984 when the story was first published) find such home truths disturbing, since they drag matters that are seen as being confined to the private sphere out into the light of day, i.e., into the public sphere. Writers from the English-speaking world, in contrast, labor under no such constraints.

The Economic Imperative

The economic imperative, of course, often accompanied by social marginalization and abandonment, marks the work of both Thai and American writers. It can be seen, for example in the stories by Krisna Asoksin and Kor Surangkhanang, as well as in "That Woman's Name Is Boonrawd" by Botan (1996: 143-64). In the latter, Boonrawd meets an American engineer, Robert, and they establish a relationship; although it is clear they love one another, the economic imperative is ever present. Boonrawd is fully aware that Thai women without financial means of their own are extremely vulnerable. Moreover, as Kepner (1996) notes in her commentary on Chapter 12 of Botan's *That Woman's Name Is Boonrawd*: ".... The choice of a marriage partner is too important to be dictated by affection alone—marriage is a *business* for a woman" (Kepner: 163). Although there is love between Boonrawd and Robert, the economic imperative can lay bare far baser desires, as seen in the excerpts from the following two stories.

"From *This Human Vessel*" by Krisna Asoksin

> *Giaw becomes a housemaid in the house of a respectable couple, Plao and Maturot, a welcome escape from life in the nearby slum in which she was born.*

> "There were no weddings here. People ran off together, and girls with big stomachs weren't always sure who to blame. Giaw's own parents had never considered teaching their children how to live moral lives.

> "What was important to them? Filling their children's bellies, trying to figure out how to get lucky in the lottery, arguing with each other: such was life. Their children had not been raised in this place so much as they had wallowed in it. They ran wild from one hovel to another. Who knew where they were, and who cared? When a girl's belly began to swell, she realized that eventually there would be a baby. Giaw and her friends had grown up brash, bold, and fearless. *Pua* was a word they understood: a pua was a man with whom one did things; a word signifying less, perhaps, than *husband* meant to people further down the lane. To have a pua was a very clear idea to Giaw" (1996: 236).
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> Chapter 103
>
> *Giaw eventually becomes the minor wife of her boss, Plao, moves away with him to another house, and gives birth to a son. Born prematurely, the boy is born with both physical and mental defects and is placed in an institution soon after birth. Plao breaks up with Giaw and moves back in with his family. To get her revenge, Giaw, decides to humiliate the proud Maturot by pursuing Plao's teenaged son-in law, Chaiporn, himself trapped in an unhappy marriage with their daughter Pimrot* (Kepner1996 : 238).
>
> "Giaw paused and considered her two former husbands: first Plao and then Chaiporn … 'I'll take either one of them,' she announced. 'Or both of them together—what do I care? Just so long as I get to keep that house" (Krisna Asoksin, 1996: 246).

The character of Giaw reappears in several guises in both Western and Asian fiction. As noted by Renner (2010) in her dissertation in the following words:

> The prostitute is, in many ways, a female amalgamation of the moral failings of the drunkard and the gambler. Because she was seen as a victim of seduction, she, like the drunkard, represents a failure to control desire and

> appetite. Because she typically is seduced by a wealthier man, she, like the gambler, is someone who attempts to elevate her class status without earning her ascent via virtue. Rather than winning the heart of a self-made man through natural virtue and beauty (which are almost synonymous in antebellum literature), the prostitute—and the seduced woman who is her precursor—could be seen as using sexuality to achieve vertical mobility in the same way the gambler seeks to bypass the hard work that antebellum Americans believed was necessary to the American Dream. (Renner, 2010: 5-6).

The figure of the woman seduced, abandoned and forced to ply the oldest profession in the world is a common one in Western literature, one of the oldest examples being the 1893 novella "Maggie, a Girl of the Streets" by Stephen Crane, and can also be seen in the following excerpt from *Ying Khon Chua* (1937) by Kor Surangkhanang (translated by Marcel Barang as *The Fallen Woman*).

In this story, Wahn, a pretty girl from upcountry, is seduced by a smooth talker from Bangkok who abandons her after placing her in the care of an "aunt" who is the *mamasan* of a brothel, where she is forced to work as a prostitute. Here "Ruen"—as Wahn now calls herself—meets Wit and they fall in love and even make plans to get married. Eventually, however, he too abandons Ruen, who by now is pregnant. Unable to remain in the brothel any longer, her friend Samorn helps her find a job as a maid in the house of a Ms. Keisorn, a freelance prostitute of means. Finding the hapless Ruen in tears one day, her employer gives her the following dressing down.

> I bet you're thinking of your mate. Well, he dropped you, and no wonder, with you crying and snivelling like that. You're wasting your time thinking about him. Don't you know what men are like? Loving them's no good. Take a good look at me: you won't catch me falling in love with a man, ever. But if he has money to offer, ah well, I'll go along with him wherever and whichever way he wants. And what's the good of having some screaming brat that won't have a father anyway? (Surangkhanang, 1937: 34)

Conclusion

As noted elsewhere in this paper, literature provides teachers of EFL with a wide range of benefits: it enhances motivation, fosters social or cross-cultural awareness, promotes students' linguistic development, and can even broaden their cultural horizons, as well as function as a vehicle for change. Myron Magnet has pointed out that literature in all its various forms is capable of elucidating in a uniquely holistic way how "the universal in our nature takes on the fashion and the garb of a particular age"—to which one might also add "the garb of a particular culture" (Magnet). Strip away the cultural accretions and one discovers the commonalities underlying the human condition; take a closer look at the cultural determinants at work and one discovers how these gave rise to the differences that mark our respective societies, whether these be perceived in a positive or less than positive light, thereby enhancing our understanding of—and empathy with—each other's cultures. In doing so, the student makes what might initially appear alien and exotic somewhat familiar and culturally comprehensible.

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