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To Hell, with Shakespeare

Lee Eileen

School of Creative Arts & Communication, Sunway University College, Bandar Sunway, 46150 Petaling Jaya, Malsysia;

Abstract

In the teaching of Shakespearean plays to ESL students, deciphering Shakespeare's language has often been cited as the main obstacle to comprehending his work. While this may hold true to a large extent, there are other 'aspects'/'areas' in Shakespeare's plays such as the concept of Hell and black comedy, which may prove equally demanding to comprehend in the ESL classroom. Humor is not only relative but it is also time and culture-bound; in the case of the Malaysian classroom, getting students from different ethnic and religious backgrounds to comprehend the black humor in the Porter's scene in *Macbeth* is no laughing matter. This paper reports on how the researcher tapped on the diverse religious beliefs of the students and used Taoist, Muslim, and Hindu concepts of the afterlife as a prelude to teach and read the Porter's scene. Following this, the ESL students engaged in communicative, language-based activities such as interviews with the Porter or characters in the afterlife to suspend disbelief and transcend the text. As a result of the creative methodology used in the class, the ESL students were able to discuss and comprehend Shakespeare's treatment of Hell and grasp the concept of black comedy in the play. In conclusion, the methodology advocated in the study celebrated creativity and diversity in the Malaysian classroom.

1. Introduction

Shakespeare's language has often been cited as the main obstacle to comprehending his work; whilst this may hold true to a large extent, in the teaching of Shakespeare in the English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom, there are other 'aspects'/'areas' in Shakespeare's plays that are equally demanding for the ESL reader such as the concept of Hell and black humor. Humor is not only relative but it is also time and culture-bound; in the case of the Malaysian classroom, getting students from different ethnic and religious backgrounds to comprehend the black humor in the Porter's scene in *Macbeth* is no laughing matter. Two principal reasons for the lack of appreciation for the humor in the scene is that (i) the ESL reader here does not have a shared assumption of Shakespeare's treatment of Hell in the play (ii) due to their religious backgrounds, for many Malaysian students, Hell is a serious place to atone for one's sins thus to view Hell with humor is incomprehensible. Therefore, the central question is: how do we assist students who are from diverse racial and religious backgrounds connect with the Porter's scene as a comic relief?

The Malaysian classroom is as ethnically and religiously diverse as its society. The different religious festivals celebrated in a year bear testimony to the diverse religious beliefs practiced in the country: Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism, Sikhism, Bahai, not to mention other smaller groups of faiths. This paper reports on

how the researcher tapped on the diverse religious beliefs of the students and used Taoist, Muslim, and Hindu concepts of the afterlife as a prelude to teach and read the Porter's scene. Following the pre-reading discussions of the afterlife in the different faiths, the students were induced to critically reflect on how Shakespeare's treatment of Hell in the Porter's scene qualified it as a comic relief in the context of the surrounding tragedy taking place by the second act of the play. To consolidate the pedagogical methodology, communicative, language-based activities such as interviews with the Porter and the other gatekeepers of Hell were carried out to make the characters real, transcend time and become meaningful to the students. This paper illustrates how diversity in the Malaysian classroom can be used creatively to develop the ESL students' comprehension and aesthetic appreciation of the text.

2. Review of Literature

Why do we teach Shakespeare? According to Berkowitz (1984), Shakespeare is a Major figure, central to any study of literature in English and anyone who is going to go into the world as a college graduate should know him. For Frey (1984), Shakespeare is continually reinvigorating and reinvigorated. To the question 'What do you hope to accomplish in teaching Shakespeare?', McDonald (1995) reports answers from teachers as classic and refreshing as the Bard: 'I teach because I like to..', 'teaching Shakespeare feeds the intellect, spirit, imagination – mine and the students…', 'because an author by any other name wouldn't smell as sweet…', 'his works present us with endless interesting questions, issues, dilemmas, conflicts that never go out of date…just like him!'. Adams (1995) holds firmly the view that all students should have the opportunity to read complex literature, in her experience of teaching Shakespeare in lower track classes, poor readers are not necessarily poor thinkers nor are they uninterested in the themes dealt with in Shakespearean plays. Into the millennium and the interest in Shakespeare continues: in his discussion on the myriad forms of pop-culture Shakespeare, Lanier (2002) informs us that even in contemporary versions of the Bard and his oeuvre, his name retains immense prestige; for Pujante & Hoenselaars (2003), even if English is not a global language, Shakespeare would still be a global author as evidenced by the numerous national literatures and different media in Europe that draw from his works; for Garber (2009), Shakespeare and modern culture is synonymous – long before the modern world questioned anti-Semitism, racism, youth rebellion, Shakespeare had raised these issues in his *Merchant of Venice, Othello, Romeo and Juliet* respectively thus the Bard is, as Garber argues, part of youth and popular culture.

How do we teach Shakespeare? In her article on the teaching of Shakespeare, O'Brien (1995) points out that most people meet Shakespeare in school and, there is a long tale of teachers involved in the collective struggle to find the best way to each Shakespeare. Patridge (1974) reminds teachers that a play is a play and advises against just studying the language because there are other obvious things, for example, the actors, the mise en scene, the costumes and not forgetting the silences that can be as powerful as any speech that students need to discover and respond to. In the nineties the most popular Shakespearean pedagogy was to get students and text together through performance. There are two volumes of *Shakespeare Set Free* by teachers at The Folger Shakespeare Library which offer practical and innovative means to read Shakespeare meaningfully; Taylor (2002) advises methodological eclecticism while Worster (2002) recommends performance with pedagogy. There is also a wealth of electronic support for the teaching of Shakespeare such as *Shakespeare on Disk, Shakespeare on CD-Rom, Much Ado about Shakespeare, Wordcruncher* and other Shakespeare-related softwares that this generation of digital native students may respond to in a way they may not respond to the printed word. For teachers of Shakespeare, *SHAKSPER* is an electronic seminar for those interested to talk about, teach, or study Shakespeare. Clearly, the list on how to teach Shakespeare is not exhaustive but given that text in the ESL context is often constructed on direct literal meanings and grammatical constructions and the cultural context within which Shakespeare's plays are written are foreign to the ESL reader, to what extent are the ESL students able to achieve bicultural status in the Shakespeare class?

The third question is, can we teach humor? According to Lewis (1989), humor appreciation is subjective and contextual, rooted in individual affective and intellectual responses. Accordingly, how well a joke is understood is determined in part by our immediate situation and in part by our values. Lewis further explains that in most cases, humor appreciation is based on a two-stage process of first perceiving an incongruity and then 'resolving' it. The perception of an incongruity (or what strikes us as a violation of our sense of reality) is subjective because it relies on the state of the perceiver's knowledge, expectations, values and norms. In the same vein, Raskin (1985) describes three subdivisions of the real/unreal dichotomy that are central to the interpretation of jokes: the actual versus the

non-actual, the normal versus the abnormal, the possible versus the impossible. The process of comprehending and appreciating a joke involves first identifying the incongruity (the question: Can this happen/Is this possible?) and then resolving it (seeing it in a way whereby it may seem possible/less unreal than first supposed). What makes humor subjective is that ideas of the real/the possible/the actual/the normal are subject to individual and cultural definitions. Unlike slapstick humor which is often universal, according to George Meredith's true test of comedy, humor should "awaken thoughtful laughter" which means that the laughter should contribute to a deeper meaning of the work. In the Shakespeare class, obviously the aim is for the students to experience this "thoughtful laughter" as a way in for an aesthetic experience with the text. Generally, the humor in the porter scene functions as slapstick comedy due to the grotesque appearance and drunken stupor of the gatekeeper but there is a deeper significance for his appearance in the play: the porter and his work is a metaphor for Macbeth and his deeds, but taking into consideration that humor is based on a common world view, to what extent is this thoughtful laughter accessible to the ESL readers from diverse backgrounds?

2.1. Theoretical Orientations

All literary studies, in the ESL and non-ESL context, should stress the literary-aesthetic experience. The question is, how do we develop this experience with a Shakespearean text in a multiracial ESL classroom with students from different ethnic and religious backgrounds?

2.1.1. The Aesthetic Experience

In 1986, Rosenblatt characterized the literary experience as a transaction between the reader and the text. According to Rosenblatt (1988), reading is a two-way process where the reader's experience is operated on by the text while the text is simultaneously constructed according to the reader's understanding and assumptions. This Transactional Theory of the Literary Work bears important implications for the teaching of literature in the ESL classroom. Firstly, in reading and interpreting literature, it is more appropriate to take an *aesthetic* as opposed to an *efferent* stance. In the former, readers explore the world of self and the worlds of the writer; in the latter, the reader analyses a text for information. In the efferent, we want students to give a clear answer about the text's meaning; in the aesthetic, we want them to explore a range of possible meanings (Purves 1993). When the focus of the learner's attention is on the more personal, lived-through evocation of the literary work, the response to what is read is more aesthetic. Secondly, in the transaction between the reader and the text, readers create their own secondary world which is brought about by the merging of the reader's past experiences and the experiences gathered by the text. Hence, the *reader's background knowledge* comes into play in a more decisive dimension.

2.1.2. Background Knowledge/Schemata

Rather than passively receiving knowledge, students need to become actively engaged in making meaning in the literature class. However, in order to acquire meaning in their readings, students need to possess background knowledge to facilitate their understanding of the texts read. Bartlett (1932) theorizes that when readers read, they tend to interpret their texts according to their own background knowledge. A reader's background knowledge is previously acquired knowledge structures which are called schemata (Carell & Eisterhold 1983). Basically, there are two types of schema: content and formal schemata. Content schemata is the background knowledge a reader brings to a text while formal schemata is background knowledge of the rhetorical structures of different type sof texts (Carell 1987). According to Rumelhart et al. (1977), the text does not in itself carry meaning but rather depends on the individual's pre-existing knowledge structures and his/her interaction with the text to determine one's level of understanding it. Thus, background familiarity is a most important factor of good comprehension because comprehension becomes easier if the text corresponds to the student's *prior knowledge* of language, rhetorical conventions and the world. Since background knowledge plays a significant role in text comprehension, relevant knowledge should be tapped and shared (Pearson & Fielding 1992). During pre-reading discussions, students often share information that is relevant to the topic but which they were not aware of possessing until they

need the information to make connections. It is at this stage that teachers can tap into the student's life experiences and beliefs to help them connect and understand what they read. In multicultural societies, students often have differing prior experiences and beliefs and hence do not share the same assumptions with each other or with the text. In this case, the challenge here is to induce students to draw upon their differing beliefs and prior experiences to make comparisons and critically reflect on what is in the text and in the process, help students to transcend the text.

3. The Study

Thirty-seven Matriculation students between the ages of 17- 20 years in a local institution of higher learning who chose to read Drama In English as an elective took part in the study. The drama course was a prerequisite follow-up to another elective 'Play Production', which was to be offered in the succeeding semester. The prescribed Shakespeare play for the semester was Macbeth and the students were in the 5th week of their semester and had just completed their readings of Act 1 and the first two scenes of Act 2. Act 2 Scene 3 is the Porter's scene. Due to the different religious backgrounds of the students and her experience of teaching Shakespeare, the teacher hypothesized that the students would not find the scene humorous because they viewed the afterlife and especially Hell differently. In view of this, the researcher decided to approach Hell from the student's perspectives and then work their way into the Porter's scene.

4. Methodology

The research methodology employed in this study consists of four main activities culminating in a fifth consolidation activity as its aim is engage students in activities that will assist the students to transact with the text and experience a more personal, lived-through evocation of the text/the porter scene. The research design is referred to as the monomethod monostrand design in which only the qualitative or quantitative is used across all stages; in this particular case it is all qualitative. The research strand consists of three stages: the conceptualization stage, the experiential stage, the inferential stage (Teddie & Tashakkori, 2009).

The premise for the study is: Due to the different religious backgrounds of the ESL students in the Malaysian classroom, the class does not find the porter scene humorous because they view the afterlife, especially Hell differently. The research question to be addressed is: Taking into consideration that humor is based on a common worldview between the writer and the reader, to what extent is this thoughtful laughter made accessible via the designed activities which drew upon the ESL students' diverse background knowledge and experience?

4.1. Activating Background knoweldge

Activity 1
The objective of this exercise is to induce students to reflect on the concept of Hell according to their faiths and in the process raise awareness of the similarities and differences of Hell between the religions.

The students divided themselves into five main groups: the Muslim group (M), the Buddhist/Taoist group (BT), the Hindu group (H), the Christian group (G) and the Atheist group (A) as there were ten Muslims, thirteen Buddhist/Taoists, seven Christians, five Hindus and two Atheists. Each group had to
i)   brainstorm on the concept of the afterlife
ii)   give at least three words/phrases associated with Hell in their religion or thinking (the Atheist group)
iii)   describe Hell according to their faiths (or thinking)

Each group then presents to the class what Hell is according to their religious/philosophical orientation.
Activity 2
The objective of this exercise is to make students realize that some ethnic groups believe that the mortal relatives on Earth are obliged to 'help' their dead relatives in their journey to the other world thus they may need to hold prayers in which food and gifts are offered; likewise some Christian groups believe that prayers can help atone

the sins of the deceased. This activity also foreshadows the next two activities in which students will narrow down their focus and discussions to the gatekeepers of Hell in the Chinese afterlife and in Macbeth.

- *1 pair red candles*
- *A pair of joss sticks for each person's present*
- *Kim Chua ('gold' paper) – to be folded, burned, and sent to her*
- *3 types of fruits*
- *3 types of dishes*
- *1 bowl rice*
- *3 small cups of tea*

After reading the above, the students were to discuss these questions:
i)   What is the 'other world'? What constitutes the 'other world'?
ii)   Which religious group do you think practice this?
iii)   Have you ever witnessed these 'prayers for the dead' scene? Where/When?
iv)   What, do you think, is the 'gold' paper for?
v)   How is this treatment of the afterlife different from the other religious group?

Activity 3
This exercise is to narrow down the lesson and the students' focus to the functions and characteristics of gatekeepers of Hell in the different religions and ultimately prepare students to discuss the porter in the Porter's scene.

For this task, students were given information cards each containing a picture and the name of the gatekeepers of Hell in Islam (Maalik), in Christianity (Satan), in Hinduism (Yamaraja), and on Buddhist-Taoist Hell Bank notes, Yuen Wong alias Yanluo Wang, the gatekeeper of the Buddhist-Taoist underworld . Students are to refer to the information cards and discuss the roles and the characteristics of these gatekeepers of Hell e.g. What are their duties? How do they appear to you - Fierce? Evil? Sadist? Do you expect these gatekeepers to be humorous?

Activity 4
Students read Act 2 Scene 3, the Porter's Scene and:
i)   Discuss what the scene is about
ii)   Compare the duties of the Porter with the other gatekeepers of Hell in Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhist-Taoism (cf. Activity 3)
iii)   Discuss, in their opinion, why Shakespeare included the Porter's scene in Macbeth
iv)   Decide whether the Porter's scene is comic - what is humorous and what is not, and whether the scene serves the purpose of comic relief for the tragedy

4.2. Enhancing the aesthetic experience

To consolidate the teaching-learning experience, students prepare interview questions for the all gatekeepers of Hell (Maalik, Satan, Yamaraja, Yanluo) and the Porter. Students then pair up as interviewer and interviewee, taking turns to be either one and conduct the interviews. The pair of students who managed to portray the Porter most accurately and also draw the most laughter in the interview with the Porter received the commendation for having transcended the text.

5. Results and Discussion

The results of the 'intervention' - the five activities given by the researcher in the study - is reported here according to the activities carried out in the methodology. As mentioned earlier, the analysis is qualitative as the

focus is on how, judging by the responses, the students interacted with the text. Nevertheless, the activities were planned to yield responses according to the three stages of the monomethod research design:

i) The Conceptualization stage
ii) The Experiential stage
iii) The Inferential stage

The Conceptualization stage

The first activity, Brainstorming on the afterlife/the concept of Hell, was successful in getting the students to reflect on the afterlife, the existence of heaven and hell, as well plead ignorance of whether there is an afterlife, heaven or hell. The second activity, Journey to the other world, added further conceptualization of the afterlife and of dealing with the dead. These activities helped set the stage for further discussions and thinking of the afterlife thus students were able to conceptualize what the afterlife is likely to be.

Table 1 The afterlife and the concept of Hell

Groups	The afterlife	Hell
Muslim	Syurga (Heaven) and Neraka (Hell)	Neraka -a place where evil doers go to, steaming and tormenting or freezing, to suffer Hell is a terrible place, must avoid
Buddhist/Taoist	Buddhist In the afterlife you are reborn. Rebirth is according to levels, the good is reborn into a higher being, the bad/evil is reborn into worse states. Taoist The afterlife is a journey. Where to? Don't know.	Naraka – the lowest realm of Hell, punishment, no escape A place to cleanse your sins, many chambers to punish according to your sins
Christians	Either you go to heaven or hell. Your soul meets the Lord. A state of non-existent.	When you are not worthy of the Lord, hot, evil, tragic.
Hindus	Depends on your karma – either you go to heaven or hell when you die.	The lowest spiritual plane called naraka, not permanent, a place to be punished
Atheists	When you die, it's all over. No heaven or hell.	Don't know.

From the brainstorming session, it is clear that most religions believe in the existence of hell; the difference is some religions such as Muslims and Christians believe that hell is a point of no return while the Taoists and Hindus consider hell as a temporary place where a person's sins can be atoned.

Table 2 'Journey to the Other World'

Questions	Responses
i. What is the 'other world'? What constitutes the 'other world'?	The dead (world). The afterlife. Up or down there! Paradise. God, heaven, the devil, hell, don't know.
ii. Which religious group practises this (ritual)?	The Buddhist. The Chinese. The Taoist.
iii. Have you ever witnessed these prayers? Where/When?	Yes, a t funerals. Sometimes by the roadside? During Chinese religious festivals.
iv. What, do you think, is the 'gold' paper for?	Don't know; not sure; for moneylah!
v. how is this treatment of the afterlife different from the other religious groups?	More prayers/longer time for prayers. They believe that the spirits come down to eat the food/fruits. There is contact between the dead and the alive – scary!

It can be seen from Table 2 that being a multiracial country, most of the students have been exposed to some form of Chinese prayers but unless you are Chinese, most of the students do not know what these prayers are for. Thus, for most of the non-Chinese students, this exercise is informative.

The Experiential stage

Activities iii and iv, Discussing the roles and characteristics of the gatekeepers of Hell and Reading the Porter's scene, were complementary as the students at this stage were making connections between the duties of the gatekeepers of hell in other religions and experiencing the different treatment of the porter's role in the Porter's scene.

Table 3 The gatekeepers of Hell

Questions	Responses
i. Maalik	Really? Never heard of him. I thought Satan rules Hell?
ii. Satan	Oh, the evil one. This fellow is big time bad! Scary. Not one you want to meet!
iii. Yamaraja	I didn't know there's one in Hinduism too. Why is he in blue? I thought Yami is the one guarding hell?
iv. Yanluo Wang	This guy doesn't look like a gatekeeper of hell, he's like a businessman! I don't believe it – there's money in hell too?
How do they appear/look to you?	All fierce and evil except the Wang guy. Nolah, definitely not funny. Hell is not a jokelah so how can it be funny?

As expected, all the gatekeepers of Hell are expected to be fearsome and evil. Also, the students do not expect hell or their gatekeepers to be viewed with humor – to them, hell is serious business.

Table 4 Porter's Scene

Questions	Responses
i. Describe what the scene is about.	The fat man…the porter is guarding the gates of Hell. Some people have arrived and the porter is admitting them in, he insults them but lets them in.
ii. Compare the duties of the porter and the other gatekeepers of hell	Although the porter is admitting people (sinners) into hell, somehow the afterlife is not so scary in this scene. Is the porter real?
iii. Why do you think Shakespeare included this scene in Macbeth?	For a break? Don't know, maybe to laugh?
iv. Is the scene comic/hunorous? Does the scene provide comic relief?	If you compare the porter with the other gatekeepers, he looks funny and sounds funny. Is that comic relief?

With reference to Table 4, what makes the porter funny is more his appearance. Thus, we can say that at this point, the appreciation of humor is low level (not 'thoughtful laughter').

    The Inferential stage
    So far, the four activities have assisted the students to activate their schema to discuss and prepare them for the context of the porter's scene. The last activity is the inferential stage because it was not until the students engaged in the role play of interviewing and being interviewed as the Porter did they actually experience (not just read) the laughter and humor of the scene. The students were able to laugh at the scene as they have transcended the text: the appreciation of humor takes place because the ESL students were able to find incongruity in the porter as a gatekeeper of hell (that this gatekeeper is not the normal serious, evil-faced gatekeeper of hell that one sees in religious beliefs) and resolve this mismatch of expectations (it is possible to have such a gatekeeper of hell because it is meant to be humorous/to provide comic relief).

6. Conclusion

    This paper has shown that in the teaching of Shakespeare to ESL students, the language of the Bard is not the only obstacle to appreciating his play(s) and that humor, especially black humor, is one of the most challenging experience to acquire in the class. The methodology advocated in the study clearly reinforces the pedagogical need for the practitioner to draw upon the student's background knowledge and experiences to help them transact with the text (Lee, 2008). The paper also exemplified how diversity in the ESL classroom can be reaped creatively when the students are not taught but led to discover for themselves the meaning of the text via meaning-making activities. To conclude, learner diversity can be an asset in the ESL classroom if it is used creatively.

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