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# “The Theme of the Traitor and the Hero”: Participatory Drama and the literary short story

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Το άρθρο αυτό μπορεί να χρησιμοποιηθεί δωρεάν για έρευνα, διδασκαλία και προσωπική μελέτη. Επιτρέπεται η αναδημοσίευση μετά από άδεια του εκδότη.

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## “The Theme of the Traitor and the Hero”: Participatory Drama and the literary short story

Xiaodi Wang, Joe Winston

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In Charles Dickens' novel *Hard Times*, Mr Gradgrind asks Sissy Jupe to define a horse. The circus girl, who has lived with horses all her life, panics and fails to give the “correct answer”. When I read this chapter, the poor little girl's experience always reminds me of my high school days in the People's Republic of China. My literacy teacher used to ask us to summarize the theme of the literary text we were studying. I was an enthusiastic young reader of literature, but I always struggled to “define a horse”, although these “horses” were my intimate companies. All I could do was write down the standard answer:

*“The Necklace” by Guy de Maupassant is a critique of the vanity of the petite bourgeoisie.*  
*“Metamorphosis” by Franz Kafka is a denunciation of the cold and harsh nature of human relationships in a capitalist society.*  
*Shakespeare's “Hamlet” displays the strength of will of Renaissance Humanism in its desire to break away from the constraints of feudalism and also reveals the limitations of the rising capitalist class.*

My experience was not at all untypical in China. This socio-historical approach to the teaching of literature has been strictly controlled under the watchful eye of the national curriculum, in which “literary education must take Marxism as its guide” is stated as the first and foremost principle.

In China, the theoretical support for Marxist literary education is reflectionist theory (Wu 2003: 7), which insists that literature reflects or reproduces social reality (Eagleton 1976: 48). This argument echoes the theoretical basis of Marxism – that the economic base determines the superstructure (Marx & Engels 1845). In China, this deep-rooted tendency of Marxist criticism dominates literary education from primary school to university. Although it provides a socio-historical insight into literary appreciation, this formulation has been criticized by western theorists on the political left for being mechanistic (Eagleton 1976) and for ignoring the aesthetic value of literary works for political ends (Arendt 1973; Wilson 1972). In China, it has produced generations of students who can cite the official party line but who seldom if ever read literature.

My research intends to demonstrate the potential of participatory drama in teaching classic short stories to undergraduate students in China. My aims are to convey a different way of thinking about literary value and to interest more young people to read good literature.

### The Common Reader

How should one read a book or a story? Literary theorists offer numerous ways to interpret literature and I find it hard to choose one as the guide for my teaching. From a pragmatist's viewpoint, the idea of literature depends on the interpretive community. Thus, I shall apply literary theories that suit my target students.

I view the students I teach as *common readers*, who read for pleasure and a flourishing life rather than “to impact knowledge or to correct the opinions of others” (Woolf 1984: 1). So I find Leavisite criticism (1960) particularly relevant. F. R. Leavis regarded literature as a living organism that we live with and love. Unlike certain forms of education that aim to train students to be cogs in the wheel of the social system, literary education in the Leavisite tradition aims to build up humane understanding and self-enrichment (Bate 2010).

### A dialogue with the dead: how to read great literature

Although Leavis did not initiate a formal theoretical system of literary appreciation (Steiner 1972), Jonathan Bate, who has been greatly influenced by him, provides insightful advice into reading as “a dialogue with the dead” (Bate 2010: 25). Bate claims that reading activity is a mixture of imitation, absorption and resistance to the text, as if in conversation with the author. It is not a passive way of being informed, but a positive and creative communication with a great mind. Bate indicates that once its affect has been re-enacted by a reader (as

in the case of a young person who reads a Shakespearean sonnet to her lover), the literary text will come alive and “the words of a dead man will become modified in the guts of the living” (Bate 2010: 27).

### **The company we keep: the intimate power of literature and an ethics of fiction**

Through this form of dialogue, the sophisticated literary work becomes “the company we keep” (Booth 1988). The literary canon has always been taught formally and scholarly. Bourdieu (1984) reminds us that people who acquire their aesthetic knowledge through the education system tend to have a respectful attitude towards art, whereas people who absorb their taste instinctively from their family background are more likely to have a close personal ease with art. In this research, I am not repeating the very laborious education of art (Bourdieu 1984) which elite classes use to exclude people who have not had their social advantages. I prefer to try to build up an intimate friendship between young people and literature, because this research is not about helping students to break through the cruel fortress of class exclusion but to cultivate passionate readers who in their future lives can claim to have a genuine love of good literature (Armstrong 2005).

### **An Enigmatic Story**

One of the stories I have used as a teaching text is “*The theme of the Traitor and the Hero*”, a short story by the Argentine writer, Jorge Luis Borges. The story is set in the context of a revolutionary Ireland. On the eve of the rebellion of 1824, Kilpatrick, the young, charismatic, patriotic leader is assassinated in a theatre. One hundred years later, his great-grandson, Ryan, is compiling a biography of the hero’s life. He tries to discover the identity of the assassin but the historical records prove to be enigmatic rather than illuminating. In fact Ryan is struck by how these documents resemble plots and characters from Shakespeare’s plays *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth*. Finally he reaches a startling conclusion – the hero Kilpatrick was also the traitor of this revolution. He was found out and condemned to die by his fellow revolutionaries. Since the ruined reputation of a hero would have jeopardized the revolt, the conspirators proposed to use the traitor’s execution as an instrument for the revolution. They used Shakespeare’s works as temples in which to plot the assassination. Following the great dramatist’s design, the assassination is staged and in the subsequent turmoil of grief and anger the revolution is successful.

Borges is brilliant at creating stories that resemble labyrinths and halls of mirrors. In this short story, the ironies, suggestions and intertextual devices open what feels like an infinite space for readers to imagine or to confuse. Unfortunately he only leaves us with 1384 words, which means the text is overwhelmingly condensed and sophisticated. In other words, Borges writes a novel in only 4 pages. It is proof of the author’s genius but also for anyone attempting to adapt the story for dramatic purposes it presents a formidable challenge that might prove nervously exhausting.

### **Context: From 1820s Ireland to 1920s China**

To a young reader, reading Borges is rather like coming across someone who is extremely clever but does not talk too much; you may feel afraid to have a word with him. So the first thing I did was to ask the clever gentleman to speak in Mandarin.

In my adaptation I set the story in the China of the 1920s. Most Chinese students know little about the history of Ireland in the 19th century so it would be very hard for them to imagine the characters and scenarios. Such a change of setting finds its justification in the words of Borges himself. In the original text, he writes that the story might take place in any oppressed country. In Bernardo Bertolucci’s film adaptation, “*The Spider Strategism*” the setting is shifted to the Fascist Italy of the 1930s.

I chose the 1920s in China because the historical background echoes that of 19th century Ireland. The 1920s was a revolutionary time in Chinese history. Western thoughts of democracy and modern society came to China after the First World War. It was also an oppressed time - China’s relations with western countries were under diplomatic ten-



sion for various reasons after the Paris Peace Conference of 1919. Moreover, it was a fascinating period, when many famous and influential politicians, writers, artists, and celebrities came onto the stage, whose names are still well-known in China nowadays.

I set up the fictional background by telling participants that we were to imagine being in China in the 2020s, when a famous writer<sup>1</sup> I had just finished a biography on her great grandfather, a famous general assassinated in the 1920s. Then I showed them a series of short reports about this as written in three different newspapers and magazines in China – The People’s Daily, the official newspaper of the Chinese Communist party; The Southern Weekly, the most influential liberal newspaper in China; and Panorama, a popular magazine of book reviews, art and unofficial history. These titles are not fictional. By imitating the different attitudes of contrasting papers, I was attempting to build up the mysterious and contradictory character of the Kilpatrick figure from different perspectives. This idea comes from a British political comedy *Yes, Prime Minister*. In one episode of this TV series, the Prime Minister, Jim Hacker, makes a satirical statement about the British press.

**Hacker:** Don’t tell me about the press, I know exactly who reads the papers: the *Daily Mirror* is read by people who think they run the country; the *Guardian* is read by people who think they ought to run the country; the *Times* is read by people who actually do run the country; the *Daily Mail* is read by the wives of the people who run the country; the *Financial Times* is read by people who own the country; the *Morning Star* is read by people who think the country ought to be run by another country; and the *Daily Telegraph* is read by people who think it is.

In the original text, Kilpatrick, the main character, is a figure with several faces (since his creator loves mirrors), so in my adaption, the hero is interpreted from a variety of viewpoints - authority (people who run and own the country), liberal intellectuals (people who think they ought to run the country), and nostalgic aesthetes (people who do not care who runs the country). It is intended to build up a 3 dimensional figure – a young, heroic, patriotic, charismatic, mysterious man with lots of stories about him, revealing information that is evidently only the tip of an iceberg.

- a. The People’s Daily (the official paper of communist party of China): This biographic novel portrays the complexity of Chinese society in the early 20th century. The hero, Lingzhi YE, is the talented general, political leader and pioneer of the Northern Expedition.<sup>2</sup> In his short life, YE devoted himself to establishing a new democratic China. His bravery and devotion have encouraged numerous subsequent revolutionaries fighting for the sake of the Republic.
- b. The Southern Weekly (China’s most influential liberal newspaper): Lingzhi YE is a contradictory figure in early 20<sup>th</sup> century China. He was born in a North Warlord’s family but became a rebel son to his “father”. He wrote poems when he studied in Europe but later became a young general. He kept to a traditional Chinese lifestyle until he died. A passionate public speaker he also had the most prudent of minds. In all he is a mysterious figure representative of the complex history of early 20<sup>th</sup> century China.
- c. Panorama (the magazine of book reviews, art and unofficial history): Lingzhi YE might be forgotten by people nowadays, but he was undoubtedly one of the iconic celebrities of the period of “the Republic of China”. A young general, as handsome as an ancient warrior, his love story with his wife has become a classic 20th century romance of the hero and the beauty. His death is still a mystery. It has been said he was murdered by the government of the Northern Warlords. He was shot whilst watching Peking Opera, *the Denouncement of Cao Cao*<sup>3</sup>, a story about a proud poet who beat the drum denouncing Cao’s rule. The play more or less reflected YE’s own destiny.

Journalism does not – and cannot - pursue truth in an absolute sense, it works on assembling and verifying facts for its target audiences, then the audiences can make their own assessment of the information. Media serves as a common carrier of public discussion. And one cannot forget that public opinion can have a great affect on a politician’s career or even a country’s destiny. In *Julius Caesar*, Marc Antony’s famous speech at Caesar’s funeral sways the public will and completely changes the political situation. In Borges’ story, Kilpatrick’s glorious death lights the patriotic enthusiasm of the Irish people. Public opinion or popular will is

manipulated by the great rhetoricians. In this drama activity, I aim to show that after 100 years, the press is still seeking partial angles for picturing the hero.

In this exercise, I asked three participants to read the short reports in the tones of the papers' potential readers – a serious communist official, a pseudo-intellectual, and a camp young girl. After a short group discussion, participants talked about their first impression of the hero. Since the three papers built up a young, heroic, charismatic and mysterious character, most of the participants were immediately fascinated by such a figure.

However, interestingly, the hero is in fact the traitor of the nation, and participants will find this out at the end of the session. But in the fictional world, it will be a secret forever. So when the participants know the truth and look back, all the reports and their fantasies about the hero can be seen as highly ironic. The massive success of the biographic novel, the praise of the hero, and the articles become a delicate, well-fabricated lie for the public. More interestingly, the lie is told all together by an informed biographer, an uninformed press, and the man who designed this piece of theatre 100 years ago. 100 years have passed, but the old play of the hero is being staged once again. It is intended, in Borges' words, to have the effect of "a secret form of time, a pattern of repeated lines", as revealed in the words he writes at the end of the original story.

He (the writer/great-grand son) understands that he too forms part of Nolan's (the conspirator who designs the assassination) plot... After a series of tenacious hesitations, he resolves to keep his discovery silent. He publishes a book dedicated to the hero's glory; this, perhaps, was foreseen.

Since I was trying to keep a touch of detective story, I ended the workshop when the truth came out, so the participants' feelings about this design can only be found out in later interviews which have yet to be conducted at the time of writing.

### Intertextuality

The most fascinating part of this story is its intertextual devices, especially the imitation of Shakespeare's plays. In his liking for mirrors and labyrinths, Borges, in his genius, designs the story so that every detail can reflect several shadows because of the various allusions, implications and ironies he weaves into the story's design. The simplest example is the hero's name: Kilpatrick, which can be divided into Kill and Patriot; or Kill Patrick. Under the title – *theme of the traitor and the hero*, "Kill Patriot" is obviously ironic, and "Kill Patrick" easily reminds people of St Patrick, the most generally recognized patron saint of Ireland who happens to be British. By simply naming the hero, Borges has already created a beautiful crystal of icy irony.

Trying to present the intertextual devices in this story to young students was a great challenge to me. The hero has a glorious death and the revolution is successful because the whole event is framed within the design of a great and established political tragedy, *Julius Caesar*. A Shakespearean play is obviously much more sophisticated and complex than a character's name. To some extent, this story derives much of its seemingly infinite interpretive depth through Borges inviting Shakespeare's ghost to practise its magic. And history here is imitating art. Thus one of the main task of my teaching was to foreground the intertextual devices in this story, and inspire students to explore through drama the connections between *Julius Caesar* and Borges' story.

One of the excises I designed to do this was to tell the participants that a filmmaker wanted to make a film of the hero and the author of the biographic novel (who is also, of course, the great granddaughter of the hero) had been invited to write the screenplay. Inspired by Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, the director and the writer both wanted to begin the film in the way Shakespeare did. All the participants are enrolled as actors auditioning for this film, and in this exercise, they are asked to workshop the first scene.

In *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare begins with the people not the hero. Romans are taking an unofficial holiday to celebrate the conquering Caesar's return from a civil war. In my adaptation, the hero triumphs over another warlord and returns back to Beijing. This exercise is set on the eve of his return with various people in Beijing talking about the hero's triumph. I ask participants to play five particular groups of people in Beijing. They are customers in a teahouse<sup>4</sup>, the hero's public rivals in their smoking room, high officials' wives on a mah-jong<sup>5</sup> table, journalists and their editor in a newspaper office, and a pedlar and a policeman on the street. The five scenes I chose are typical of the 1920s in China. The street and high officials' smoking room meeting echoes Act 1 Scenes 1&2 in *Julius Caesar*, whereas the tea house and mah-jong table are two typical images in Chinese modern literature and their creators, Lao She and Eileen Chang, are both in the national curriculum of China.

In the original text, the great-grandson chooses to publish a book "dedicated to the hero's glory" after some hesitation. The reason is so interesting that it must be explored. Yet I am also quite interested in the content of this book. How would he create the heroic character? It cannot be based upon the truth, which he decides to cover up. So I make a bold hypothesis – since the hero's death imitates literature, this biography would also be



written under the shadow of established literary works. In my adaptation, the high-grade parodies make the book look like one written by the literary ghosts - Shakespeare, Lao She, Eileen Chang or any famous writer that the great-grand daughter may imitate. Then the real history would be covered by delicate literary devices. The undeserving hero would gain a second turn of fame through the help of art.

However turning my idea into practice is extremely difficult. As an art of fiction, intertextuality is often taught in only in departments of literature, because it needs a certain basic knowledge of literature and a background in reading for it to be explored. Such requirements may be too high for common readers. So I chose the literary texts for this intertextual exercise very carefully. *The Tea House* is a key text in the national curriculum, so everyone who has been to senior high school in China should have studied it properly. *Lust and Caution* is widely known after Ang Lee's film adaptation in 2007. And I make sure that I explain Julius Caesar's story to participants very clearly.



I conducted this activity with 3 groups of students in Beijing. 2 groups of students were from a theatre academy and one from a top university in China. None of the groups were studying literature in their colleges. Although these “common readers” had distinctive backgrounds, their responses towards this exercise shared many similarities. Firstly, none of the three groups were familiar with the literary texts I used. For instance, in the teahouse exercise, only 1 group of theatre students were inspired by Lao She's play, because they had rehearsed it several months before. The other 2 groups, even students from the top university told me that they had only heard about this famous play. When I told them that Act 2 of the *Teahouse* is in the high school textbook of literacy, they seemed to be very surprised. A girl student in the top university said “Really? Is it the play about a son having an affair with his stepmother?” I told her, not without embarrassment, that the play she mentioned is *Thunderstorm* by Cao Yu, which is also a key text in their textbook. Therefore, visualizing the scene of a teahouse became a difficult task for two of the groups. They both used their life experience to imagine a teahouse in the 1920s, yet unfortunately their experience belongs to the 21st century. Thus one group showed a busy Chinese restaurant, in which people simply boasted to others or were fighting to pay the bills. Their dialogues consisted of arguing over who knew the hero best and whether he was brave or not. The other group presented a Starbucks rather than a teahouse. A lovely waitress asked the customers' order then listened to them gossiping about how handsome the hero was.

Without the relevant reading background, this intertextual exercise was scarcely successful. However, with the theatre students who knew the text well, it got impressive results. This play led them to experience the time, the characters and their feelings. Their characters were rather like those in Lao She's play – the cunning teahouse waiter, the patriotic Manchurian lord, a timid and talkative customer and two bullying secret policemen. The Manchurian lord was praising the hero's achievement to his timid friend but they were both arrested by police. They adapted Lao She's famous lines, which worked in their acting very well, such as “show your bloody power to those foreign lords. You have been very well paid by the government, but why have I never seen you dare to fight in a war!”, and “gentlemen, please! Let's not talk about politics.” Although their improvisational performance was not as mature and coherent as a scene in the *Teahouse*, they captured some essence of Lao She's style – black humor, the fate of unimportant people and the sense of indirection in a time of change. There is no better literary model than Lao She for one who wants to imitate the old Beijing style.

I saw the strength of drama as pedagogy very clearly in a game that I played with the students, an adapted version of the game “assassin” (Winston 2000).

I asked all the participants to stand in a circle and gave each of them a playing card. In the cards I gave there was a big joker - the card of the hero - and a little joker – the card of the traitor. All the others were the hero's companions. The hero showed his card to everyone but others kept their cards a secret so no-one would know who the traitor was.

Then, everyone had to close their eyes except for the traitor. The traitor can kill anyone except the hero by pointing him or her to the teacher. Once they have been killed, participants can open their eyes but must remain silent. When I stop the game, everyone is invited to open their eyes and see who has been killed. They can then discuss who they think the traitor is. The hero then has the right to kill the main suspect.

According to the rules of the game, if the hero can find out the traitor, the hero wins. If he cannot, then everyone has to close their eyes again and the traitor can start to kill more people. After the traitor has murdered all the of hero's companions, she can kill the hero and win the game.

I played the game with them twice. The first time I told them all the rules by trying the game out. The second time, I gave both the hero's card and the traitor's card to one girl; she killed all the other participants and revealed the truth at the end.

I wove all the important elements of the story into this game. Every participant was in role and the dramatic tension came directly from the original text. I originally piloted this exercise with ten MA students in Warwick University, four of whom said when the final truth came out that they felt "shocked". One girl pointed out that I had broken the rules by making the hero and the traitor the same person. I answered that there was no rule that the hero and the traitor could not be the same person; look at the story, I said, the main character played the hero and the traitor at the same time. The girl thought for a second and said "I cannot think anymore, it is so scary. The man is so dangerous. He killed us but made us suspect innocent people. How can he manipulate us so calmly? How can he use our trust to hurt us whilst keeping his image of justice and dignity? What a traitor!" I asked her if she felt betrayed. She said "yes, but not much, it is just a game anyway. I must say I have a much stronger feeling that the villain is so cool!"

When I designed the game, all I thought of was how to use the plot to set up the rules. I did not expect such chemistry to happen in the workshop. The result shows that once the context has been pre-established, once the characterisation collaborates with the rules of the game, the tension, the interaction and even the whole atmosphere can be driven by the nature of the original story.

## Conclusion

The purpose of the good life, proposes Alisdair MacIntyre, consists of a quest in which one searches for the good life, a search that can never be over (1981). Despite the ambiguities in the findings so far, I am heartened by this idea; that this research is in some sense its own purpose. This is neither to ignore the intended educational outcomes nor to indulge in a piece of self-indulgence; it is to recognize that the ambitions of my question can never be realistically fulfilled, certainly in any straightforward sense. Fundamentally, my research revolves around ideas of art and artistry, which are always, to some extent, their own purpose and provide their own rewards. I hope that this account will interest those teachers who are interested in pushing the boundaries of participatory drama, exploring the possible complexities of its artistry and the limits of its educational possibilities, especially how these relate to complex literary fictions.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In my adaptation, I changed the writer's gender, because it would be easier for me, a female teacher to do some activities, such as teacher in role as the writer.

<sup>2</sup> The Northern Expedition (Chinese: 北伐), was a military campaign led by the Kuomintang (KMT) from 1926 to 1928. It aims to unify China under the Kuomintang banner by ending the rule of local warlords. It ends the Warlord Era and reunified China in 1928.

<sup>3</sup> In the Han dynasty, the ambitious Prime Minister Cao Cao is having a banquet with distinguished guests. Cao bids Mi Heng to work as a drummer, just for the fun of insulting him. Mi arrives dressed in rags and, when asked why, simply strips off to proudly stand nude before the public. Guests shut their eyes in embarrassment. To rebut Cao Cao's angry accusations, Mi replies. "You said I am shameless? Not me but someone who has misled his majesty. Let the people view my clean conscience." "If you're clean," Cao roars, "Who is dirty?" "You!" Mi sneers. "Your eyes are dirty for being unable to tell good men from bad, your mouth is dirty because you do not read Confucius, your ears are dirty because you refuse to listen to advice and you tolerate nobody because of the dirt in your belly." Cao, infuriated, orders him to the battle front, hoping that the enemy's sword will kill him.

<sup>4</sup>TEA HOUSE: Published in 1957, *Teahouse* is not only the peak of Lao She's career as a dramatist but also a monumental work in the history of modern Chinese drama. Through a graphic depiction of what happens to a teahouse in Beijing and the fate of Wang Lifa, boss of the teahouse and that of a group of characters connected there, *Teahouse* mirrors the social turmoil and the seamy side of society. The first act describes the corrupt and moribund Qing Dynasty after the Reform Movement of 1898. The second act portrays the dogfight between warlords in the initial years after the founding of the Republic of China (1912-1949), during which ordinary people could hardly earn a living. The third act depicts the Kuomintang's government in Beijing after the victory of the Sino-Japanese War.

<sup>5</sup>This is drawn from Eileen Chang's *Lust and Caution*, where high officials' wives and concubines share gossip and secrets whilst playing mah-jong.

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Professor **Joe Winston** is co-ordinator of the MA in Drama and Theatre Education and Director of Research Degrees at the Institute of Education, Warwick University UK. He has a background in primary and middle school education and was a head teacher for three years before joining the staff at Warwick in 1991. He is joint editor of *Research in Drama Education*, widely recognised as the leading academic journal in its field. Well known nationally and internationally for his lively in-service work with teachers, he has published a wide range of books and articles both of an academic and professional nature. He has recently delivered key note addresses at international conferences in Europe and Asia. His book "Beauty and Education" was published in January, 2010, and was reviewed as book of the week in the *Times Higher Education Supplement* in April, 2010. Other recent publications include "Second Language Learning through Drama" and "Beginning Shakespeare: 4-11", both published in 2012 by Routledge.

