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Texts that work: Three suggested literary texts for the language classroom

The most frequently asked question since starting the Literature in Language Teaching SIG back in 2012 has been “Can you recommend some good texts to use?” The 2015 SIG Forum offered answers to this very question from multiple participants. I perhaps cheated a little, in attempting to give more value for money, by suggesting three texts. In my short allocated time, I noted the reasons for using the texts, suggested a process for using them, noted key themes for discussion, and gave a quick overview of the texts.

Using texts with a range of high level students who tested into content courses, but who were nevertheless non-English majors, I first set multiple questions for students' own personal responses, which then lead into pair and group discussions (as discussed in detail prior, in Bibby, 2014). Second, comes the reading, which I prefer to have students do at home. Class time is then more productively spent on the third activity of discussion and idea sharing.

The first text discussed was Kurt Vonnegut's satirical dystopian *Harrison Bergeron*, a tale of imposed equality. This story is ideal for the language classroom due to its relative brevity, the spoken nature of much of the text, the limited number of characters, and the relatively low lexical level. Further to this, there is a short film available, 2081, which, at 26 minutes, is a suitable length to be shown in class to support the written text. The multiple themes arising of equality, freedom, difference, individuality and revolt have proven readily discussable.

The second suggested text was *The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas* by Ursula le Guin. This text is useful to use as a utilitarian thought exercise for students – what price is worth paying? The tale is told in three parts: a utopia, a horrific description of a price that needs to be paid for the utopia to be sustained, and a final choice. This tale takes students aback in the horror of the payoff, and usefully so, to set up some passionate discussions.

The third of the suggested texts is Katherine Mansfield's *Miss Brill*, a sad story of an elderly lady enjoying going about her Sunday routine, observing participating in 'park life,' and overhearing comments of casual malice. Students in the previous semester chose this as the

favourite of all the texts studied – the crashing sadness, from an earlier participatory dreaminess, is indeed affecting.

Quite differing texts, but what these sort stories do have in common, in addition to their convenient brevity, is an uncommon depth and their universality.

References

Bibby, S. (2014). Content and context: A university L2 course featuring George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. *Journal of Language in Literature Teaching* (3)2, 21-33.