

## TEACHING HA JIN'S "A LECTURE" – A SHOWCASE OF THE WORTH OF LITERATURE IN DEVELOPING CRITICAL AND CREATIVE THINKING IN THE CLASSROOM

Susanne Andrea Sitohang  
[susanne.sitohang@uki.ac.id](mailto:susanne.sitohang@uki.ac.id)  
Fakultas Sastra, Universitas Kristen Indonesia

**Abstract.** *The unraveling of the students' sense of humanity and individuality is deemed necessary to better prepare them to face the current world of globalism and multiculturalism, to guide them to the understanding that while the world consists of different beliefs, ideals, political views, and religions, at the center of all things, humans share common needs, desires and feelings. Therefore, students need to discover within themselves a sense of humanity and individuality. Having been equipped with this sense of humanity and individuality, the students, thus, hopefully, will be able to think critically and bring about changes in their immediate environment should unjust acts take place. Critical literacy is believed to be one of the many ways to achieve this goal. The unraveling is done through the inclusion of literature in the classroom in an Indonesian English class setting. This article highlights how students can be introduced to concepts of "humanity," "conformity," and "individuality" through reading a short story by Ha Jin entitled "A Lecture." After understanding the short story and the afore-mentioned concepts, students are able to produce on their own an art project as a reflection and reaction to the story and the ideas embedded in the story.*

*Key words: humanity, individuality, non-conformity, acceptance, radicalism,*

### Background

Various research projects have proven the benefits of learning literature for students. Maley in Hismanoglu (2005) proposes four reasons regarding studying literature. Students should read literature because

- a. literature is valuable authentic material;
- b. it is cultural enrichment;
- c. it provides language enrichment, and
- d. it generates personal involvement

Literature also contributes to the development of students' ability to relate – they can become more mature emotionally as their affection and feelings and emotions are influenced by literature. One should not forget that literature is universal. It is also no-trivial. The messages from literature relate to the readers although sometimes these messages are ambiguous (Maley in Hismanoglu, 2005).

In addition, the students' critical thinking faculties are also influenced by reading literature. They become more aware of cross cultural matters and have more acute senses in issues affecting global communication.

In reading a literary work, students also learn to practice critical thinking, to read between the lines and to find out what the writer of the works actually means to convey. This kind of critical thinking in reading a literary work may also be included in critical literacy. It is critical literacy because students are expected to be able to discover what authors in various texts embed in

his or her stories. This is because it is safe to assume that authors or writers of literary works have social and political influence, which may or may not be implanted in their works. Students should be able to find out what values or ideas authors are promoting in a particular literary work. Students should be sensitive to determine whether or not the ideas promoted by these authors contain acceptable or unacceptable ideas.

Teachers of literature classes, therefore, in choosing what literary works to introduce to their students, should think about the needs of the students, their interests and cultural background and the language level of the students so that they can easily digest the meaning the author wishes to impart. Through reading a work of literature, students can also add their knowledge of the world with regards to world history – wars, historical accounts, and world leaders. Learning about this aspect surely helps students in becoming more aware of ideas around them.

Through reading a piece of literature, students may also be encouraged to produce work of literature of their own as their reaction to the stories they read. Students can reflect and react by producing their own work of art. It is the purpose of this article to showcase the points mentioned above.

### **The Literature Class**

The class being showcased is a literature class, entitled ASIAN STUDIES. In this class, students are introduced to different stories written by Asian writers. The stories are written in English, or they may be translated works. The course introduces participants to Asian people, the culture, history and politics. Students are encouraged to get to know the countries of Asia through its literature.

There are 18 students participating in the showcase. They are introduced to a short story written by Ha Jin, a Chinese immigrant writer. The title of the short story is “A Lecture.” The form of short story is chosen because of its brevity but rich in meaning attributes. This story is found to be suitable as it is about a period in the history of China, which is the period of Cultural Revolution. The story is rich in historical, sociological and political values. The story also introduces students to the powerful leader of the time – knowledge which may help them be aware of the danger of extreme beliefs and setting a figure a cult, one important point to consider in today’s world of extremism and fundamentalism.

The students are asked to read the story and then, together with the teacher, they analyze the work. As their final assignment, students are asked to work in groups and produce another work of art as a reflection and a reaction to the story they have read. The entire reading project is divided into three stages: pre-reading activities, while reading activities, and post-reading activities. The details are described below:

#### ***Pre-reading activities***

1. In this stage of the class, the teacher aimed to introduce students to ideas embedded in the selected short story. The teacher would like to know what students think of ideas, such as “humanity,” “conformity,” and “individuality.” This is done by giving each student paper to write his/her own definitions and examples of the three key words above. The definitions produced by the students were then discussed together. It was found that not all students were familiar and

were able to define the three key words. The word “conformity” was the one word that is mostly mistaken. The word “individuality” was also found to be mistaken as “egotism.”

2. To further check the students’ understanding of the three key words, the teacher, then, showed some pictures and asked students to match the pictures with the ideas promoted by the three key words “humanity,” “conformity,” and “individuality.” Students were asked to identify whether the pictures show “humanity,” “conformity,” and “individuality.” The purpose of this activity is to strengthen the students’ understanding of those three key words. At this stage of the lesson, students had become more familiar of the meaning the words.

3. The next step in the lesson of the introduction to one Chinese political leader who was key to the understanding of the story, Mao Zedong. The name Chairman Mao appears in the story. He is the leader of Cultural Revolution in China. The students are also introduced to that particular point of history in China as it is necessary to understand the story better. In this stage, the teacher again showed pictures of the leader and the situations in China during the historical point in time. Other aspects about the Cultural Revolution include the Communist China, the Long March, the war between the Nationalist and the Communist.

4. The three key words “humanity,” “conformity,” and “individuality” were finally explained.

### ***While reading activities***

1. After the pre-reading activities, it was time for the students to read the short story. After the students finished reading, the teacher asked how they found the story. Whether they found the story easy or hard to read.

2. Teacher then gave some comprehension questions to check the students’ understanding.

3. To make sure the students really understood the story, the teacher and the students read the story together. At intervals, the teacher explained the story further, pointing out aspects that students might not understand.

### ***Post reading activities***

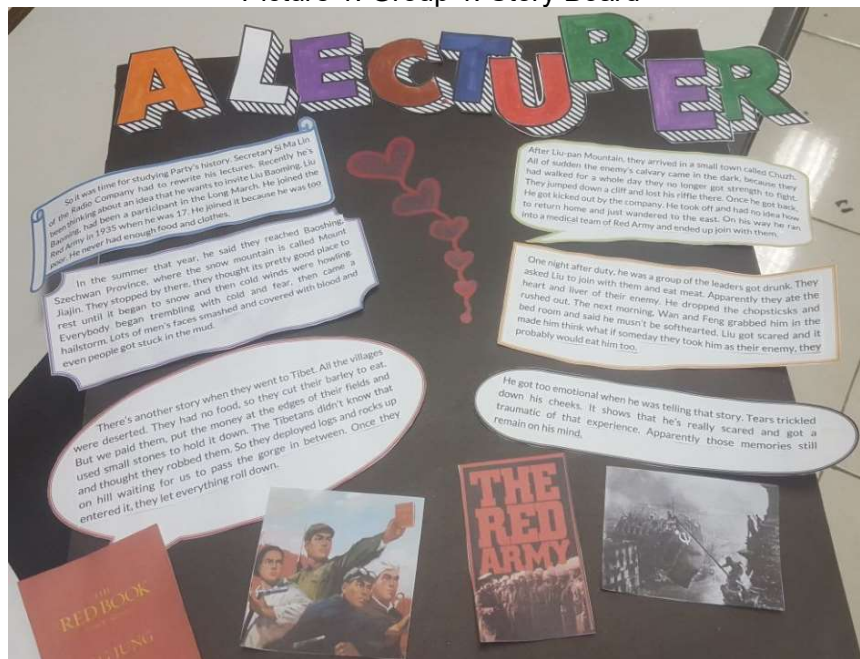
1. After the while-reading activities finished, the teacher asked students to write an individual reflective paper, with a set of questions to guide them in their writing. The questions were:

- a. Is the story hard? Why?
- b. What are the predicaments faced by the main character(s)?
- c. What conflicts do they have to face?
- d. What hard choices or decisions do they have to make?
- e. What lessons about humanity and about individuality did you get from reading the story?
- f. What new information about China did you learn from “A Lecture”? What do you think of the situations posed in the stories? What would you do if you were Liu Baoming? Would you do the same? Or would you do something different? What do you understand now from the short stories about China? Any change in perspectives?
- g. How different is the culture of China and your own culture?

- h. Do we have the same history? What would you do if we had the same situations here in Indonesia?
- i. What lessons about humanity and individuality did you get from reading the two short stories and knowing the two characters? What resolutions about life do you have now after the readings?

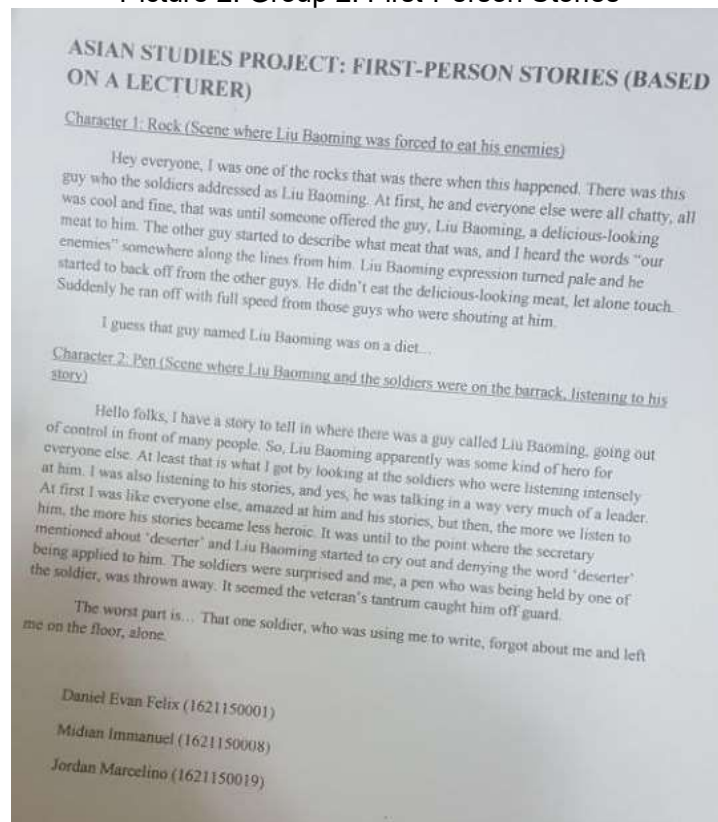
2. The students were, then, divided into several groups. They were assigned to work in groups and came up with a different project as their reaction to the story. The project may take the form of story boards, poems, or other forms of literary art. The results are the following.

Picture 1. Group 1: Story Board



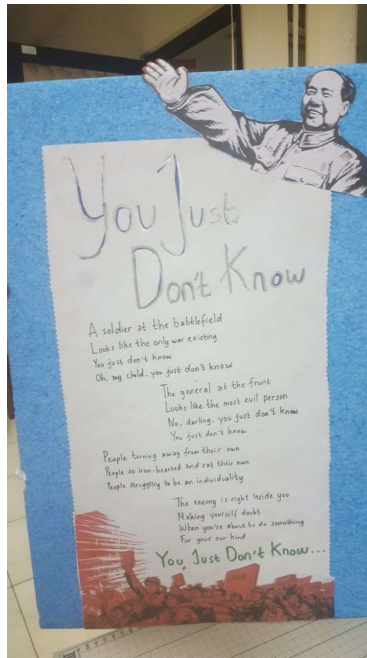
This group came up with a story board about the story. The group recreated the story and put the episodes in the story on a board. They put pictures to animate the story. From examining the story board, one can see that the students understood the story.

Picture 2. Group 2: First-Person Stories



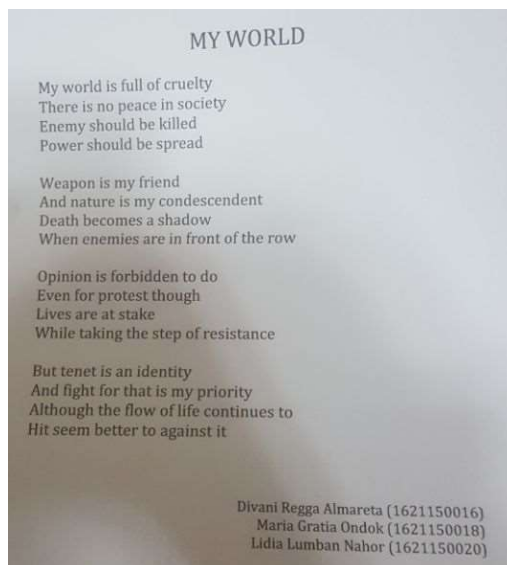
This group produced one quite creative project. They recreated the story by retelling the story in a different voice. They used first-person narration, while the story itself used the third-person narration. With a different voice, the effect of the story also differs.

Picture 3. Group 3: Poem “You Just Don’t Know”



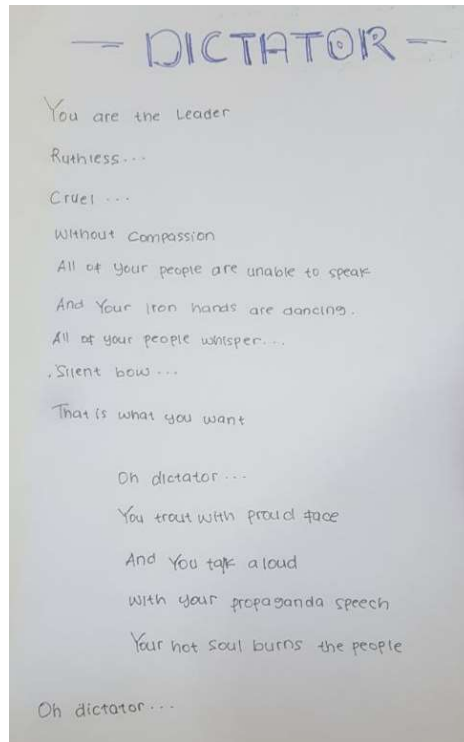
The group reacted by producing a poem entitled “You Just Don’t Know.” This group tried to grasp the feelings of the people during the period of Cultural Revolution. This also applies to the project done by the group below. They produced a poem entitled “My World.” This poem, again, talked about the feelings that the Chinese living during the period might be feeling.

Picture 4. Group 4: Poem “My World”



The last project produced by the students is a poem with the titled "Dictator." This poem is focused on the figure Mao Zedong, the dictator of the day.

Picture 5. Group 5: Poem "Dictator"



### Concluding Remarks

From the teaching of the selected story and from the projects produced by the students as shown previously, one can safely conclude that the students in the class were able to understand the concepts introduced in the story. They were able to put their critical thinking, which was proven by the projects they produced. The story taught the students that in this world, there exists different ideas and the diversity that they find through the different stories they read will only enrich their thinking and feelings and prepare them to face the global world.

This showcase again shows the importance of literature to be given in today's classrooms. There are, of course, other short stories by Asian writers that can be used to introduce to other ideas of humanity to the students.

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