

Children's Literature for Educational Purposes

Yuji TAKENAGA

Department of English, Faculty of Education

Ehime University

教育的目的のための児童文学

竹 永 雄 二 (英米文学研究室)

愛媛大学教育学部紀要

第56巻 抜刷

平成21年10月

教育的目的のための児童文学

(英米文学研究室) 竹 永 雄 二

Children's Literature for Educational Purposes

Yuji TAKENAGA

(平成21年6月5日受理)

English education in Japan

Although children's literature is a rich source of educational materials for many students learning English as a foreign language in Japan, it has not been given its just due by college researchers or middle and high school teachers. Most college researchers have often dismissed it in favor of classical works. In general, they have tended to use English classical works such as those of Shakespeare, Dickens and Jane Austen as textbooks for English literature courses as well as general English proficiency courses. Consequently, English lessons have often been painful for many students, and they have lost their motivation to improve their English. Middle and high school teachers are restricted by being required to use the limited number of textbooks authorized officially.

In the past, teachers traditionally used the grammar-translation method, stressing the importance of grammatical rules and the skill to translate English into Japanese. They trained students to memorize English in order to pass the entrance examination for universities. However, under the pressure of growing globalization, English education has been forced to change. The emphasis has move from grammatical knowledge of English to communicative skill. The Ministry of Education and Science announced last year that foreign language activities would be introduced into elementary schools as required activities, and this educational reform is currently underway.

Children's literature for extensive reading

The state of affairs described above has strengthened my belief that children's literature can be most helpful for students in developing their language skills and cultural consciousness. First, it can provide a lot of enjoyable stories for extensive reading. Recently, we have seen a growing interest in children's literature due to the popularity of movies such as the *Harry Potter* series, *The Lord of Rings* trilogy and *The Narnia Chronicles*. The original books are available in most bookstores in Japan and are also easily obtained from the worldwide online bookstore, Amazon. Young English learners can spontaneously expand their 'comfort zone' by reading books of their own choice (Ono, Day and Harsch, 2004). For example, when English learners read the following paragraph taken from *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, they can follow and enjoy the story without having to consult the dictionary every other word:

Just as the frying-pan was nicely hissing, Peter and Mr Beaver came in with fish which Mr Beaver had already opened with his knife and cleaned out in the open air. You can think how good the new-caught fish smelled while they were frying and how the hungry children longed for them to be done and how very much hungrier still they had become before Mr Beaver said, "Now we're nearly ready." (82-3)

Exploring an imaginary world from children's literature, English learners can reinforce their motivation to learn more English. Enjoying English is key to this motivation.

Children's literature for developing cultural consciousness

In general, children's literature provides numerous imaginary worlds where students can experience different cultures and develop their cultural consciousness. For example, let's consider about *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* by C.S. Lewis I mentioned above.

Allusions to World War II

First, there is a distinct allusion to World War II in the opening part of the book:

Once there were four children whose names were Peter, Susan, Edmund and Lucy. This story is about something that happened to them when they were sent away from London during the war because of the air-raids. (9)

The four children are sent away to the country house belonging to an elderly professor to avoid the Blitz. According to Downing (2005, 29), 'At the beginning of World War II in September 1939, Lewis's household at the Kilns accepted children who were evacuated from London during the air raids.' This provides the background for the story. It does not seem unintentional to me that a wardrobe through which Lucy first enters into Narnia, includes 'war' in its spelling. Narnia is tyrannically occupied by the White Witch. It is not a wonderland but an eternal winter world where Christmas never comes. Tumnus, a faun who has helped Lucy to escape, is arrested by the secret police as punishment for this act. In order to evade the search by the White Witch, Mr. and Mrs. Beaver and three of the Pevensie children spend a

night in a cave which is perhaps reminiscent of a trench or a shelter during the air-raids in London. Father Christmas announces that Christmas has come at last in Narnia, and gives presents to each of children, but his presents are special tools useful in battle. He hands 'a shield and a sword' (119) to Peter: 'a bow and a quiver full of arrows and a little ivory horn,' (119) to Susan: 'a little bottle of what looked like glass and a small dagger.' (119) to Lucy. As these presents portend, there later occur fierce battles, and a lot of people and animals are killed. Perhaps these examples allude to the war in the real world, World War II. Given this difficult situation, Christian belief becomes more significant.

Allusions to Christianity

Early on, Edmund commits a sin. He eats 'Turkish Delight,' a cake enchanted by the Witch and becomes instantly strongly addicted to it. This episode clearly alludes to the sin of Adam and Eve who ate from the Forbidden Tree. As punishment for his sin, his life is likely to be forfeited by the White Witch who represents a servant of Satan. However, Aslan dies to save his life. Edmund deeply repents of his sin and redeems himself, and he bravely battles his enemies. Through Edmund's story, the reader (English learners) learns about one of the major Christian teachings, sin and redemption.

Second, the lion Aslan represents Jesus Christ. Aslan's death on the Stone Table and his revival parallel Christ's Crucifixion and Resurrection. However, this central part of the story alluding to the miracle of Christian legends can be rather incomprehensible to many Japanese students. One of my students said that she could not understand why Aslan should sacrifice his life for Edmund. By contrast, the seasonal change directly appeals to Japanese students. As Aslan comes to Narnia, spring also comes; in the woods, flowers are blooming, birds are singing, and brooks are babbling. The vivid

description of the spring also awakens great joy in our heart:

Close beside the path they were following, a bird suddenly chirped from the branch of a tree. It was answered by the chuckle of another bird a little further off. And then, as if that had been a signal, there was chattering and chirruping in every direction, and then a moment of full song, and within five minutes the whole wood was ringing with birds' music, …(132)

From a multicultural perspective, the friendship of a faun and Lucy is interesting. When Lucy first enters into Narnia, she meets Tumnus, a faun who is half goat and half man. He initially kidnaps her and intends to take her to the White Which, but he changes his mind and saves her life. Accordingly, Lucy and Tumnus become close friends. According to Downing (2005), Lewis commented that this book started from his memory of a picture depicting a faun carrying an umbrella. A faun is a creature in a Roman mythology. It is interesting to observe two cultures meet under one umbrella.

In a recent book, *Planet Narnia*, Michael Ward (2008) argues that seven books of the Narnia chronicles respectively correspond to the seven planets, Jupiter, Mars, Sol, Luna, Mercury, Venus, and Saturn. In this book he demonstrates that medieval cosmology provides the imaginative key to the seven books. According to his interpretation, the planets are the spiritual symbols of universal values. For example, the first book, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* corresponds to a planet, Jupiter whose spiritual symbol is joviality. One example is observed in the scene where the seasonal change from winter to spring in the wood is joyfully described. Joviality can be also observed in the scene where Aslan rises from the dead:

A mad chase began. Round and round the hill-

top he led them, now hopelessly out of their reach, now letting them almost catch his tail, now diving between them, now tossing them in the air with his huge and beautifully velvety paws and catching them again, and now stopping together in a happy laughing heap of fur and arms and legs. (176-7)

Ward's insightful theory helps students expand their perspectives academically and globally.

Just as a wardrobe is a gateway through which the Pevensie siblings enter into an imaginary world of Narnia, this book is a gateway through which English learners can enter into Western culture and develop their understanding of the core culture of Christianity.

The collaboration of movies and children's literature

Lastly, I will comment on the relationships of the animation movie version of *Howl's Moving Castle* directed by Hayao Miyazaki, and the original work. The collaboration of movies and children's literature is creating new cultural amusement.

Howl's Moving Castle

Howl's Moving Castle is a young adult fantasy novel written by Diana Wynne Jones and first published in 1986. The story is about a young woman named Sophie Hatter living in the town of Market Chipping in the magical kingdom of Ingary. As she is the eldest of three daughters, she resigns herself to a monotonous life, running the family hat shop. However, one day she is turned into an old woman by the Witch of the Waste. Sophie leaves the shop and gets a job as a cleaning lady for Wizard Howl, who lives in a moving castle powered by a fire demon, Calcifer. There is a rumor in Market Chipping that Howl eats the hearts of beautiful young women. Sophie makes a bargain with Calcifer: if Sophie can break the contract Howl and Calcifer have made, then Calcifer will return Sophie to her true form. In the end of the story, Sophie saves Howl by

giving him his heart back. By breaking their contract, Sophie can return to her true form. Howl releases Calcifer, restores other spelled persons to their true forms and finally asks Sophie to marry him.

Allusions to "Song" by John Donne

"Song" by John Donne is referred to twice in this novel and plays a very important role. It is used as a curse which the Witch of the Waste has put on Howl after he deserted her. For example, the first stanza is as follows;

"Go and catch a falling star,
Get with child a mandrake root,
Tell me where all past years are,
Or who cleft the Devil's foot.
Teach me to hear the mermaids singing,
Or to keep off envy's stinging,
And find
What wind
Serves to advance an honest mind. (176)

When the seven impossible tasks mentioned here really have been carried out, the curse will be fulfilled. About the first task, "Go and catch a falling star," Howl catches a falling star, Calcifer and gives it his heart to keep it alive. About the second one, "Get with child a mandrake root," one of the roots (mandrake) Sophie has planted sprouts two green leaves. About the third one, "Tell me where all past years are," Howl knows this as it is part of his magical training. About the fourth one, "Tell me ... / Or who cleft the Devil's foot," perhaps Howl cleaves Calcifer's foot because he has given his cleft heart to him. About the fifth, "Teach me to hear the mermaids singing," the mermaids come out of the sea and sing during Howl's fight with the Witch of the Waste in Porthaven. About the sixth, "Teach me ... / Or to keep off envy's stinging," Howl perhaps has learnt this because he has had a lot of bitter experience in his boyhood. About the last, "And

find / What wind / Serves to advance an honest mind," Howl speaks honestly to Sophie about himself for the first time, transporting her by means of a magical wind. Though it is difficult to understand each line of Donne's poem and its relationship to the story, the reader tries to follow the development of the story more carefully, stimulated by the mysteries. Regarding the original poem by Donne, the speaker of the poem expresses his skepticism about the women's constancy. Moreover, some critics (Carey, 1981) point out that a deeper sense is hidden in this poem; Donne is expressing his spiritual sufferings about his conversion from Catholicism to Protestantism. Thus, the reader can develop their cultural understanding about Western culture by speculating on these allusions.

Film adaptation

Hayao Miyazaki is one of the greatest animated film directors in Japan. His animation films have won him high renown internationally. He adapted *Howl's Moving Castle* into an animation film of the same title, and released it in 2004. In the film Sophie is a protagonist who tries to live bravely though she has been turned into an ugly old woman by the Witch of the Waste. However, the film often differently develops from the original book. One of the differences is that the film puts more emphasis on war than the book. For example, Howl goes out secretly at night to fight battleships alone. He also firmly refuses to use his magic for the war, though he is requested to cooperate by the kings of two countries. This aspect of the film's plot perhaps comes from Miyazaki's political views as a pacifist. Importantly, both the film and the book is stressing the importance of human heart. This aspect is slightly reminiscent of Faust who has sold his soul to the devil in order to obtain supernatural power. In the end, Faust is condemned to eternal punishment in hell, while Howl takes back his heart and becomes happy with Sophie.

Conclusion

In conclusion, children's literature is a rich source of materials for educational purposes but it is still uncultivated for them. It is particularly useful for developing Japanese students' basic skills in English and their understanding of Western culture. This summer, I'm expected to offer a teacher-training course to middle and high school teachers in my prefecture. Therefore, the next step is how to develop practical methods that teachers can use easily and effectively in their classrooms.

References

- Carey, John. (1981). *John Donne Life, Mind, and Art*. London and Boston: Faber
- Downing, David C. (2005). *Into the Wardrobe: C. S. Lewis and the Narnia Chronicles*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Jones, Diana Wynne,. (1986). *Howl's Moving Castle*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers.
- Lewis, C.S. (1950). *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers.
- Ono, Leslie. Day, Richard. Harsch, Kenton. (2004). Tips for Reading Extensively. *English Teaching Forum*, 42.
- Ward, Michael. (2008). *Planet Narnia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

