

“Frosty Cliffs,” Frosty Aunt, and Sandy Beaches: Teaching *Aurora Leigh* in Oman

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Abstract: This article discusses the reception of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* by a class of university students in Salalah, Oman. I use Browning’s epic novel-poem as an example of how a literary text can change meanings when taught in a society foreign to its culture of origin. I describe how the text worked within Omani culture both in terms of the adjustments I had to make to teach it and how my students perceived the text and characters. I then reflect on my responsibilities as a teacher in this context, including whether it is my responsibility to change or improve my students’ interpretive communities or perhaps, using Paulo Freire’s framework, to “liberate” my students from their non-Western point of view.

Aurora didn’t like the “frosty cliffs” of “cold” England. I wonder if she would enjoy the palm trees, sunny beaches, camel herds, and green mountains of the small town in the Middle East where I live. My students certainly enjoyed Aurora, the protagonist of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s epic novel-poem; many women found her a positive role model when we read the text in a *Norton Anthology*-based Victorian and Romantic poetry class I taught. I agree with Lamia Youssef that “Reading a text that is removed in time, space and culture from its audience represents a contradiction to the students’ world of immediate gratification, because the text does not yield immediate meanings or relay instant messages,” but I believe that with time, patience, and a lot of cross-cultural clarifications, students can respond positively to foreign texts (28).

On the other hand, reading a Western text in a non-Western environment can also lead to unexpected reinterpretations of characters as, to

use Stanley Fish's term, the students' interpretive communities are quite different from the presumptions of Western interpretive communities. In this paper, I use *Aurora Leigh* as an example of how a literary text can change meanings when taught in a society foreign to its culture of origin. I will describe how the text worked within Omani culture both in terms of the adjustments I had to make to teach it and how my students perceived the text and characters. I then will reflect on my responsibilities as a teacher in this context, including whether it is my responsibility to change or improve my students' interpretive communities or perhaps, using Paulo Freire's framework, to "liberate" my students from their non-Western point of view.

I. Location and Related Research

I teach in Salalah, Oman, a small town on the Indian Ocean, close to Oman's border with Yemen. There are only about one hundred other Westerners in town, most of whom teach at other technical or training colleges. My university has three thousand students, with almost equal enrollment between men and women. There are three colleges: Commerce and Business Administration, Engineering, and my college, Arts and Applied Sciences. It is a private, Omani-owned university but about half of the students receive full or partial government scholarships, determined by their scores on exams given at the end of high school. As with all Omani universities, the main language of instruction is English; there are about ten native speakers of English in a faculty of about one hundred and thirty.

I teach literature classes; thus I only see students who are working toward a Diploma (two years) or Bachelors (four years) degree in English. Both majors require literature classes, such as Introduction to Literature, Poetry, and Drama with a selection of electives including Creative Writing, Shakespeare, the Novel, and Victorian Poetry. Most of the female students will marry after they graduate; a few are already married with one or two small children cared for by their families while they are at college. The female students who work will be English teachers or work for the government, most often for the Ministry of Education or the Diwan, similar to a governor's office. Over the last seven years, about

ten of my students have continued on at my university to earn a Masters in Education; one has studied for a Masters in England.

Almost all students are Omani; for them Islam and family/tribe are the most important cultural structures. I have perhaps one or two non-Omani students a year; these students are children of parents who are working in Salalah and are usually Arab and Muslim. My classes usually have between twenty and thirty students, mainly women, with no or only one to two men. I make my students sit in a circle, but it is still a very segregated environment. Men sit next to each other (by the door), and there must be at least two empty chairs placed between the men and women.

Getting male and female students used to each other is a gradual process. Boys and girls are in the same classrooms until fourth grade but are in sex-segregated schools after that. In the 1980s, before enough schools were built, men would go to school in the morning and women would go in the afternoon. In Salalah society, public male-female interaction is very limited. Some families are quite strict (a girl can only speak to her brothers, father, uncles, and sometimes male cousins); others allow a girl to meet, for example, friends of her brothers who might be sitting in the living room. I seldom see any of my students outside of class; a few times a woman (face covered except for her eyes) will say “hello” at one of the bi-annual shopping festivals that has “women-only” days. I would like to point out, however, that Oman is not nearly as conservative as, for example, Saudi Arabia. Women drive cars, own their own businesses, and work in the police force, military, banks, and hotels.

Men wear an Omani cap, a pretty embroidered cloth hat, and a *dish-dasha*, the standard Arabian Peninsula male clothing. Women wear an *abayah* (shapeless black cloak) which has many different designs and styles but is basically a light black cloak that covers from neck to ankles. Their hair is covered by a black scarf. Some scarves are thick, plain, and cover from the eyebrows to the lower lip; some are beautifully decorated and show the whole face.

Of the three most difficult aspects of teaching, the first is that the teaching method most used in high school is memorization so the idea that there might be more than one explanation of a poem or that the students might come up with their own ideas is new, sometimes threat-

ening. I get constant requests of “tell me what I must know for the test”; they have seldom been asked to formulate their own opinion in an educational setting, and it is a frightening experience for some students.

Second, students are by inclination and by cultural practice “painfully shy” (Sonleitner 8). Both Aisha S. Al Harthi and Ayesha Heble explain that Arab students in general avoid confrontation in classrooms. The result is that in class women and men cannot have a discussion. For example, a man will respond to a question, then a woman will look at me and rebut his point, and then the conversation is over. Another person might add a comment but the original two will almost always remain silent.

Thirdly, although my students are very intelligent and engaging, they have a limited ability to read in English, primarily because they have so few chances to interact with native speakers of English. Literature classes, thus, focus more on understanding vocabulary, metaphors, and grammatical structures than understanding how a text or artist fits into a particular genre, time period, or literary theory. All readings are primary texts as secondary texts are usually written in an academic English that is too difficult to understand and/or full of references that would take too much time to explain. For example, if I were teaching *Aurora Leigh* with students with a fluent comprehension of English, I would supplement the text with websites such as *The Florin’s “Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Aurora Leigh,”* which gives a detailed list of Browning’s references to people Browning knew, the Bible, art works, historical events, geographical locations, Greek myths, and other poets including Homer, Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, and Byron.

My students have no understanding of the Bible; some characters in the Bible are also in the Qu’ran, but with significant changes. For example, Joseph does not exist in the Qu’ran; Mary is not married and Jesus speaks at three days old to explain the circumstances of his birth. Painted representations of religious figures are not allowed in Islam. My students also have no knowledge of Greek myths, Homer, Virgil, Dante and, apart from the one or two poems I teach, no knowledge of Milton or Byron.

As a professor of Western literature in the Middle East, I am one of a small minority; I believe there are only five people with similar jobs in Oman. Further, my class is probably the first and last chance a student

will have to converse with an American woman. So I have to pack in as much information as possible—not just literary texts but Western cultures, expectations, understandings, manners, and opinions. I explain Western attitudes because Salalah is rapidly changing: a new international airport and three five-star hotels are under construction to meet the needs of the many Arab tourists who arrive in July and August to enjoy the town's cool, rainy monsoon season. My students will eventually live in a community that is far more multicultural than it currently is. I believe that a basic working knowledge of cultural differences (i.e. North American women don't kiss when they meet, eating and drinking while walking is acceptable in North America) helps eliminate some of the immediate and negative prejudices that Omanis might feel toward people from different cultures who arrive to enjoy the new hotels.

Thus there is very little research about the kind of work I do in presenting Western literature to Muslim/Arab/tribal students. Most of the existing research fits into one of three categories: the use of multicultural literature with younger students, the discussion of non-Western students in a Western country, and articles by or for ex-pat teachers which concentrate on the pragmatics of teaching, not issues related to using literature to create cross-cultural understandings.¹

Articles about teaching Middle Eastern students include those by Nancy Sonleitner and Maher Khelifa, Al Harthi, and Heble. Yet these essays focus on the pedagogical and cultural aspects of teaching, not on the specifics of literature reception. I have written about the issues involved in choosing appropriate, interesting, and authentic texts for Middle Eastern students (Risse, "Using Local Voices"), but this essay will provide fine-grained detail about the kinds of explanations and elisions that are necessary to make foreign texts understood and the kind of cultural reshaping that occurs when Middle Eastern students engage with a Western text.

II. Teaching *Aurora Leigh*

To the inevitable list of Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelly, I added Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1856) as well as Charlotte Smith's "Written in October." As my class of thirty students was almost all

women, I wanted to include poems by women and about women (i.e., a specific woman who was interesting and represented, not just a “Lucy” or nameless, unspecified “beauty” of the night). Due to time constraints, we did not read all of *Aurora Leigh*.

Aurora Leigh is a blank verse novel-poem that tells the story of a girl whose English father married an Italian woman. When both parents die, she returns to England and lives with her father’s conformist, traditional sister who gives Aurora the limited education necessary to prepare for being a proper wife. Her cousin Romney proposes to her, but she refuses, wishing to focus on her own life as a poet. Romney then decides to marry a lower-class seamstress, Marian Earle, but that relationship is broken off by an aristocratic woman, Lady Waldemar, who is also in love with Romney. Marian is, with the unscrupulous assistance of Lady Waldemar, taken to a Paris brothel, where she becomes pregnant. Aurora meets Marian by chance in Paris and takes her and her child to Florence. After several misunderstandings, Aurora and Romney are finally married and she begins a fulfilling life as poet and wife.

The work has become an important feminist text due to the fact that Aurora initially chooses to dedicate herself to her work, poetry, rather than a conventional marriage; the ending, however, blends the personal satisfaction of writing with the communal happiness of a successful marriage. As one critic explains, “Her work draws upon novels written by women, Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) being one major source: the female protagonist’s status as an orphan, the figure of a cruel aunt, the proposal by St. John Rivers, and Rochester’s blindness all appear in *Aurora Leigh*” (Isaacs).

Aurora Leigh is comprised of nine books. Due to time constraints, I only taught part of the first book, which begins:

Of writing many books there is no end;
And I who have written much in prose and verse
For others’ uses, will write now for mine,-
Will write my story for my better self,
As when you paint your portrait for a friend,
Who keeps it in a drawer and looks at it

Long after he has ceased to love you, just
To hold together what he was and is. (1–8)

This was a difficult commencement; the students understood that this was a first person narrator who was a writer, but the idea of writing for a “better self” as if the writer were several people who could cease to love each other, was confusing. “To hold together what he was and is” made no sense. My students have never heard of Freud, there are no psychiatrists here, and the idea that you could be several people—that you are not in control of what you think and do—is alien; there was no way I could quickly make that whole bundle of references clear.

The next part went easily enough—a mother who died young, a father lost in grief. That made sense, but the flashback to the father’s “conversion” from England to Italy was difficult. To change your religion from Islam in some Muslim countries (Saudi Arabia for example) is to commit treason. Oman is, in comparison, very open. Salalah has both a Catholic and Protestant church, side-by-side on government-donated land. The buildings’ locations are general knowledge; there are regular services, special services for Christian holidays, and no hassles or harassments of any kind. I have never heard an Omani say anything negative about Christianity in general, but to change your religion or your national allegiance is unthinkable.

My students all understood the father standing “in the alien sun / In that great square” and falling instantly for Aurora’s mother (76–77), but “He too received his sacramental gift / With Eucharistic meanings; for he loved” confused them, not just the religious terms but the fact that the father would leave his country, his religion, and his family for a woman (90–91). Omani men are not allowed by law to marry foreign women; it is illegal without a special government dispensation that is only given to men who are older (past fifty) or handicapped.

When my students met the cool and austere aunt (or as one student wrote “dry, strong and intricate”), their first thought was how horrible she was to poor Aurora:

she wrung loose my hands
Imperiously, and held me at arm’s length,

And with two grey-steel naked-bladed eyes
Searched through my face,—ay, stabbed it through and through,
Through brows and cheeks and chin, as if to find
A wicked murderer in my innocent face. (325–30)

Yet, when I asked them how they would feel if their brother married a woman from another culture, there was that perfect sort of silence you sometimes get in a classroom when you have asked the right question and the students are mulling it over. I have read many writing exercises (write a letter to a friend, give someone advice, write about something you wish for, explain one of the best days you have had) which express the very real fear that a beloved brother or uncle who has moved to the West to study or work will not move back home again. “Come back to us,” I have read over and over, “we miss you, you must remember your responsibilities to your family.” And here they were rooting for the man who has done what frightens them, a man who deliberately ignores all his obligations. As one student wrote on the final exam, Aurora is not loved “because her aunt thought her mother was the cause to change her brother and she took him from his family, religion and behaviors.”

“Would you welcome your brother’s child into your home if she was from a different culture and different religion?” is not the same question here as it is in North America or Europe. Eventually the students decided that they would, they must. A brother’s child is family and family must stay together. The aunt was wrong to not welcome Aurora, but it was clear that the father’s reputation had undergone a sea-change. He had left his sister alone, left his house, his country, and his religion—death was his punishment.

As L. Galda and R. Beach state, “the fact that they [the students] are bothered or disturbed by these concerns, issues, or dilemmas operating in worlds or systems enhances their engagement with inquiry about these worlds or systems” (70). It was helpful to go through this kind of thought experiment at a remove from actual people or specific circumstances. Students wavered back and forth throughout the time we studied the poem as to who was more at fault, the father or the aunt, and why.

The description of the aunt that had the most impact was the comparison to the rose:

In smiling; cheeks in which was yet a rose
Of perished summers, like a rose in a book,
Kept more for ruth than pleasure,—if past bloom,
Past fading also. (285–88)

It took a few minutes to get the meaning across (“perished,” “ruth,” “past fading”) but I wanted the students to get the idea of the aunt’s even and unchanging demeanor, and the idea of “rose” as a symbol of something not beautiful, but a reference to beauty. I tried to explain:

The poor-club exercised her Christian gifts
Of knitting stockings, stitching petticoats,
Because we are of one flesh after all
And need one flannel, (with a proper sense
Of difference in the quality) (299–303)

But those lines simply didn’t translate. “Poor-club” doesn’t have an equivalent here—you give charity to members of your extended family and tribe. There isn’t the idea of a sort of nameless and faceless “poor” who are given food or money. “Knitting” isn’t a usual activity in Oman; “petticoats” and “flannel” are pretty much impossible to explain. Few women wear slips under their dresses and the word “slip” refers to men’s underwear, so in a mixed class you end up in hot water no matter how delicately you try to explain.

But the biggest problem is the irony, which is not a common rhetorical strategy in Oman. Saying what you know not to be true as a way of expressing humor usually ends in confusion. “We are all of one flesh” for my students was taken at face value, and my students did not believe me when I tried to explain that Aurora is implying her aunt did not, in fact, consider all people equal. The one part that worked was the idea that there were different “qualities” of fabric, one for rich and one for poor, because almost everything my students wear was made for them at the tailors. Even the men are adept at picking out fabric for their *dishdashs*.

The bird analogy worked perfectly:

She had lived
A sort of cage-bird life, born in a cage,
Accounting that to leap from perch to perch
Was act and joy enough for any bird.
Dear heaven, how silly are the things that live
In thickets and eat berries!

I, alas,

A wild bird scarcely fledged, was brought to her cage,
And she was there to meet me. Very kind.
Bring the clean water; give out the fresh seed. (306–15)

The straightforward metaphor was something they could hold on to. A student wrote: “The idea of this poem [is] we have two kinds of women, one who lives in cage like a bird but the [other] one who loves movement and freedom and [to] go where she wants to go.”

Here, at least, with repetition of “very kind” I was able to make the irony explicit, but it took a lot of effort. First I walked around the classroom and said “very nice” in a condescending tone while pointing at things like my purse and cell phone. That got the students laughing and finally understanding the idea of sarcasm, so that when I said “very kind,” they could start to hear Aurora’s tone, made clearer in the lines:

And thus my father’s sister was to me
My mother’s hater. From that day, she did
Her duty to me, (I appreciate it
In her own word as spoken to herself)
Her duty, in large measure, well-pressed out,
But measured always. She was generous, bland,
More courteous than was tender, gave me still
The first place, (363–70)

But the class’s opinion changed when we got to:

as if fearful that God’s saints
Would look down suddenly and say, ‘Herein
You missed a point, I think, through lack of love.’

Alas, a mother never is afraid
Of speaking angrily to any child,
Since love, she knows, is justified of love. (370–75)

Ah, the aunt was afraid of God. That must mean she was a good woman. Further, the idea that she was never angry was not seen as a negative point. The general opinion was that mothers should not ever get angry with their children, a point I will discuss further below.

The list of “accomplishments” was another stumbling block. To understand the lines: “The creeds, from Athanasius back to Nice, / The Articles . . . the Tracts *against* the times, / (By no means Buonaventure’s ‘Prick of Love,’)” (398–400), you don’t need to know who or what Athanasius is, but you do need to understand that if Aurora is saying “by no means,” then she, in fact, found the means to read it. It is hard to explain and hard to understand that she is showing her knowledge of something that she is supposed to not have read. “But how did she learn it?” my students asked. I had to confess—I don’t know. “But how do you know she knows?” Right down the rabbit hole we go: “She is saying that her aunt refused to let her read this book [completely ignoring the double-entendre of “prick”], but as Aurora gives the name of the book, then somehow, although it was forbidden, she found it; maybe there was a copy in the library.”

This idea of reading something she should not have crossed a cultural line, in that the aunt was again seen as positive, protecting Aurora from improper books. If the aunt had said not to read it, Aurora should not have read it and Aurora’s actions were coded negatively by my students.

I gave up on:

I washed in
From nature, landscapes, (rather say, washed out.)
I danced the polka and Cellarius,
Spun glass, stuffed birds, and modelled flowers in wax,
Because she liked accomplishments in girls. (427–31)

This was too much new vocabulary for too little meaning. I concentrated on the sewing metaphor, which was difficult in its own way:

So, my shepherdess
Was something after all, (the pastoral saints
Be praised for't) leaning lovelorn with pink eyes
To match her shoes, when I mistook the silks;
Her head uncrushed by that round weight of hat
So strangely similar to the tortoise-shell
Which slew the tragic poet.

By the way,
The works of women are symbolical.
We sew, sew, prick our fingers, dull our sight,
Producing what? A pair of slippers, sir,
To put on when you're weary—or a stool
To tumble over and vex you . . . 'curse that stool!
Or else at best, a cushion where you lean
And sleep, and dream of something we are not,
But would be for your sake. Alas, alas!
This hurts most, this . . . that, after all, we are paid
The worth of our work, perhaps. (454–71)

First, women here don't sew (that's the tailors' work), so it took a while to get the idea of "silks," longer to get the idea of "pink eyes," and even longer to understand why it was funny. As when teaching Dickens, there were times I would simply say, "OK, this is funny in English, you'll just have to trust me." I also gave up on the hat/tortoise analogy.

"Stool" took a long time to explain. People usually sit on low cushions on the floor in Oman, so you wouldn't need a "stool" in an Omani living room. Then we struggled with the idea that there is a man ("What man?" "Aurora's father?") who is "cursing" ("giving the evil eye to") the stool. "Would be for your sake" is a grammatical horror—but at the end, one woman raised her hand and said, "She is right, men never appreciate anything you do." I took that as a victory and we soldiered on.

The long final passage we studied was a complete minefield:

In looking down
Those years of education, (to return)
I wondered if Brinvilliers suffered more

In the water torture, . . . flood succeeding flood
To drench the incapable throat and split the veins . . .
Than I did. Certain of your feebler souls
Go out in such a process; many pine
To a sick, inodorous light; my own endured:
I had relations in the Unseen, and drew
The elemental nutriment and heat
From nature, as earth feels the sun at nights,
Or as a babe sucks surely in the dark,
I kept the life, thrust on me, on the outside
Of the inner life, with all its ample room
For heart and lungs, for will and intellect,
Inviolable by conventions. God,
I thank thee for that grace of thine! (472–88)

The trouble began with explaining “water torture” to students who are well aware of the actions of American soldiers in Iraq and Guantanamo Bay. “Split the veins,” “pine,” “inodorous,” “relations in the Unseen,” “elemental nutriment,” and “inviolable” were all difficult concepts. I couldn’t explain “babe sucks surely” since direct reference to breast-feeding in public would be impolite. I explained this as “a mother giving a baby food” and let it go without making the explicit connection between Aurora and her mother.

Two things saved the passage. First, her mention of “God”—that Aurora believed in God (they read the line as a direct, specific prayer) was a relief to the students. I had several comments about how, even if her aunt was not nice to her, Aurora had God to help and comfort her, and that people should always rely on God for support. My students were sometimes surprised, but always glad, when a Christian character in a poem or book made their faith clear. I sometimes had the impression they believed all Christians to be godless heathens, so that when *Jane Eyre*, for example, makes it clear she believes in God, there was a noticeable, positive murmur in the room. So I glossed “Unseen” as “God” and didn’t try to complicate the drawing “nutriment and heat from nature.”

Second, the dichotomy of “outside” and “inner” life was clear and fit easily with the students’ lives. I explained the idea as having to wear an *abayah* when they are “outside” with people they don’t know and wearing the simple, loose Dhofari dress when they are with family. But since Aurora doesn’t really have a family, the “inside” part is simply her own thoughts.

As one student wrote on her final exam: “You can learn what others want you to learn but at the end you will study what you want to study. For example, you can learn French but want to learn English. At the end you will speak English well but French not.” At the end, the students generally saw Aurora as a sympathetic character. When asked to compare her to the main character in Wordsworth’s “She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways,” one student wrote, “Here we see . . . both girls are in the same situation. No one knows them or loves them”; another wrote “I think both poems talk about the girl who lives alone and no one knows her, just a few of people.” A few picked up on Aurora’s desire for more learning: ““She Dwelt” is opposite *Aurora Leigh* because the first one is quiet and she needs some people around her. But the second has everything, house, food, people around her but she wants more in her life.” I had compared Aurora’s desire for knowledge to Ulysses’ desire for adventure in Tennyson’s poem, so one student argued:

Aurora Leigh is a Victorian poem because the poet [Aurora] wants more and more, although she has everything . . . but her aunt wants not [what she wants]. . . . Aurora has everything in this life but she wants to discover everything and she thinks everything that her aunt [teaches] her is not enough and she wants more and more.

III. Discussion of Possible Reactions to Divergent Readings

Before examining my students’ reactions to the aunt, I would like to reflect for a moment on the instability of texts once they cross cultural borders and how that instability should be treated. One of the best descriptions of a classic Western text which acquires a new meaning in a new location is Laura Bohannan’s “Shakespeare in the Bush,” in which

Bohannon tells the story of Hamlet to a group of Tiv. From the very beginning, the listeners redefine the meaning of events. When Bohannon describes the appearance of Hamlet's father's ghost, she is asked:

“Why was he no longer their chief?”

“He was dead,” I explained. “That is why they were troubled and afraid when they saw him.”

“Impossible,” began one of the elders, handing his pipe on to his neighbor, who interrupted, “Of course it wasn't the dead chief. It was an omen sent by a witch. Go on.”

I had similar experiences in Salalah. I am part of a research group with several Omani men, and during five- or six-hour car trips into wadis or through the desert, they would occasionally ask me to tell a story. Trying to pass the time, I would run through a variety of tales from various genres such as *Les Misérables*, *Cyrano de Bergerac*, *Aida*, *Swan Lake*, and *Antigone*. The reaction was always in keeping with their Omani/Gibali cultural understandings that people should keep in control of themselves at all times and family, not romantic love, should be the most important aspect of one's life. Whereas in Western culture Eponine (in *Les Misérables*), Cyrano, and Radamès (in *Aida*) are seen as positive characters dedicated to love, to the men in my research group, lovers who died from unrequited love were seen as negative figures who had wasted their lives. When I told the story of *Macbeth*, I forgot to add that Lady Macbeth kills herself, and, even though I made it clear that she had gone insane with guilt, the men decided that she should marry Macduff as that was the best way to help stabilize the country.

In the same way, the aunt in *Aurora Leigh* changes from a negative to a positive character when the story is seen through the lens of Omani culture. In the West, the aunt is normally regarded as an unsympathetic and deficient character. According to an instructor at Vanderbilt University, for example, the aunt is “a narrow, convention-bound woman who imposes on Aurora an education intended to prepare her to be an ordinary middle-class wife” (Hecimovich). Another website for students praises Aurora for resisting the “conventional and complacent English values imposed on her by a maiden aunt” (“Aurora Leigh

– Critical Essay”). My students, however, tried to see the aunt’s point of view and to judge not just her actions but the reasons for her actions. One student wrote:

I love this poem because I learned from *Aurora Leigh* how to be patient and strong. I learned from her how to adjust with my new conditions in my life. Exactly like her when her life changes after she leaves Italy and goes to live in England with her aunt. Her whole life changes from happiness to sadness. But in spite of the difficulties that she faces in England she keeps [her] chin up and tries to see the bright side only and forgets all the darkness. . . . She only sees the future and keeps smiling in spite of everything and tries not to become another example of the cold and senseless woman like her aunt.

But despite all that, we should excuse the aunt because she also has put on a difficult condition when her brother leaves her alone and goes to live in Italy. She becomes lonely without love from anyone. She deals with life solely and I think it [is] what makes her severe and loveless.

It was, in their opinion, the brother’s responsibility to care for his sister, Aurora’s aunt. In Islam, marriage is an expected, necessary event; there is no tradition of nun- or monk-like withdrawal from the world. Fathers and, when fathers are dead, brothers should arrange good marriages for sisters. Spinsters are seen as victims of their families; the women themselves are not at fault. I have heard of very few women who have never married; such cases happen when a woman is not allowed to marry the man of her choice and refuses all other offers or her father refuses all offers. These women are seen as the tragic injured party, and it is believed that the family, specifically the father, will be punished in the afterlife for this scandalous denial of a woman’s right. Thus, the aunt was not seen as a woman incapable of love, but as a woman cruelly injured by a thoughtless brother. Further, the aunt was not taken as a representative of a country (England) or point-of-view (middle-class manners) but of the terrible outcome that results when men neglect their familial duties.

The students first sympathized with Aurora's cold reception in England, but when they looked at the story in more detail, they agreed it would be difficult to welcome the foreign child of a brother who had left the home. In Salalah, boys usually stay in their father's house, adding or redecorating a room with an attached bathroom when they are married. It is common, for example, to have a married couple with four married sons, daughters-in-law, grandchildren, and unmarried daughters in one house. Aurora growing up in a house without other children was seen as her *father's* fault, as he had denied his sister her right to have children. Hence, the poem was read didactically—if you marry someone from another culture, you will die—not, I believe, a conclusion Browning or most Western readers would agree with. One student remarked to me, “It is good the man died. He deserved this.”

A second connected point is that within Gulf culture “individual growth is seen as a concept that would cause disharmony within families, which is not welcomed, especially if the daughter or wife rebels against her expected role” (Richardson 433). Of course, this is heresy in North America, but my students could argue that *Aurora Leigh* proves this point. The father goes to Italy for personal satisfaction, and what is the result? A sister deprived of her right to have children, two deaths, and an orphan.

It would be difficult to argue in a Western classroom that the aunt is a victim, not an oppressor; it was impossible in my Omani classroom to regard the aunt as an oppressor. The aunt is religious, feeds and clothes Aurora, never becomes angry at her, tries to protect her from reading improper books, and gives her a basic education; from the united (Omani) point of view of my students, the aunt is a good woman.

The question then arises: should I try to change my students' opinion of the aunt? We can look at this question in detail as representative of a larger question: what should my goal be in teaching English literature to Middle Eastern students?

Before I discuss how I resolve this issue, I would like to discuss briefly two frameworks which can help a teacher in situations, not necessarily cross-cultural, in which students and teacher have divergent interpretations. One is Fish's term “interpretive communities,” which he uses to help explicate reader-oriented criticism. He argues that “any procedure

that attempts to determine which of a number of readings is correct will necessarily fail” (149) as different groups of people will typically approach a text from different perspectives.

I have tried to follow Fish’s edict that “it is the structure of the reader’s experience rather than any structures on the page which should be the object of description” in this paper describing how my Omani students built their own reading of *Aurora Leigh* by fitting the information of the text into their body of knowledge (Fish 152).

Furthermore, like Fish, I am “opposed [to] the assumption that . . . [a correct reading] is embedded or encoded in the text” (158). I do not see it as my job to bring my students into a Western interpretive community; my job is to clarify (my) Western perspective as an alternative view. “Different, not better, not worse” is how I explain all sorts of bizarre Western behavior ranging from giving flowers to a host to not burying the dead for three or four days.

For example, when reading the lines, “Alas, a mother never is afraid / Of speaking angrily to any child,” my students argued that a good mother is never angry at her children. I don’t believe I should try to change that opinion. What I did was explain that child-rearing practices are different in different countries, and we had a brief discussion of child-rearing practices that are common in the West, such as “time-outs,” newborn babies sleeping in their own room, strict bedtimes for children, and careful monitoring of sugar intake—all of which my students were strongly opposed to.

Another useful perspective is found in Freire’s famous *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). Working with Brazilian students who were “disinherited masses” and “illiterate peasant[s]” (11, 15), he developed a critique of, in his terms, the banking theory of education in which “the teacher knows everything and the students know nothing” (54). In opposition to the banking theory, in which students are empty vessels to be filled with the teacher’s knowledge, Freire describes a liberation pedagogy in which teachers do not “expound on a topic completely alien to the existential experience of the students” (52); instead teachers give students practical knowledge relevant to their own lives. “It is inadmissible . . . to present pictures of reality unfamiliar to the participants,” he suggests

(95). Freire states that education “must be forged *with*, not *for*, the oppressed” (30; emphasis in original) and “the pedagogy of the oppressed cannot be developed or practiced by the oppressors” (36).

I have met several Western teachers in the Middle East who seem to support a version of Freire in that they believe teachers should “liberate” their students, which usually amounts to teaching Western ideals as preferable. In my situation, I can only read Freire’s “oppressor” as equal to “foreigner.” My students are not empty vessels that I can fill—they are people who want and/or need a tool (English) to help reach their goals of graduation and employment. Although I do make an effort to find stories, poems, and drama that would be of interest to my students, most of the settings and actions of the texts we read are utterly foreign to them. This I can justify in terms of my belief that it is important to know about other cultures in order to interact effectively with them. However, Omanis, not Westerners, must decide whether to make the jump from knowing about other cultures to copying them; I think this is a point Freire would agree with.

“Liberation” is a two-way street. Several Omanis have wanted to “liberate” me into wearing an *abayah* and not eating pork; if I resist that kind of “liberation,” why wouldn’t my students and Omani friends resist attempts to show that, for example, drinking alcohol or pre-marital sex is acceptable? Or, in the more general sense, I live in a town of over forty thousand that has no homeless people and no old-age homes. Am I in any position to teach my students how to create a better community?

In the specific case of the aunt, there is no way in Omani culture for her to be coded other than as an object of pity for being unmarried. My Omani friends (both male and female) all see that, like the aunt, my position as a single, older-middle-aged woman is a tragedy. All of my friends, and a fair number of my students, have asked me with great concern why I am not married and reiterate that they will “pray for me”; specifically, they pray that they will “see me hold my child.” When I say that no man loves me, I am told that “love is not important for the marriage” and that I “need to get my child.”

Do I think it is possible to “liberate” Omanis from this set of beliefs? No. Do I want to even try? Not any more than I would like to try to

“liberate” them into believing that love is fundamental for marriage and that a childless woman can still live a happy life. With students, I make it clear that, in the West, to be childless is not a disaster; with my friends, I thank them for their prayers and move on to a different subject. I agree with Freire that “[t]he teacher presents the material to the students for their consideration and re-considers her earlier considerations as the students express their own” (62). I would amend his view to suggest that the goal of considering and re-considering for both my students and me is that we understand how the same event can be seen differently in different cultures.

As I have argued elsewhere (Risse, “Coddled”), I see my role as walking students through a museum, showing them exhibits (texts) to explain how people in the West have different convictions, religions, and ways of life but not expecting that my students will take up residence in the cultural traditions I present. The vast majority of my students will live in Salalah for their entire lives; why should they adopt my “readings,” i.e., my attitudes and customs?

Should a foreign teacher push a foreign agenda? I do not believe I should. Thus, I do not believe my students are misreading *Aurora Leigh* or that they have missed the point of the poem. Like Bohannan’s interlocutors, they have analyzed and judged the poem, the characters, and the actions according to their understanding. Neither Browning nor any other poet can launch a text into the world with specific instructions for interpretation. Browning created the aunt as negative, but the meaning of a piece of literature is always and intimately tied to the place where the meaning is worked out.

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I have received permission from my students to use anonymous quotes from their work in my research. I have silently amended some of the students’ quotes, changing verb agreements (from “she know” to “she knows,” etc.) and possessives. I have received permission from my Omani friends whom I have quoted.

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Notes

1 Most multi-cultural education studies I found were focused on younger students. For example, Galda and Beach's "Response to Literature as a Cultural Activity" focuses almost exclusively on middle and high school students. (See also Nystrand and Gamoran, Beach, Boyd, Pike, and Brooks.) When I found university-based research it was typically a small set: ten students (Hung), for example, or university-level education students (Singer and Smith).

Another sub-set of educational literature deals with teaching non-Westerners Western literature in a Western setting. For example, Valdes' "Culture in Literature" is about her teaching "'American Life through Literature' for sophomore nonnative speakers of English at the University of Houston" (139). She has an interesting choice of texts, but her focus is on explaining American culture to students who have come to North America for higher education; thus, her choices would not be appropriate for me. For example, "A & P" about a boy who supports a girl's right to wear a bathing suit in a store, would not be a cultural fit and *The Scarlet Letter* is too difficult.

In a similar manner, Kramsch focuses on literature in the foreign language classroom from a Western point of view. She suggests that when reading *Lord of the Flies*, teachers should encourage students to imagine the impact of the story on different audiences: "a feminist, an officer in the British navy, a priest, a schoolboy, an avid reader of adventure stories, a Marxist, a boy scout" (151). Of the seven choices, only "schoolboy" would be understandable within my students' framework.

Many educators who write research articles supporting multicultural literature work either from the idea that white, middle-class students should have exposure to other cultures or that students from X culture (perhaps a minority in the United States but often the majority in their school/ neighborhood) should be able to read about their own culture in the classroom, i.e. African-American, Hispanic, Caribbean, or Asian. For example, in an article about teacher-education students at the university level, Singer and Smith state, "for white and heterosexual readers, who are more used to finding themselves in books, multicultural literature introduces opportunities for seeing the world through other people's eyes" (17). Nobles, who brings her students to a mosque to better understand their readings from the Qur'an, is another example of a Western teacher who tries to introduce her "mainly Christian" students to a new culture (65).

This lack of research about teaching literature in the Middle East led me to write about how to choose appropriate, authentic and interesting materials (Risse, "Using Local Voices").

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