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RAVEN MOTHER STORIES IN FLT

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Abstract

The text presents the results of the research based on findings of a university course during which university students – majoring in teaching German as A foreign language (FL) – expressed their opinions about the stories of raven mothers in FLT. Interesting stories of raven mothers stir emotions and help teachers to develop students' language skills. The course was carried out in winter term 2017 as an elective literary course with students reading the following books: Julia Franck's (2007) *Die Mittagsfrau* (*The Blind Side of the Heart*) and *Rücken an Rücken* (*Back to Back*), Peter Wawerzinek's (2010) *Rabenliebe* (*Bad Love*), Angelika Klüssendorf's (2011) *Das Mädchen* (*The Girl*). The aim of this course was, firstly, to make students look for arguments to justify the character's behaviour that the students tried to comprehend as the behaviour of raven mothers was sometimes incomprehensible; secondly, to encourage students to read literature as a resource for understanding life in totalitarian regimes that has again become a discussed issue in German prose after 2000; thirdly, to improve students' language skills and language areas while presenting, discussing and writing. This paper presents in practical examples the ways how a teacher can enrich FL lessons with a literary text since literature in FLT is an issue not to be neglected by institutions training future teachers of FLT.

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1. Introduction

Autobiographical or biographical writings reflecting authors' feelings, capturing interpersonal relation, mutual alienating and showing various forms of love provide considerable "emotional sustenance". Contemporary German prose published after 2000 features some strong novels with a failing mother who neglects, leaves or even tortures her children and thus becomes a "raven mother".

These strong stories have a significant pedagogical potential in foreign language teaching (FLT). A literary text offers a possibility of students' identification with the author, improves critical thinking skills, creativity of students and stimulates their imagination (Lazar, 2005; Van 2009; Aghagolzadeh & Tajabadi, 2012). Individual characters show their daily life within the given historical background; students learn naturally about history and culture of a foreign nation in a set period; the story evokes feelings and thoughts in heart and in mind, motivates students for lifelong reading and develops basic language skills (Heinrichova, 2017). Literature, as well as music, can be used for improving learners' communicative abilities and knowledge of the culture and language. The language skills can be acquired in non-isolated ways through real language situations and communicative tasks. This potential thus should be fully used in FLT (Besedova, 2017).

Current didactics of FL is based on intercultural and communicative method. The teacher should be able to present student's negotiations in FL, literature, culture, values as well as history of a foreign nation (Göbel & Busse, 2017; Dembeck & Parr, 2017; Heinz, 2010; Bracker, 2015). To assure this, the teacher must be a respected authority and be able to support students in case of different opinions in discussions. The teacher should support independent work of students and encourage enhancing of communicative competences too. If a student makes a mistake, the teacher must be able to explain to the learner where and why the error is made. It is interesting, according to Ondrakova, that students majoring in teaching languages are of the opinion that it is better to let pupils speak with errors in FL even though, on the other hand, they themselves want to be corrected (Ondrakova, 2016). Interestingly, the current students respect the right of a teacher to make errors because even teachers continuously learn FL (Ondrakova, Tesar, & Pavlikova, 2017). The students majoring in teaching German as FL often study English as their first FL. According to Tauchmanova (2017), these students are not fully aware of potentials of the positive transfer from English to German and advantage of using and applying these already built language competences. Using literary stories generally can help to understand and exercise these structures in the seminar discussions, interviews or in their writings about the books.

This paper presents in practical examples the ways how a teacher can enrich FL lessons with literary text since literature seminars are a core part of studies provided by institutions training future teachers of FL. The example of four books of German prose published after 2000 devoted to raven mother – Julia Franck's (2007) *Die Mittagsfrau (The Blind Side of the Heart)* and *Rücken an Rücken (Back to Back)*, Peter Wawerzinek's (2010) *Rabenliebe (Bad Love)*, Angelika Klüssendorf's (2011) *Das Mädchen (The Girl)* – confirms that these stories help teachers to develop students' language skills.

2. Problem Statement

The story of raven mother makes very impressive stories. The four German novels published after 2000 chosen for this elective course meet a lot of requirements: 1) the psychological context – the students can identify themselves with one of the characters and try to find the potential reasons of character's decisions; 2) the historical context – the stories give feeling for a historical period (2WW and its consequences and the totalitarian system of East Germany); 3) the skills development – reading, speaking (discussions, presentations, role-plays etc.) and students' writings.

3. Research Questions

Bearing in mind the fact that foreign language teachers at primary and secondary institutions evaluate differently the usage of various kinds of literature in their lessons, we accept the variety of stories used in the lessons. Aware of the fact that it is important for pupils (learners of foreign language) to be able to understand the stories they have to read, the stock character of raven mother is ideal to use in foreign language reading. Our basic research question to answer was “Do raven mother stories have potential in foreign language lessons?” We hypothesised that: “Using emotionally strong raven mother stories enhances language skills.”

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to investigate the university students (majoring German at the Faculty of Pedagogy at the University of Hradec Kralove) during an elective literary course to find out why and how we can offer raven mother stories in FLT. As these stories are very impressive, it is possible, as the first aim, to make students look for arguments to justify the character's behaviour that the students tried to comprehend since the behaviour of raven mothers was incomprehensible. Secondly, we want to encourage students to read literature as a source to understand life in totalitarian regimes that has again become a discussed issue in German prose after the year 2000. Last but not least, the objective is to improve students' language skills and language areas during their presentations, discussions, working on writing.

5. Research Methods

The elective literary course devoted to raven mother stories in FLT in winter semester 2017 was attended by 18 students (16 female and 2 male students) majoring in teaching German as a FL. At the beginning of the literary seminar a questionnaire survey was given to the class for quantitative part of the analysis. The questionnaire was composed of two parts: an identification part and a part describing students' relation, interest in the topic of raven mother and their knowledge of the topic (twenty YES/NO questions).

After the questionnaire survey, we used these following research tools to collect qualitative data to understand the extent of students' knowledge of the topic: *Mind map*, *A minute paper*, and *a Concept map*. The students tried to answer following questions: *What do you associate the raven mother with? What example of a raven mother do you know? Why is the topic still relevant?* The students were asked to recall some positive and negative attributes or an example of a film, book, fairy-tale about a raven mother.

All students read all four books devoted to the topic of raven mother in German as their homework. In the lessons, the students worked in groups of four to five students. Every group prepared a presentation of one book for the other attendees of the seminar. The semester lasted 13 weeks. Every three weeks one book was presented. In the two following seminars after the presentation, a discussion, games, role-plays, dialogues, information/problem solving activities were implemented. In the discussion, different opinions were compared. The students were asked to identify themselves with one of the characters, to detect their decisions and attitudes. During the role-play, the students in one of the roles tried to explain the decision of the chosen character. After the role-play the students in groups tried to find out what happened before the beginning and after the ending of the stories.

Having realized all these activities regarding the presented book, students were asked to reveal the evaluation of the progress when assessing their own language skills.

Reading activity: The students answered the same set of questions after completing reading of:

- a) approximately one third of the book
- b) two thirds of the book
- c) the whole of the book

Was it necessary to use a dictionary to be able to understand / follow the story? How often did you need to use a dictionary? They circled options (never – rarely – sometimes – often – on every page).

Listening activity: Short extract of audio book or author's reading (3-5 min) was played before presentation of the book and after realizing all the activities.

Speaking activity: In role plays students had to choose a character, either a raven mother or her (abandoned) child to perform a scene from the book to explain the character's motivation and decisions.

Writing activity: As a homework task after every presentation, the students were asked to elaborate a summary and explanation of the chosen character's decisions (400 words). The seminar was completed by students writing an essay (500 words) about the possible causes of raven mother's decisions, mother's dreams or about her child's dreams.

At the end of the semester, the students could show their interest in the topic by their voluntary search for further examples of this issue and about the period (of these two totalitarian regimes).

Course content – summary:

1. Memories of childhood in the German Democratic Republic (former East Germany) are described in the novel by Angelika Klüssendorf (born 1958 in Ahrensburg, since 1985 living in West Germany) nominated for the German Book Award.
Das Mädchen (2011, *The Girl*) is a story of a cruel childhood in the former GDR that was compared to huge children's home. The main character is a nameless, skinny and defiant girl whom nobody calls by her name because they do not know it. She grows up either with her alcohol-addicted mother who beats her or in a state run children's home.
2. Julia Franck, (born 1970 in East Berlin, since 1979 living in West Germany) is the author of the novel *Die Mittagsfrau* (2007, *The Blind Side of the Heart*, German Book Award). *Die Mittagsfrau* is a fictional story but its framework – prologue and epilogue – are true. Julia's paternal grandmother left her 7-year-old son Peter Franck, the father of the writer Julia, at the end of the

war as she [Helene, later named Alice] was convinced or rather hoped he would do better elsewhere than staying with her. It is a story of a woman that was forced by the war to behave like a heartless mother who lost the ability of maternal love. The character of mother is shown without being biased, she is neither blamed nor are apologies made for her. In her story, the consequences of an escape at the end of the Second World War from the homeland are described.

3. *Rücken an Rücken* (2011, *Back to Back*) is the novel about Julia's maternal grandmother and her two children (Ella and Thomas), mother and uncle of Julia Franck. The raven mother Käthe (Julia's grandmother) is a Jewish sculptor living in East Berlin. A survivor of the Nazi era, she is a fervent socialist who has been using her political connections to secure more significant commissions. Being devoted entirely to success makes her a cruel and abrasive mother to her children. She barely acknowledges Ella's vulnerable loneliness and Thomas's quiet aspirations, and her hard-nosed brutality forces her children to build an imaginary world as a shelter from the coldness that surrounds them.

Peter Wawerzinek (born 1954 in Rostock) whose parents escaped from East Germany shortly after his birth leaving him behind, was adopted after spending some years in children's homes. In the novel *Rabenliebe* (2010, *Bad Love*, on the short-list of the 2010 German Book Award) Wawerzinek describes his attempts to find his own biological mother in West Berlin. The book has become a therapy depicting author's life to be able to deal with the disappointment of meeting his mother and step-siblings who are more interested in Wawerzinek than his own mother who has no feelings towards him.

6. Findings

The questionnaire showed students' relation, interest and knowledge of raven mother's stories. The 18 students (16 female and 2 male students) are 20 to 23 years old. They are not married and have no children. Their answers were very similar:

Table 01. Students' relation, interest and knowledge of raven mothers' stories

No.	Question	YES	NO
1.	<i>Do you know anyone who behaves like a raven mother (in real life, film, literature)?</i>	18	0
2.	<i>Do you perceive this behaviour as negative?</i>	18	0
3.	<i>Do you understand this kind of behaviour?</i>	0	18
4.	<i>Do you think about the reasons for this behaviour?</i>	2	16
5.	<i>Is it possible to recognize the behaviour of raven mother when she is in public with a child?</i>	6	12
6.	<i>Does raven mother treat all her children in the same way?</i>	8	10
7.	<i>Does raven mother treat her own children better?</i>	12	6
8.	<i>Does raven mother love the children living with her?</i>	4	14
9.	<i>Do the affected children love their mother?</i>	14	4
10.	<i>Do the affected children idealize their mother?</i>	18	0
11.	<i>Do the affected children blame themselves for their mother's bad behaviour?</i>	17	1

12.	<i>Does raven mother exist in every era?</i>	18	0
13.	<i>Can a bad economic situation turn mother into a raven mother?</i>	6	12
14.	<i>Can a bad political situation turn mother into a raven mother?</i>	4	14
15.	<i>Does raven mother care for her children?</i>	6	12
16.	<i>Does raven mother torture her children physically?</i>	6	12
17.	<i>Does raven mother torture her children emotionally?</i>	14	4
18.	<i>Is raven mother evil because of her natural personality traits?</i>	16	2
19.	<i>Are children a burden on raven mothers?</i>	14	4
20.	<i>Is raven mother unhappy?</i>	18	0

After the questionnaire survey, the students tried to answer following questions: *What do you associate the raven mother with? What example of raven mother do you know? Why is the topic still relevant?*

Negative associations definitely prevailed – raven mother does not look after her children, she neglects them having her own interests. Five female students compared a raven mother to a mother who decides to have a family and also a career making them perceived by their surroundings as mothers who do not devote enough to their children. One male student remembered Heinrich Heine to have named Germany a country, who just like a raven mother left her children. Yet, thanks to background research students mentioned also positive folk examples of wise raven showing the right way. One female student recollected a TV documentary demonstrating ravens to be exemplary parents. Students also spoke of fairy tales (such as Cinderella, Hans and Gretel etc.) featuring a character of step-mother disliking her step-children. They sympathised with the children, hoping for the evil character to be punished. Students perceived the raven mother to be a dateless issue occurring in any historical period in any system or regime.

Research question: “Do raven mother stories have potential in foreign language lessons?”

This topic has vast potential for FLT. It helps learners to understand how a member of a particular society (in our case in the epoch of National Socialism and in former East Germany) can behave in a specific situation. The students are interested in these impressive stories and search for arguments to explain the behaviour of the raven mother. They identified themselves with one of the characters in role-plays and in their writing, the students looked for arguments to justify the character’s behaviour that they tried to comprehend. Some students criticised the selected character they identified with, because they found the behaviour incomprehensible. The most chosen and likeable characters were as follows:

- In case of the novel *The Blind Side of the Heart* by Julia Franck, 10 out of 18 students chose the character of raven mother Alice/Helene; her mother Salma feeling nothing towards her daughters was chosen twice; Peter, Helene’s abandoned son, refusing to see her 10 years later, was selected six times
- Characters of *Back to Back* by Julia Franck were chosen in the most balanced way: raven mother Käthe, a Jewish sculptor got chosen 5 times; her provoking, mother’s attention seeking daughter Ella was chosen 8 times; her son Thomas, a reserved dreamer was chosen 5 times

- Narrator's character (Peter Wawerzinek) in the book *Bad Love* was favoured 14 times; the character of his mother (having left her son in Rostock and gone to West Germany) was preferred 4 times
- In Klüssendorf's memories of childhood in the GDR *The Girl*, the character of the girl was chosen 16 times whereas her mother was selected twice

We hypothesised that: "Using emotionally strong raven mother stories enhances language skills."

Listening: These listening tasks included multiple-choice questions, sentence completion and matching. Students successfully carried out listening comprehension tasks which clearly proved increase in this language skill.

Reading: Students had to carry out tasks to assess their reading comprehension. It became clear that it was becoming gradually easier for students to answer reading comprehension questions (without using a dictionary or using a dictionary less often).

Speaking: In role-plays students had to choose a character, either a raven mother or her (abandoned) child to perform a scene from the book to explain the character's motivation and decisions. When performing these role-plays after the first book, the students felt embarrassed and shy. They had difficulty finding right words to express their emotions, attitudes and justify the character's behaviour.

The raven mother stories provide a lot of "emotional sustenance" motivating students. Having realized the role-plays, the students in groups tried to explain what might have happened before the beginning and how the story might develop after the ending of the stories. The students did not apologize behaviour of the raven mothers; instead, they tried to argue possible reasons leading to women's failure in their primary role. 17 out of 18 students tried to invent a happy ending that the novels might theoretically end in. Students' confidence grew after each of these role-plays and when preparing the role-play for the last book read, they needed very little time for preparation which is evidence of improvement of both receptive and productive language skills.

Writing: The students practised their writing after every presentation and in the final essay. In every task, the evaluation of the writing showed that they improved on vocabulary, prepositional phrases and collocations related to the topic.

The research also found that the students became interested in the topic as they searched for other works presenting a raven mother. Thanks to voluntary background research, students mentioned other interesting examples: a drama film directed by Stephen Daldry *The Hours* (2002, based on Michael Cunningham's novel, 1998) and the novel of the American writer of Chinese origin Amy Tan *The Joy Luck Club* (1989, film 1993). The works were briefly presented, and their strong stories engaged other participants of the course. However, despite the interest in these stories, it did not lead to voluntary search for further examples of this issue and about the period (of these two totalitarian systems).

7. Conclusion

Our hypothesis of possible usage of raven mother stories in FLT to practice and enhance foreign language skills has been confirmed. Our intention was to show the potential of raven mother stories in foreign language lessons. The literary text with a strong topic is a powerful pedagogical tool. Based on the evaluation of all the language tasks given to the students, we can claim that students' language skills and language areas does improve while presenting, discussing and writing about these stories. These impressive raven mother stories stir emotions and help teachers to develop students' language skills. We can adduce the following benefits for FLT. The students' critical thinking is activated as they look for arguments to justify the character's behaviour in trying to comprehend it as the behaviour of raven mothers was sometimes incomprehensible. The students read literature as a resource for understanding life in totalitarian regimes that has again become a discussed issue in German prose after 2000. Their interest in these characters and stories engage them to look for more literature or film examples about his topic. Hence, apart from improving language skills, literary texts allow for students to develop critical thinking and empathy for the characters, and a sense of historical importance of events upon the lives of people.

The above presented did not definitely cover all the possibilities offered by this topic. Teachers can exploit literary texts in numerous ways in FLT. Possible examples might be: description of the characters; description of the historical period or comparing the literary characters' behaviour at the beginning of the story with the way how they developed at the end of the story.

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