

Infusion of Aesthetic and Values Education Into American Literature

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This paper discusses the effective application of Language and Intercultural Critical Thinking Integrated Approach (LICTIA) in American literature class, which aims to enforce aesthetic experience and values education in literary teaching. Reading literary classics helps students cultivate cognitive/academic language proficiency, empathizing ability, critical thinking ability, and establish positive values system, thus facilitating the construction of a community of shared future for mankind.

Keywords: American literature, LICTIA, aesthetic and values education

Introduction

In her 2007 Nobel lecture “On Not Winning the Nobel Prize”, the English Nobel laureate Doris Lessing (1919-2013) warns us of a bleak future if we are not going to make a change:

We are in a fragmenting culture, where our certainties of even a few decades ago are questioned and where it is common for young men and women, who have had years of education, to know nothing of the world, to have read nothing, knowing only some speciality or other, for instance, computers. (Lessing, 2007)

Lessing points out the malaise of the modern world: regimentation and mechanization of the mind and all forms of prejudice and discrimination that divide people by labelling and compartmentalizing. She then prescribes the remedy: to link oneself with the great literary tradition and nurturing imagination. Similarly, Martha Nussbaum (1947-) stresses the ethic function of literary reading. She argues that the emotional response and moral imagination initiated by the reading of literature can be supplementary for public rationality (Nussbaum, 1998, p. 343).

As a college teacher who has been teaching English and American literature for years, I agree with Lessing and Nussbaum that literary reading has a great potential in constructing a wonderful human life. Literature can enrich our lives, uplift our spirits, and touch our deepest emotions. I call it the redemptive power of literature.

Through years of literary teaching, I have explored various teaching methods to help students understand the importance of literature and experience the power of it, to help them cultivate empathy, appreciation of

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beauty, and critical cultural awareness, and to help them construct positive values system. I want them to understand that literary canons can transcend time and space and have a contemporary resonance.

Sun Youzhong in his essay “On Liberal English Education” proposes that “Liberal English Education LEE”, as a new English teaching paradigm, intends to integrate the acquisition of both language and knowledge, to set up an explorative learning community, and to enhance language skills, intercultural critical thinking ability, and humanistic education at the same time (Sun, 2017, p. 859). Sun expounds on the theory in the context of English skill courses, while I have been thinking about the application of the theory in literary courses, which enables the teacher to instruct values in a more intelligent and systematic way.

The following part illustrates with examples how the effective application of Language and Intercultural Critical Thinking Integrated Approach (LICTIA) in American literature class helps attain the teaching goals mentioned above. Integrating critiquing, reflecting, exploring, empathizing, and doing (CREED) into literary teaching helps students to acquire cognitive/academic language proficiency (Cummins, 1979), empathizing ability and critical thinking ability through reading literary classics. More importantly, by doing so, students also construct positive values system.

Provoking Literary Interest, Activating Imagination, and Cultivating Aesthetic Sense

It is not uncommon that English majors in the Central University of Finance and Economics usually do not have a keen interest in literature, as many of them intend to take up economic professions after graduation and are affected by economic utilitarianism. Therefore, to provoke their interest in literature is of utmost importance. I want them to understand that they can be related to a literary work despite that it is written by a foreign writer and about a different culture. Literary classics have a universality.

This year when the coronavirus pandemic is prevailing in the world, people are frightened and a pessimistic sentiment strikes everyone. I want my students to cheer up. Then we are going to read William Carols Williams’s “The Red Wheelbarrow” (1923).

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens.

I think it as a good opportunity to help the students appreciate the beauty of everyday life. This imagist poem best illustrates Williams’s statement “Say it! No ideas but in things”. In this poetry of senses, Williams emphasizes the presentational immediacy of the moment in life and the man’s perception of senses at the moment.

The poem describes a common scene in the farm which is easily neglected. Yet by using painterly language, the poet impresses the reader with highly contrasting colors and presents the surprising beauty of the trivial life: The white chickens contrast with the red wheelbarrow; the static contrasts with the dynamic; living

thing contrasts with object without life; natural object contrasts with man-made object.

We can imagine that the farmers are taking a shelter against rain and while they are looking around idly, they suddenly catch the beauty embraced by everyday life which usually escapes their attention when they are busy with work. The claim “so much depends” upon this wheelbarrow is quite accurate. This is not only because the red wheelbarrow is used for a number of important chores—to move upon tools from the barn to the fields, to transport feed to the cows and chickens, to carry seeds for planting and the product to the house, it is also because the wheelbarrow is instrumental in conveying beauty.

When we analyze this little fresh poem in class, I ask my students to slow down and to activate their senses and see if they can find any beauty around us, and if there is this kind of epiphanic moment in their lives. And the answer is yes. They are excited to share their experience of beauty.

This little poem helps us understand that every cloud has a silver lining. The fear of the pandemic that haunts us will disappear and we should not let the bleakness dominate our lives. Literature can uplift our spirit.

Cultivating Empathy and Enhancing Intercultural Communication

Joaquin Phoenix’s Best Actor Oscars speech in March, 2020 was an instant hit. In his speech, the actor discusses the environment, human relationships, and the need to come together in order to make things better. I ask my students to watch the video before we study the American Transcendentalism and to see in what way this speech is related to the American romantic ideals.

The students are thrilled and inspired by the speech. One student says that she appreciates Phoenix’s idea that humans should stop plundering the natural world for its resources and should be in awe of nature. And she remarks that what Phoenix advocates in the acceptance speech is the echoing of the transcendentalists’ views in the 19th century America.

I am glad that they grasp the gist of the speech and it is a good starting point to begin our tour through the mindscape of the American Transcendentalism and exam the important philosophical views of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau.

Both transcendentalists are critical of modern civilization, which is, in their opinion, degrading and enslaving man, and causing regimentation and mechanization of man’s mind. Therefore, they emphasize a tending to our spiritual welfare as a fight against materially-oriented life. And instead of seeing nature as inferior to culture that has been conquered by man, they hold that nature has the purest and the most sanctifying moral influence on man. English romantic poets such as William Wordsworth have expressed the same view. For instance, his lyric “Daffodils” deals with the theme that nature can exercise a healthy and restorative influence on the human mind.

These romantic ideals were important for the 19th century Americans and Englishmen when both countries embarked on the rapid development of capitalism and industrialization. They are also important for us today when we plunge into the popular tendency to get ahead in world affairs and when the desire to get on has obscured the moral necessity for rising to spiritual height.

Therefore, when I lecture on the American Transcendentalism, I ask the students to reconsider the relation between nature and human, the relation between humans, and the relation across cultures and borders. I also ask them to consider the importance of ecological civilization to the survival of all species in the world. It’s time to get rid of ethnocentrism and anthropocentrism. We should reconsider the view that humans are the centre of the universe. We should respect the rights of other species in nature. Man and nature should get on

well with other each. Thoreau's *Walden* (1854), a book about his two-year solitary life in the cabin in the woods, advocates back-to-nature and expresses his fondness of that solitude and closeness to nature. One of the important lessons we have drawn from the devastating coronavirus pandemic is that the harmonious relationship between man and nature and the cooperation between different cultures are vital for the survival of both man and animals.

When Phoenix observes that "When we use love and compassion as our guiding principles, we can create systems of change, not when we cancel each other out for past mistakes, but when we guide each other to grow, for redemption, that is the best of humanity" (2020), he does not limit it to the human society, but incorporate the natural world as well.

Both the American transcendentalists and Phoenix see the infinitude of man—man can cultivate himself and hope to become better and even perfect. And I believe that literature plays an important role in making that possible. Literature is the window through which we can communicate with heterogenous cultures. Literature helps develop our compassion and empathy; therefore, we can transcend time and space and overcome our egocentrism and reach for another people, another culture, and another species.

To demonstrate that power of literature, I tell my students about the performance of *Hamlet* by 11 prisoners in the Nr. 17 prison in Moldova. The rehearsal and the staging of the play has inspired the dramatic potential of these desperate prisoners, demonstrated their feelings, uplifted their souls, and provoked their longing for a better life.

Numerous cases in class and in our lives have shown that literature can help cultivate empathy, enhance intercultural communication, and tear down the labels that tend to divide and disconnect us.

Involving Discussion and Debate Over Values in Class

The general offices of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and the State Council have issued a guideline on strengthening reform and innovation of ideological and political theory courses in Aug. 2019. Literary reading, as an important channel of philosophical and ethical thinking, plays a key part in helping students develop critical cultural awareness and positive sense of values. The following case shows how ideological and political education is integrated into literary teaching.

When we began to study multiethnic American literature, Black Lives Matter protests erupted across the world following the death of George Floyd on May 25th. The world was raged with social injustice and racism. In Britain, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, George Floyd's death and the Black Lives Matter protests drove online conversations around race. I think it offers a good perspective to read Toni Morrison's masterpiece *Beloved* (1987). This American Nobel laureate in 1993 has written a number of works about the black community, especially the experience and roles of black women in a racist and male dominated society. *Beloved* examines the psychological effect of slavery on the ex-slaves from a woman's point of view. The story takes place in 1873, when Sethe's house is haunted by her deceased baby daughter. Morrison makes it clear in the novel that although slavery as a legal institution has been abolished, its haunting of the African-American psyche has just started.

I ask the students to think if any drastic changes in racial equality have occurred since the American Civil War in the 19th century and the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. After a heated discussion, they agree that systemic racism still exists in America and Britain, etc. And the non-white groups within these countries are suffering worse outcomes in the coronavirus pandemic. And I then ask them if they understand the reasons why

Sethe kills her baby daughter so that she will not grow up to be a slave. Some of them say that they are first shocked by Sethe's doing, and then they understand it as an act of motherly love and protection. And this helps them understand the evilness of slavery and how slavery destroys the identity of the African-Americans and tortures them physically and spiritually long after its abolition. To let them understand how this ghost keeps haunting the American society, I tell them a story about a brilliant black man, who after serving prison sentence, commits suicide because he finds himself not accepted by society.

Here we see how literary reading is turned into an open public sphere for conversations about social justice. The discussion of the violation of social justice, human dignity, and unalienable rights in class extends from racism to other social justice issues such as woman's liberation, gay rights, the rights of the indigenous people, animal rights, and the gap between the rich and the poor, etc.

The Nobel Committee acknowledges in the Nobel Prize presentation speech Morrison's life-long commitment to effecting a change in social justice and racial equality by "giving the Afro-American people their history back, piece by piece" ("Award Ceremony Speech on Toni Morrison", 1993). Yet we should also be aware that meanwhile her work is always symbolic of the shared human condition, transcending lines of gender, race, and class.

The most enduring impression Morrison's novels leave is of "empathy, of compassion with one's fellow human beings" ("Award Ceremony Speech on Toni Morrison", 1993). This is essential to the construction of a community with a shared future. Phoenix in his Oscar speech accentuates that we are not championing different courses instead we join in the common course, which he terms "commonality", "the fight against injustice". This intercultural understanding and solidarity is the essence of a community.

How we read *Beloved* in class has demonstrated that literary classics of the past are always relevant to what are happening around us now. In one way or the other we can always feel related to the canons. Another remarkable point is that we read literature not simply as an aesthetic experience, but more importantly as a platform to listen to the underdogs and to speak up for the silenced and voiceless.

Phoenix takes the Oscar awarding ceremony as a platform to give a voice to the voiceless; Morrison uses her pen to preserve and safeguard human dignity. When we listen to the inspiring speech and read the heart-touching novels, we feel different. We feel we are becoming better.

Phoenix ends his speech by quoting his late brother River Phoenix's lyric, "Run to the rescue with love and peace will follow". The ability to love, to empathize, to sympathize, and to understand people who are different from us and other species can be cultivated through literary reading.

Conclusion

As various theorists have illustrated that literature serves two functions: entertainment and instruction, the literary course helps to make these functions actualize. And in doing so, it tries to effect a change in students' lives, making them better understand the meaning of life, respect humanity, establish a community with people from heterogenous cultures, and form a bond with nature.

In the latter part of her Nobel lecture, Lessing tells us a story of an African girl, a mother of three children: how reading *Anna Karenin* has inspired her and filled her life with hopes and new visions that transcend the sheer poverty and hard environment. Lessing says "I think it is that girl, and the women who were talking about books and an education when they had not eaten for three days, that may yet define us" (Lessing, 2007). I should say that shows how literature has brought out the best of us, the best of humanity.

Literature is effective in transforming our lives. As a literary teacher and a voracious reader, I always believe it. And I hope my students also believe it through their literary reading. This is the goal of literary teaching.

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