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Teaching culture through 20th century American poetry

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Abstract

From my experience in teaching English and American culture and literature to Romanian students, the students’ interest in literature increases when approached as a mirror held up to the cultural context from which it emerged. My field focuses on American urbanism studied in poetry and the paper presents the teaching means used to elicit the students’ interest in culture and poetry and to help them identify references to urbanism in American poetry by using various, interactive activities.

Keywords: teaching culture; American poetry; cultural components;

1. Introduction

There are more and more specialists, nowadays, who consider, when elaborating textbooks which are to be used for learning a foreign language, that literature is not important, a decisive role being attributed to communication activities. That is why many students neglect reading literature, and why not admit it, everybody to use summaries and interpretations instead of reading the whole literary text; therefore, we are sentenced, to a constant narrowing of our cultural horizon. The cultural globalization means, inevitably, the use of someone else’s interpretation; we no longer have the power to produce our own point of view. Emotion and imagination are left somewhere in a dark place, in a hidden and locked box. Having the excuse “time is money”, there are other activities which require less involvement and fewer feelings. Killing emotions can be a great quality for a survivor. It is demonstrated that if one wants to succeed in a very short period of time, that person must suppress his/her feelings. Being merciless and

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fearless can be considered, nowadays, keys to success. Now, going back to literature, Henry Widdowson cited one opinion that asserted that “literature, and poetry in particular, has a way of exploiting resources in a language which have not been codified as correct usage. It is therefore misleading as a model” (Widdowson 164). In spite of this unfair statement, Widdowson proved to be one of the academic community representatives who were for a greater involvement of literature in teaching a foreign language. A definition of literature, which renders its fully deserved place, was formulated as “the accumulated wisdom, the best that has been thought and felt within a culture” (Carter and Long 2).

2. Elements of culture within poems

Literature represents a reservoir of culture and implicitly an inexhaustible source for teaching culture in an efficient and interactive way. Starting from the assumption that literary works are also products of the times in which writers lived, various cultural aspects (such as religion, social classes/groups, education, clothes, food, language, urbanism, etc.) represent the tools the authors use to construct their fictional world. Therefore teaching culture through literature is a way to deconstruct the text in its cultural components and to drive it closer to reality, and thus closer to students’ understanding.

Andrew Motion, a contemporary British Poet Laureate, tried to give, in “The Guardian”, a definition to poetry, pointing out the poet’s high level of implication: “Poetry is the form we turn to instinctively at moments of intensity, whether it be to celebrate or grieve. Why? Because of its compressions and distillations, its different perspectives, its meditative pace. Because of its link with our strongest emotions. Because of its power to console. Because of its separation (of whatever degree) from ordinary speech, which creates a sense of occasion. Because of its implicit demand to remember.”

Poems, if well chosen, are easy to deal with when talking about the history of a city. Here we may refer to the environment, either natural or artificial, and the people who live in, and, of course, the link between them. One of the advantages of using poems in the classroom is the fact of going with several poems at the same time, thus being able to compare different aspects they present. A lengthy literary text, such as novels and plays, can become an obstacle in understanding, in a short period of time, the characteristics of the place we thought of. The city has been generally perceived as having two main features: on the one hand, it has been regarded as the center of a community, where all important things are happening, and on the other hand, as the source of everything that means the destruction of the initial, pure and innocent world, a place where evil things take shape.

More and more students come with serious gaps in their general knowledge and the teacher must fill in these gaps by using different and innovative methods. Learning about culture is vital for one’s professional career if caring to carry a good conversation or to show that s/he belongs to a certain culture, and thus be different from all the others. Poems can be a good option to unveil cultural components of the described places. One of the challenges a teacher must face is the students’ fear to a cryptic message. The teacher has to convince the student that one should read the poem with the heart and not only by using his/her reason.

The United States of America seems the perfect place to perform teaching cultural diversity. Where else can we find so many different cultures and points of view? The American cities are good examples of what diversity means since the evolution of such a settlement can be noticed through its social groups. Most probably, a Hispanic Poet will make reference to the Spanish origin of that particular location, showing pride in his ancestors.
The teacher is fully responsible for the understanding of the chosen poem. Quite often, s/he must come with an adequate introduction which permits the student to get a clearer view on the poem, as a whole. Background knowledge is necessary when talking about people, places, buildings or other facts that require previous social or historical information.

There are some major steps in working out an urban poem. First of all, as mentioned before, the teacher must prepare the students for the new poem/s which are to be studied. They should read the poem before class, in order to be able to understand the new vocabulary. The next step consists in brief information offered by the teacher which refers to the environment the poem is related to. After this, the poem has to be read out and listened to several times by different students. If the poem is multivoiced, then it is a good idea to have multiple voices played by the students. Next, the discussions are extremely important and the teacher must encourage all possible ideas, even if there are complete misunderstandings and misinterpretations of the poem. These wrong directions sometimes can turn the discussions more lively, and the more interpretations, the better. The last interpretation must be the teacher’s, and it is very important for the success of this activity to emphasize that all the interpretations are valuable. The teacher’s view has to be considered as one of the many interpretations of the poem and it is not necessarily the best one. At this stage, the students can be divided into several groups and be asked to defend their point of view by appointing a spokesperson.

Once identified the themes of the poem, the students must come with their own experiences which are somehow connected to those read in the poem. The feedback process should be a permanent one, guided by the teacher.

It is also very important to encourage art for art’s sake. Ask your students to decide upon an urban theme and then to look for poems about it. Let them listen to their chosen poems for pleasure, since motivation and autonomy are vital in this activity.

The teacher has to focus upon various aspects, in order to accomplish the goals s/he had in mind when starting the course:
- The students should be aware of the writer’s choice of words to reveal significant layers of meaning;
- The students should notice the underlying theme, thus understanding the implications and the issues raised by that particular topic;
- The students should take into consideration the cultural contexts the poems refer to, as a major point to start from.

Several questions have to be answered for a good understanding of a text (in our case, a poem):
- What is the purpose of the poem?
- What is the meaning (explicit or implicit) of some words within the poem?
- What is the point of view expressed in the poem and what is its relevance as connected to a specific cultural context?

The students can create a spider diagram with the city the poet chose written in the centre. Thus, the features of the city can be clearly emphasized and the reader can have a good idea of what the poem is about and also have a better view of what the cultural implications are. The city is often regarded as a living entity, one that can breathe and why not, die, if not properly taken care of. It is the product of its people’s culture and its evolution fully depends on the standards of those who live in it. If the inhabitants are evil, the place will borrow this feature and will eventually destroy those who created it.
A discussion on multiculturalism is welcome when interpreting poems which refer to cities, if we take into account that the United States is usually considered a melting pot of cultures and traditions. The teacher can make a selection of various poets belonging to different cultures who expressed their views regarding the urban spaces. The students will be able to notice how writers of different cultures and social backgrounds offer multiple perspectives on the city, either venerating or accusing the city for fulfilling their dreams or losing their hopes.

Prediction, as a means of introducing students to the message the writer intended for the reader, is a helpful device which can be used especially when dealing with the title of the poem. For example, “Lines Written in a Pittsburgh Skyscraper” by Diane Ackerman, may be initially considered a bird’s eye view upon the city life of Pittsburgh. The author changes the tone and rather soon we have sordid images of the city, “whose sentence is hard labor”. By mentioning landmarks of the city, the poet invites the reader to learn about the city culture, thus being tempted to further investigate other cultural elements and find out more about the existing ones, already described. The body of the city, as described by Ackerman, is not a healthy one since words like “brown river” and “pouring blood” reveal sickness. (Christopher, 9)

The same image we have in Carl Sandburg’s “Chicago”, where the author emphasizes the wickedness of the city: “They tell me you are wicked and I believe them”. One interesting activity can rely on group work: the students are divided into three or four groups (depending on the size of the class) and are required, after having previously given them three or four poems on cities in US, to underline words that speak about the bad parts of the city and then write them down, with a short explanation. Sandburg’s description of Chicago looks like an entry from an encyclopaedia, where the reader finds out useful things about the very city he or she wants to know. The poet offers us the many names the city received during its long history, thus revealing all the activities that took place there. By mentioning the below-mentioned names:

“Hog Butcher for the World,
 Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat,
 Player with Railroads and the Nation's Freight Handler;
 Stormy, husky, brawling,
 City of the Big Shoulders;”

Sandburg tries to enumerate the stages Chicago went through, thus pointing out the great role the city had in the life of the community, as a pillar of the economy.

An interesting cultural perspective of the city of New York is offered by Marianne Moore in her poem entitled “New York”. It is based on the antithesis between today’s New York and the settlement which used to be homeland to Indian natives. The contrast is meant to emphasize the history of the place, with its ancient, wild and mysterious environment. Nevertheless, the poem does not proclaim the supremacy of one period or another; it just gives information on what New York was and what it has become. It is a surface, not in-depth presentation, leaving the reader to decide which image he liked best. Moore’s fascination for New York evolved into a lifelong relationship, the poet always paying attention to details and breathing with the city. He love for this city can be resumed in one sentence: “even death in New York would seem to me preferable to exile” (Stapleton 497). Another representative poem is “People’s Surroundings” which gives the full dimension of what we call the diversity of an urban place. New York can be the generous host of probably any human being on Earth, not only from the religious point of view but also from the social one. This is the place where different people with different jobs can live together, at the same time. Here we can find “carpenters”, and “cooks” but also people belonging to royal courts such as “queens” and “emperors”. This happy mixture is amazing and it renders the idea of a culturally fulfilled city.
The teacher can speak about the fascination of New York City, by using famous songs and lyrics. The poem “New York, New York” can be used here, made famous by Frank Sinatra, as a background for our enterprise - teaching diversity and multiculturalism. For the poet Fred Ebb, living in New York means a test of endurance and ambition: “If I can make it there, I’ll make it anywhere”. “I want to wake up in that city/that never sleeps” expresses the desire for a live city, which cannot die – human’s aspiration to immortality, even if defined for the city. The city becomes part of their lives, it can be considered a member of the family. The culture of the city proves to be a complex one, with feats of jealousy. The city must always be fed, its life depends on the inhabitants’ energy. A city is dead only if its citizens stop working and thinking.

The teacher can use lyrics of other famous songs the students know or heard about. A good example is Stevie Wonder’s “Living for the City” (he is also the writer of the lyrics), where we encounter the image of the victim of the urban spaces:

“His hair is long, his feet are hard and gritty
He spends his life walking the streets of New York City
He’s almost dead from breathing in air pollution
He tried to vote but to him here’s no solution.”

The multiple intelligence process is a good solution to make students participate. All the information they will offer during the interpretation of one or several poems is gathered, thus having a complete view of the city. The teacher has the possibility to use poems which speak about only one city, and here one can build a real history of the city, or different cities, by using the “compare and contrast” activities. No matter the choice the teacher makes, s/he will be able to reveal various cultural elements of the urban space, thus increasing students’ awareness on this type of environment. Depending on the information given by the poem, the teacher can extend the discussion on other cultural topics or themes which are related to the one presented in the classroom.

3. Create your own urban poem

After analyzing various poems on urban environment written by American writers and pointing out all the elements of culture they contain, it is time for the students to create their own urban poem, revealing pieces of their culture. It is essential to teach students to use all their senses for a comprehensive description of the city they live in: how it smells, how one can “hear” it, the things one can see. To give the impression of the city as a living being, one should follow the specific rhythm of the place: for busy cities the vocabulary will be more vivid, trying to encompass all the emotions gathered there. Imagery must be very consistent, with suggestive similes, metaphors and personification, not forgetting about alliterations and repetitions which highlight the main characteristics of the location.

Brainstorming before starting to write a poem can be a good solution for those who are stuck for ideas. The students must think of the sounds, images and smells that surround them, mentioning the shape, texture and size of the described objects. To enhance the idea of movement, the poem must contain happenings with or without protagonists. Then, all these facts should trigger some feelings, either positive or negative. Neutral images leave no room for interpretation and the poem turns into a monotonous one.

4. Conclusion
Poetry can help students reflect upon their culture and identity. There are important reasons why we should choose poems for understanding culture: first of all, it is an authentic material and second, the students are encouraged to interact, no matter their opinions.

References


