On Introducing American Literature to College Students

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Abstract

To limit the term “American Literature” to the works of white American males is a mistake. The time has come to fully expand syllabi and give “minorities” writers their full place in the canon. Works by women, people of color, and various minorities are to be integrated with the established master works in the field. Through literature, students are to learn about humanity, others’ feelings and lives, and patterns of human existence outside the classroom. They are to learn about different periods of history represented by a variety of writers rather than by a specific type of writers.

Any anthology that is intended to introduce students to literature should focus on presenting a variety of literary works through providing different genres (fiction, poetry, and drama), and avoiding excessive emphasis on one author, genre, theme, or race. Today, different cultures should be understood and recognized particularly after the emergence of the Internet technology where the world becomes one village. I will discuss how and what literature should be introduced to college students.
دراسة الأدب الأمريكي
قاسم بن حسين ذهل
الملخص
من الخطأ قصر "الأدب الأمريكي" على كتاب من فئة بعينها وخاصة ذوي السحنة البيضاء. فقد حان الوقت ليشمل المنتج كتاب الألفيات الأخرى من لم يأخذوا مكانتهم من قبل في الموسيعات المتداولة. فالأعمال التي كتبها ملونون ونساء وكتاب من أعراق مختلفة تكون المجتمع الأمريكي ينبغي أن تأخذ الحيز الذي يليق بها ضمن منهج يحتوي على أعمال تعودنا ذكرها وقراءاتها في الموسيعات دون غيرها، وذلك لأن الأدب يعني فرصة للطلاب للتعرف على كتب على حياة الآخرين وأحاسيسهم وما يكتفون تواجههم خارج قاعة الدرس، ويمكنهم من دراسة قترات تاريخية مختلفة عن طريق كتابات مثل تلك الحقب.
إن موسوعة قتر لها أن تقدم الأدب الأمريكي للطلاب يجب أن تشمل على أعمال أدبية متنوعة تمثل المجتمع بسائر فناته دون أن تغلب ذلك على حساب كتاب أو جنس أدبي أو موضوع أو عرق، وخصوصا في زمن يندعى منا تفهما ومعرفة ثقافات متنوعة ومختلفة بعد انتشار المعلومة عن طريق الشبكة الالكترونية.
وفي هذه الورقة ساقاش ما يلزم تقديمه لطلاب الجامعة وكيفية تقديمه عند تدريس الأدب بشكل عام وال"الأدب الأمريكي" بشكل خاص.
Dr. Gassim H. Dohal

What is American literature? In introductory literature courses, what should teachers try to teach college students? Are there particular criteria for what is introduced? If students have no chance to explore their culture while taking introductory literature courses, are they going to do so on their own? What about minorities’ literature? Should their races get represented? Do teachers need to pay attention to their students’ needs? And what is the best method to engage college students in introductory courses? There are many, many questions that require answers. I will try to answer such questions in the following few pages.

Defining an American Canon & Constituting Selves as Subjects:

Literary canon, as a term, is used to refer to works and authors that are considered “major”, usually by a particular group in a society. So traditional American canon reflects the interests and ideologies of the powerful dominant class. Hence, Joyce C. Harte maintains that

Because of the hollowed status of those ‘great books’ from which our realities were erased and a pedagogy which demanded awe and reverence for the authority of these texts, we were constructed as passive students who imbibed literature unquestionably. (94)

Canon Formation & the Political Issues:

To limit the term “American Literature” to the works of white U.S. males is a big mistake. In the words of Paul Lauter, general editor of The Heath Anthology of American Literature, “From its start, the New World community was multi-racial and multi-cultural ... early offered signs of the necessary mingling of red, white, and black...” (81). In addition, American literature is not limited to what is written in the United States. Brenda M. Greene, on her part, argues:

American literature is not bound by the borders of the United States; it includes the Caribbean, Central America, South America, and all of North America. These texts ... are non-linear and shift across history and geography.... They center women’s lives, and focus
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on subjects who cross cultural boundaries of race, ethnicity, class, and gender. These texts cause us to rethink American literature. (113)

Yet we have to admit that there are historical and political dimensions behind any tradition. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. points out that “those of us working in my own tradition confront the hegemony of the Western tradition, generally, and of the larger American tradition” (107) that “appear to convey and sustain the dominant social order” (Arnold Krupat 310).

Anthologies:

The traditional canon leaves no place for minorities such as African American and feminist studies. Some try to redefine the canon by editing anthologies that include “the commonplace book of our shared culture” (Gates 92).

However, any anthology that is intended to introduce students to literature should focus on presenting a variety of literary works through providing different genres (fiction, poetry, and drama), and avoiding excessive emphasis on one author, genre, theme, or race. Recently, works by women, African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans are included in the anthologies.

Today, different cultures, like those mentioned above, should be understood and recognized by college students. Recognizing those cultures will help students realize that there are other different cultures with different values in our world; cultures they may be exposed to one day.

However, each anthologized work is usually followed by study questions. These questions are designed to help students in their exploration of literary works. They serve for both in-class and out-class assignments.

Yet, teachers should give students a chance to pose questions. Asking questions hold them accountable and involved in the educational process. Also, teachers may need to prepare a packet beside the assigned anthology.
Related Works:

I believe that translated works into English are important. Such works will allow students to learn and understand other cultures in general, and their immigrant ancestors’ heritage in particular. In addition, in an introductory course, students may read for those literary non-American authors who wrote about America. Such an assignment will give students a chance to see how others look at their culture and values.

Cultural Differences & Conflicts:

Different minority writers may introduce cultural differences and disputes in their writings. And college students should be exposed to differences and conflicts found in those writings. Gerald Graff argues that “the dispute itself becomes part of what educated persons should know” (44). Indeed, in his book Beyond the Culture Wars (1992), Graff argues for teaching conflicts to students. Since many contemporary problems arise out of moral, religious, and ethical beliefs, the classroom may be the right place to address these problems and conflicts.

Inclusion:

The time has come to fully expand syllabi and give minority writers, particularly in the United States, their full place in the canon. Works by women, people of color, and various minorities are to be integrated with the established master works in the field “so that the common intellectual culture of America includes representation from all its constituent people” (Mark B. Ryan 173). We have to be fair, and let minority groups have their rights granted, freedom expressed, equality practiced and voice heard.

History should be taught whatever it might be. Gates argues that “You can’t opt out of history. History may be a nightmare” (106).

In addition, teachers are to put the word “introductory” in front of them while preparing the syllabi and while teaching students. A syllabus is to include a variety of authors with a range of styles and voices. One work will be a sample from which students can build their own readings as they explore other works by the same author by themselves.
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A helpful introduction to literature is to handle all genres. The works to be introduced may have four sections: 1-Fiction (short stories); 2-Poetry; 3-Drama (mainly short plays); 4-General Section (autobiographies, critical essays, and theoretical approaches). Focusing on short works in both fiction and drama sections is due to the fact that it is an introductory literature course. If students understand short works, and are able to apply theories to these works, they will be able to analyze and discuss long works on their own.

Critical Approaches:

To help students look at and discuss the texts of an introductory literature course from different, theoretical, and critical perspectives, an introduction to literary theory with examples should be provided. Having sample essays will help students understand how a critical essay looks like with regards to structure, organization, focus, etc. These essays will allow students plan and develop their writing assignments. Indeed, the more effectively students learn to write about literature while taking their literature courses, the better they will be able to write in the future whatever the topic is.

Today, it is hard to separate literature from theories. As Graff observes, “any teacher of literature is unavoidably a literary theorist. Whatever a teacher says about a literary work, or leaves unsaid, presupposes a theory” (250). Giving students a chance to ask and try to answer their questions will instigate their curiosity to explore the text, and think creatively and critically. Though the text is chosen and assigned, yet the ideas and discussion in the class should focus on the students’ raised issues.

IN BRIEF: Introductory literature course should be designed to offer alternatives to the traditional methods of teaching college literature. These alternatives are based on the author’s gender, multicultures, contemporary theories, and thematic categories that relate to students’ needs. Using different techniques and methods such as question/discussion, presentation, group discussion, and a cooperative learning assignment will help them to create an educational environment. Group activities and discussions are to be encouraged, because students may learn from each other.
Sample Works to Be Taught:

Fiction:

a) - An overview: structure, character, theme, setting, tone, style, etc.
b) - Eudora Welty  A Worn Path
   Tim O’Brien  The Things They Carried
   Alice Walker  Everyday Use
   Tom Whitecloud (Native American)  Blue Winds Dancing

Joy Williams  Taking Care

Willa Cather  Paul’s Case
Stephen Crane  The Blue Hotel
William Faulkner  Burn Burning
Amy Tan (Chinese American)  Two Kinds
Shirley Jackson  The Lottery
John Updike  A&P
Hurston, Zora.  Sweat
Kate Chopin  The Story of an hour
Margaret Atwood (Canadian)  Rape Fantasies
Alice Munro (Canadian)  The Found Boat
Yamamoto, Hisaye.  Seventeen Syllables
Nathaniel Hawthorne Young Goodman Brown
Edgar Allan Poe  The Fall of the House of Usher
Ernest Hemingway  Soldier’s Home
Michel Tremblay (French-Canadian)  The Thimble
Robert Olen Butler  Snow
Sharma, Akhil.  If you Sing Like That for Me
Charlotte P. Gilman The Yellow Wallpaper
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Flannery O’Connor  A Good Man Is Hard to Find
Sarah Orne Jewett  A White Heron
Vizenor, Gerald.  Dead Voices: Natural Agonies in the New World.
Cisneros, Sandra.  The House on Mango Street.

c) Two sample student essays

Poems:

a) An overview: symbolism, imagery, myth, figures of speech, and other relevant topics.

b) e. e. cummings  next to of course god america i
Linda Pastan  Ethics
Wallace Stevens  Disillusionment of Ten O’clock
Elizabeth Bishop  The Fish
Lee, Li-Young.  Rose (selections)
Sylvia Plath  Daddy
Walt Whitman  Facing West From California’s Shores
Anne Bradstreet  To My Dear and Loving Husband
Langston Hughes  Theme for English B
Chin, Marilyn.  The Dwarf Bamboo (selections)
Judith Viorst  True Love
Gwendolyn Brooks  We Real Cool
Mora, Pat.  Borders (selections)
Nikki Giovanni  Nikki-Rosa
Emily Dickinson  I’m Nobody! Who Are You?
May Swenson (of Swedish ancestry)  Women
Jean Toomer  Reapers
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Phyllis Webb (Can.) Poetics against the Angel of Death
Williams Carlos Williams  The Dance
May Sarton (Belgium)  The Phoenix Again
Muriel Rukeyser  Myth
Imamu A. Baraka  Ka’Ba
Earle Birney (Canadian)  Can.Lit.
Li-Young Lee (Chinese)  A Final Thing
Amy Lowell  Patterns
Claude McKay (Harlem)  The White City
Simon Ortiz (Native Am.) A Story of How a Wall Stands
Sonia Sanchez  right on: white america
Maya Angelou  Africa
Linda Hogan  Song for My Name
Mary Oliver  The Black Snake
Octavio Paz (Mexican)  The Street
Peter Meinke  The ABC of Aerobics
Harjo, Joy.  The Woman Who Fell from the Sky (selections)

Plays:

a)-A General Overview: tragedy, comedy, structure of plays, and other
dramatic concepts
b)-Languston Hughes  Mulatto

Petty Keller  Tea Party
Eugene O’Neill  Before Breakfast
Susan Glaspell  Trifles
Valdez, Luis.  Los Vendidos
Jones, LeRoi.  Dutchman

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Beth Henley   Am I Blue
Fornes, Maria Irene.  The Conduct of Life
Jane Martin   Rodeo
Arthur Miller   Death of a Salesman
Anna D. Smith   From Twilight: Los Anglos, 1992

c) Two Sample Student Essays

Fourth Sections:

a) Autobiography:

An overview: definition and brief history
Benjamin Franklin   The Autobiography
                           Part I: Names of Virtues
Harriet Jacobs   Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl
                           Ch. I: Childhood & Ch. XLI: Free at Last
Frederick Douglass’s Narrative, Chs. I, VII.
Gertrude Stein Selections from Everybody’s Autobiography

b) Critical Essays:

Mody C. Boatwright   A Typical Western Plot Formula
William Faulkner On the Demands of Writing Short Stories
Ursula K. Le Guin   On Conflict in Fiction
A. L. Bader   Nothing Happens in Modern Short Stories
Sylvia Plath   On Headline Poetry
William Wordsworth   On the Nature of Poets and Poetry
Ezra Pound   On Free Verse
Alice Fulton   On the Validity of Free Verse
Ralph W. Emerson   The Poet
Diane Ackerman   On Ehat Poetry Is Not—and Is
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Arthur Miller  Tragedy and the Common Man
Tennessee Williams On Theme
Susan Glaspell From the Short Story Version of Trifles

C) Critical Approaches:

- Structuralism
- Reader Response
- Feminist Criticism
- Marxist Criticism
- Historical Criticism
- Deconstruction
- Psychoanalytic Criticism
- Postmodernism
- Postcolonialism
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Works Cited


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