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Teaching American Literature in Poland

The aim of this article is to look at some aspects of the teaching of American literature in Poland. Attention is given to the change in the educational situation in Poland since the 1990s and its implication for the study of English and teacher education. The last fifteen years have brought opportunities, hitherto unimagined, for introducing American literature to Polish students, but also new challenges to the academic profession. Investigation into the teaching of American literature seems a worthwhile and topical issue, at the crossroads of Polish and American cultures.

After the Fall of the Berlin Wall

Poland's turn towards democracy exerted influence on various areas of life connected with American studies. The 1990s saw a dramatic increase in the numbers of students interested in studying English, with freedom for creating institutions of higher education and, as a consequence, an unprecedented increase in the number of various types of English teacher training colleges (often attended not by prospective teachers, but simply by students wanting to learn English). This has been part of the general phenomenon of an increase in the number of students in Poland. In 1980 the number was around 100, 000, while by 2005 it reached almost 2, 000, 000 (Czapliński).

Thus what before the Fall of the Wall had been a mere few hundred students of English, annually entering several prestigious Polish universities, has, since the early 1990s, gradually turned into thousands of students each year receiving training as English teachers, in every major city and in numerous towns all over Poland.¹ Although these institutions can hardly compete with the academic standards of English at the universities, the core curriculum once established for the study of English is followed in each institution which is entitled to award the student a BA (*licencjat*) in English. The curriculum is built around several main areas of study:

¹ The city of Białystok (Eastern Poland), with the population of 300 000 inhabitants, can serve as a good example here. Before the political transformation of 1990 it was not possible to study English in Białystok at all. Now an interested candidate can choose among four institutions of higher education offering BA degrees in English and qualifying the graduates as teachers of English.

- British and American literature
- British and American studies
- theoretical linguistics
- applied linguistics (including practical preparation for the teaching profession)
- practical skills of using English.

There have been some changes in the curriculum to adapt it more strongly to the needs of the teachers of English, emphasizing a pragmatic attitude to pre-service teacher education. Also, instead of the previously offered five years of study, most colleges offer only three years of education ending with a BA, which obviously means the curriculum is more limited than it used to be. However, the core subjects, traditionally connected in Poland with the notion of philology, have remained and thus American literature has been an obligatory presence in each institution offering English as a degree. As a result of these formal changes in the educational system, we have been observing an unprecedented phenomenon of American literature becoming, alongside English one, the main literature taught in Poland after its own national literature. The spread of English teacher training colleges creates a unique opportunity to bring American literature to young people in Poland and to influence their reading patterns.

The New Student

The population of the students of English in Poland is an example of quantity not necessarily turning into quality. What once, under the *ancien régime*, was a prestigious field of study, a window on the West for the selected few, has become a mass opportunity for anyone willing, often being a second or third option to studying more prestigious subjects such as business, law or psychology. English studies have come to be perceived as merely a means to improve one's language skills, or as a way to find employment and security in the teaching profession (which, however, has a relatively low status in Poland and thus does not attract the most brilliant and ambitious young people). So the candidates for studying English are not exactly the *crème de la crème* of the student population.² The situation is further complicated by the fact that training is done in English, which more often than not results in a situation where students' language skills are insufficient to understand literary texts, not to mention participating in a discussion or the

² It ought to be stressed that there are enormous differences in the educational background and language skills of the candidates, particularly taking into comparison big city tuition-free universities (which have many strong candidates and highly selective procedures) and private vocational colleges, which, in general, accept anyone who is willing to study and prepared to pay.

ability to express ideas in writing. Achieving the goal of immersion in the language study is done at the expense of the student's intellectual development.

A still further complication in the teaching of literature stems from the general decline of reading. Even though a statistical Pole reads two books a month (Kochanowicz) and the readers are mostly young people, foreign fiction accounts for only 19% of all books read. What is more, the relatively good statistical result of "two per month" is created by those Poles who do read, while about half of the population cannot claim to have read a single book per month. Analysis of reading habits of Poles suggests that reading remains a certain elitist privilege, acquired at home, through private cultural traditions rather than through the efforts of institutions such as schools or libraries. Although it is impossible to determine whether the non-reading section of the population is more or less likely to become students of English – there has been no research to this effect – the statistics are not without relevance to the cultural background of our students and their reading experience.

The average student of English nowadays differs from his predecessor in the previous era. This average student today no longer comes to study English with a broad general background of participation in the mainstream culture. There is a number of American writers who have been a recognized presence in Polish culture, such as Edgar Allan Poe, James Fenimore Cooper, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Mark Twain, Jack London, John Steinbeck, Francis Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Kurt Vonnegut, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller. These are the names that most people in Poland, once representing the now increasingly elusive formation of intelligentsia, would have known about and have read. The mainstream culture, however, is not always embraced by the candidates to study English today and neither do schools at pre-college level teach the students much about America, as has been noted by Franciszek Lyra in his observations about candidates for American Studies programs:

In Poland the knowledge of the United States imparted to students below the university remains spineless. Candidates for the American Studies programs continue to flaunt glaring gaps, seemingly unaware that American Studies demands not only a competent command of English, but also a degree of knowledge of the United States beyond splintered cognizance derived from outside the classroom, the mass media, indiscriminate self-education as it might be by genuine interest in America. ("American Studies" 158)

Thus today, to an increasing number of students entering various institutions obliged to teach them American literature, the subject is a *tabula rasa*. If we were to teach those students for example Serbian or Uruguayan literature (neither of which is a well estab-

lished presence in Polish culture) there would be little difference. American literature is a *terra incognita* to many students entering colleges and departments of English. They approach the subject called American literature as a large mass of totally new pieces of information which cannot be pinned onto the canvas of the earlier acquired general knowledge because this canvas does not exist. Often there is so much new information that it is against the human memory capacity.

This problem might be illustrated by a selection of students' responses in the test on American literature.³ The misinformation quoted indicates the ignorance which stems not so much from the inability to learn but, most of all, from not having any background knowledge when approaching the study of American literature. The selection comes from one part of the American literature exam testing students' knowledge of key names and titles in American literature. The other two parts of the examination included writing an essay on a novel and the recognition of styles characteristic of epochs and some of the main American writers. The errors are interesting because, contrary to those items in the test that students simply left unanswered, they indicate the degree of confusion of the student.

- "Murder in the Cathedral" – Edgar A. Poe's drama
- Charles Brockden Brown – 21th⁴ century author of fiction
- "For Whom the Bell Tolls" – a novel written by Mark Twain in Spain
- "For Whom the Bell Tolls" – a poem by Emily Dickinson⁵
- "For Whom the Bell Tolls" – a short story by Ernest Hemingway
- "For Whom the Bell Tolls" – the title of a poem by T.S. Eliot
- "Farewell to Arms" – short story by Ernest Hemingway
- Sylvia Plath – post-modernist writer
- Henry Wadsworth Longfellow – 20th century American Jew writer
- "Leaves of Grass" – an anthology by E.A. Poe
- "Leaves of Grass" – Robert Frost's poem from the period of post-modernism
- "The Calling of Lot⁶ 49" – a contemporary poem which uses typical flight phrases; ment to be performed together with music

³ The students from whose examination papers those quotations are taken are graduates of teacher training colleges and thus hold BAs (licencjat) entitling them to teach English. They took this examination while studying towards MA, after an additional survey course in American literature.

⁴ Any erroneous use of English is authentic.

⁵ In reference to this particular error (and a few others as well) it is tempting to quote what Franciszek Lyra wrote several years ago: "Might there come a day when young Poles would not recognize Faulkner's name? We need not fear such probability, however, as long as for name and prestige Emily Dickinson successfully competes with Danielle Steele, as is presently the case among Polish students of American literature" ("Is Poland Being Americanized?" 35). Apparently, the day has come when some students confuse Dickinson with Hemingway.

⁶ "Lot" in Polish means "flight."

- “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” – a book by Melville
- “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” – a novel by Mark Twain
- Margaret Fuller – Beat Generation poet
- “Call me Ishmael” – poem by a Jewish writer Saul Bellow
- “Slaughterhouse Five” – a novel written by Roderick Usher (by the same student: Roderick Usher – an author of “Slaughter Five”)
- Kate Chopin – the author of “Ahab”
- “Leather-Stocking Tales” – a modernist work

One of the most surprising findings in this field of confusion is that contemporary young people are so unaware of Ernest Hemingway’s fiction. As Jerzy Durczak observed, analyzing American literature in Poland in the 1970s, the three most popular American writers then were Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner and John Steinbeck and “the most popular of the three was no doubt Hemingway who, along with Faulkner and several European writers, became necessary reading for those who were interested in literature and who wanted to be considered intellectuals” (45). There are two possible explanations why so many young people nowadays do not recognize the titles of major novels by Hemingway – either he ceased entirely to be a noticeable presence in Polish mainstream culture, or the students no longer aspire to being considered intellectuals. In 2001 Michał Głowiński, a famous Polish critic, claimed that, while in the 1950s the question about a great American writer would certainly be answered with the name of Ernest Hemingway, today he would probably be only mentioned in this position by those who are sentimental about the fascinations of their youth (22-24). However, in 1999 the publishing house MUZA prepared a 13-volume edition of Hemingway’s selected works. Thus perhaps the failure of many young people to aspire to be intellectuals should be blamed to the fact that *For Whom the Bell Tolls* is sometimes taken for a poem by either Emily Dickinson or T.S. Eliot?

Faced with this new type of student, often full of good-will but without the background of participating in the mainstream world culture, how do we set out on our educational mission of bringing the student closer to American literary culture?

The Objectives in Teaching American Literature in Poland

What are the objectives of the syllabi of American literature courses in Poland? There are certain assumptions of the purpose and content shared by Polish lecturers of American literature, although, as far as the student body is diverse, so are the lecturers’ teach-

ing and research experiences. But formulating some key assumptions as to what guides the teaching of American literature in Poland might be attempted.⁷

I. The specificity of American literature.

American literature is taught in two ways: on the one hand it demonstrates literary forms in general and universal tendencies in the development of literature, while on the other it focuses on the specificity of American literature and the cultural heritage it belongs to. The second aspect seems essential because it allows the presentation of the United States as a country unique in its self-creation of nationality and statehood. The focus on the unique attributes of American literature is also a good starting point for the discussion of the processes of Americanization of the world culture and the worldwide spread of the notion of the American Dream. The study of American literature from the realm of high culture facilitates an understanding of popular American culture, such as the Hollywood cinema. Through high literature we may negotiate students' orientation to popular culture and, equally importantly, help them to understand the phenomenon of the Polish fascination with America.

The historical development of the United States brings in another topical issue today – the perception of the Other (in terms of ethnic, racial, religious or gender differences). In American literature the Other has been present since the early colonial texts. Today the relation with the Other and diverse concepts of multicultural society have become dominant problems of the European Union and the sooner Poles learn to understand them, the easier it will be to deal with the inevitable development of Poland in the same direction. In this sense the study of American literature not only helps in understanding America, but also the ongoing changes within one's own culture.

American multiculturalism is rooted in the specific historical development of the United States. The significance of the issue of multiculturalism today, however, coincides with the often uneasy development of the European Union towards a multicultural society. The concepts once reserved for describing American society are now being used to discuss issues of intercultural education in the context of European regions and European/regional identity, as when Jerzy Nikitorowicz uses the metaphors of the melting pot and the salad bowl to discuss the ideas of tolerance, integration, acceptance, open identity and the dialogue concept of multicultural education.

There are several specifically American themes which may be shown through the study of literature: the wilderness, the concept of open spaces and colonization, the Fron-

⁷ This part of the article to some extent refers to the interviews conducted with several eminent Polish lecturers in American literature: Tomasz Basiuk, Andrzej Ceynowa, Zofia Kolbuszewska, Agata Preis-Smith, Agnieszka Salska, Tadeusz Sławek and Marek Wilczyński. The interviews were presented and discussed in my book *Literatura amerykańska w kształceniu nauczycieli języka angielskiego*.

tier, the absence of the centre, the misogyny, the dichotomy between the South and the North, the individual, race and religion. These themes are either absent or pronounced differently in Polish culture.

II. Reflection upon native culture and own identity.

The reading of American literature with attention given to the presence of the Other may serve a better understanding of one's own identity, nowadays often in a state of flux. Even if Zygmunt Bauman's "liquid modernity" is not as yet a metaphor to be applied to Polish society, the changes are inevitable and continuing, while multicultural society, with its impact on the sense of self and identity, looms around the corner. Through the study of a foreign literature it is possible to acquire a better sense of the host culture and one's own identity.

The processes of Americanization and globalization are not always accepted by Polish students and can be perceived as a threat to local culture. The fears of McDonaldization, perpetuated by the media and politicians, may be rationalized by the study of American literary culture. The teaching of American literature creates a unique opportunity to comment on the events of the day, from the realm of mass culture as well as economy and politics.

Certain texts are particularly useful in providing a window to look upon important themes of Polish culture. The reading of Jewish American writers is a good example of the way American literature may serve as a place of reflection on a related theme of Polish culture. There are other texts which enable Polish-American intercultural study, such as Flannery O'Connor's "The Displaced Person," William Styron's *Sophie's Choice* or Susan Sontag's *In America*.

The study of American literature, for example through books such as *Moby Dick* or *The Grapes of Wrath*, permits the role of the Bible in American culture to be shown and thus displays the differences between the Polish and American approaches to religion. Poles are often unaware of the deeply religious quality of American culture, as the perception of America is dominated by Hollywood productions, for example action films, horrors, comedies and sitcoms. The study of literature may not only demonstrate this essential aspect of American culture, but also help reflect upon the dominant Roman-Catholic religion in Poland.

III. The function of literary texts in the development of language proficiency.

One of the main arguments brought forward in the call for the presence of literature in language studies is its beneficial influence on the development of students' language skills. Studying literature improves all skills, primarily reading and writing. Literary studies involve both extensive and intensive reading practice. Writing tasks connected with the study of literary texts develop students' ability to organize writing in an effi-

cient way, thus assisting them in the acquisition of the essential skill nowadays of being able to express oneself through the medium of a written text.

The study of literature teaches the decoding of texts, demonstrating that what is on the surface is not always the main message or content of the text. The realization that texts have multiple layers is a way of learning to understand the reality better.

IV. Post-modernity.

The presentation of post-modern texts and, in general, of post-modernity as a concept, stems not only from the importance of the issue for American literature, but is also needed due to low understanding of the topic by young Poles. The secondary school curriculum does not contain references to post-modern type of discourse and a young Pole is unlikely to have heard of post-modern writers. The whole concept of post-modernity is a confusing topic in Poland, not only because of post-modernity's inherent ambiguity and plurality, but because it is not taught at pre-college level. When used in the media, it sometimes comes with an air of suggestion that post-modernity constitutes an area of conflict with Polish national values. This view may be modified through the presentation of postmodern texts within the context of American literature courses.

Polish students benefit from learning of the ways post-modern texts criticize the capitalist society and that formal experiments in prose may be combined with an involvement in social and political issues. Post-modernity, both as an historical phenomenon of the 1960s and also a recent phenomenon, may serve political discussion, which should not be ignored in the institutions of higher education. Post-modern American literature leads into the issue of Americanization and "soft power." The politicizing of literary study serves a useful purpose of turning students into better, more critically thinking citizens.

V. Interdisciplinary approach.

The teaching of American literature can be successfully done through an interdisciplinary approach. To start with, American culture is visually oriented, and film, painting and photography can be merged with literary texts (e.g. *The Grapes of Wrath* with photographs of Dorotea Lange and the John Ford film version of the book). American poetry, contrary to Polish, has a strong oral tradition and this can be demonstrated through the recorded versions of poets from Ezra Pound to Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac or Anne Sexton, to Laurie Anderson and Emily XYZ. Harlem Renaissance poets and Toni Morrison can best be studied with jazz music, which for Polish students would mean bringing the unfamiliar literary text through a somewhat more familiar medium of music. Studying historical texts along with belletristic literature of the epoch is another possible interdisciplinary approach.⁸ Particular opportunities are created here for the

⁸ There have been many calls for interdisciplinary approach in the teaching of both British and American culture, and integrating literature with courses in history and cultural studies. Somehow it seems that even

study of drama, where the text can be combined with a video version of the play. The main constraint here is that this methodology is time-consuming. In general, however, an interdisciplinary approach to the study of literature should certainly be advocated.

VI. American literature and the graduate.

In the choice of an approach to the teaching of American literature we cannot remain indifferent to what we expect of the graduate. There is no one predictable career path for graduates of English, be it a small town BA programme or Warsaw University English Institute. A young urban graduate has various job opportunities: translating and interpreting posts as well as teaching are particularly available, but also work in business sector, corporate structures, media, cultural institutions, publishing houses and advertising. Graduates in smaller cities and towns are most likely to work as teachers or self-employed translators.⁹

Whatever the career path, a good command of the language is a key competence. The more the student has read in English, the higher the language skill. On the other hand, no matter what the specific place of employment will be, the graduate will be expected to function in the capacity of an expert on Britain and America. Not knowing that *For Whom the Bell Tolls* is a novel by Ernest Hemingway may seriously undermine the assumed expert knowledge!

As a teacher the graduate should be able to influence his learners' reading preferences, to intensify their intellectual development and to comment on the presence of American culture in the students' own world. Knowing the limitations of any individual knowledge, a good teacher should be able to guide his learners into the realms of literature hitherto unknown also to him.

Another important thing the graduate should learn from his literature courses is that usually there is no one single interpretation of a text and that individual approach to a literary text should be respected. This the graduate will have learnt most of all from the way s/he was taught, which brings in the issue of the importance of the lecturer's personality and the style of teaching. If the lecturer imposes upon the student the attitude that literature requires a process of understanding and that diverse approaches to the text are possible, it is likely that the graduate will apply the same attitude in his/her own teaching.

though lecturers agree with the concept, there are always practical difficulties in integrating the courses and the idea often remains wishful thinking.

⁹ My own research on students and graduates indicates that during their studies most students are not particularly attracted to a teaching career, while later on most do become teachers (Lucyna Aleksandrowicz-Pędich, "American Literature in the Curriculum," and Lucyna Aleksandrowicz-Pędich and Ewa Lewicka-Mroczek, "Dziesięć lat później").

The Content of American Literature Courses

The starting point for the study of literature is the choice of texts to be studied. Once this is done, the inevitable happens: the lecturer creates the canon. This is true for native literature, but for a foreign one even more so, especially if we deal with students whose knowledge of American literature outside the classroom is non-existent. In Polish educational reality the canon created for a given course is rarely, however, the result of the ideological position of the lecturer – the practical considerations are often equally influential: the availability of the texts, the length of the course, students' linguistic and intellectual skills. It is essential to explain to the student the rationale behind the reading list.

In general the content of American literature courses in Poland reflects both the traditional concept of the canon as well as the changes to the canon brought by the sense of inadequacy of the reflection of American society and culture by the traditional F.O. Matthiessen's canonical concepts. The Polish teaching of American literature has not remained impervious to the debate about the canon. The concept of class, race and gender has its definite impact on the selection of the content for American literature courses.

The texts which remain pillars of American literature courses in Poland, however, represent fairly traditional composition of the canon. Thus the student is most likely to be asked to read something by white male authors such as E.A. Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Mark Twain, Francis Scott Fitzgerald, John Steinbeck, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Kurt Vonnegut. There are attempts to present the new canon reflecting the diversity of American culture, with particular emphasis on multiculturalism and multicultural texts. The university lecturer faces, however, many painful dilemmas resulting from the short duration of the course. Can I teach Alice Walker at the expense of *Huck Finn* or a Faulkner novel? How can I introduce Raymond Carver if they have never read anything by Hemingway? Can I spend time on Louise Erdrich and skip Melville? Can I bring in Annie Dillard if they haven't studied *Walden*? These dilemmas grow with the awareness that many of the students will only learn about American literature on the basis of the "canon" which the teacher has designed for the course.

A pluralistic approach is usually attempted. The teacher of American literature in Poland makes his (or her) contribution to the preservation of great works of American literature, but remains aware of the expansion of the canon. The reading lists reflect mainstream cultural texts, but hint at the presence of the non-canonical (or newly canonical) in American culture.

To conclude, there seem to be several assumptions guiding the selection of texts in the teaching of American literature in Poland:

- to reflect the traditional concept of the canon and to present, at least generally, the established corpus of American writing,
- to present literature responding to the issues of race, class and gender,
- to respond to the existing reading preferences of young people (particularly such popular writers as H.P. Lovecraft, Philip K. Dick, Ursula LeGuin or William Gibson¹⁰),
- to show the developments in American fiction not reflected by related counterparts in Polish literature, particularly post-modern texts,
- to comply with the problem of the availability of the texts and students' reading ability (nineteenth century texts are easier and cheaper to obtain, short stories take less time to read, Vonnegut is easier and faster to read than Pynchon, poetry is easier to handle in the classroom conditions than the novel, etc.),
- to reflect in the choice of texts the research work of the lecturer.

The Practical Solution

Designing the syllabus the lecturer is torn between the necessity to provide an elementary knowledge of the history of American literature, taking into account the fact that the basic knowledge is no longer drawn from the student's background of participating in mainstream Polish culture (even though it has room for key American writers¹¹ such as William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, Henry James or Kurt Vonnegut). Considering the time limitations and the likelihood that students' out-of-the-lecture-hall knowledge may be highly limited, a survey course of American literature including the most important facts in its history, a basic sample of styles and a reading list containing the number of texts that students can be reasonably expected to learn, is a necessity. This can then be supplemented by a semester course focusing on selected aspects of American literature, which could be American Women Poets, the study of a single novel (e.g. *Moby Dick* or a Pynchon novel), Afro-American writers, Native-American writers, Jewish urban novels, Gothic fiction, twentieth-century short story; the list of choices is practically unlimited. Usually such focused courses are related to the lecturer's research interests. This seems to be the most reasonable solution: a survey course followed by a focused presentation of a selected area of American literature.

¹⁰ Interestingly, these writers, so popular among young Polish readers, have little, or no, American referentiality (as also observed by Franciszek Lyra in "Is Poland being Americanized?").

¹¹ This can be demonstrated by the action carried out in 2005 by the most popular Polish newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza* of systematically adding to the newspaper a copy of a book from the canon of world literature, including, among others, Edgar Allan Poe, Henry James, William Faulkner, Vladimir Nabokov, Ray Bradbury.

Towards a Conclusion

The above discussion does not give an answer to the question of how to teach literature in the post-modern electronic society and how to take the best advantage of the crossroads of Polish and American cultures while teaching American literature at college level. The important issue of methodology of teaching literature has been left out of this discussion, although the method of teaching is of high relevance to the final effectiveness of bringing students closer to the pleasures of reading and to a better understanding of America. The exact content of the syllabi, most frequent items on reading lists, the notion of a hidden curriculum in the teaching of literature, the transfer of the students' academic knowledge into their later practice as teachers of English – these are just a few of the many issues that might be discussed in connection with the teaching of American literature in Poland.

Perhaps teaching American literature is not only a task, but a Mission? It may offer a unique way to bring both the Text and a better understanding of America to those large numbers of young Poles whose educational choices are determined by the domination of English as the *lingua franca* of the contemporary world.

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