

## **DEVELOPING CULTURAL AWARENESS THROUGH LITERATURE\***

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The study of culture is an important part of the program of English as a Foreign Language at the Department of Languages and Literature of the Universidad Nacional of Costa Rica. More recent still is the incorporation of cultural competence as an objective of the program in general, an objective to be achieved not only through the specific course dealing with cultural studies but through all the courses in the curriculum, especially the literature courses. Cultural competence may be defined as the capacity to interact successfully with the members of another culture, the understanding of the systems of values, beliefs, assumptions and attitudes that are important in the native as well as in the target culture, and the development of mutual respect. Learning a foreign language implies acquiring knowledge about the culture or cultures that speak that language. Language is inseparable from culture, since it is charged with meanings and connotations which express the thought of the society in which it is produced. At the same time, language, as a dynamic, living force, always changing, also shapes social and cultural thinking, in a constant process of interaction. Literature is language, not static language, but

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language in use, language alive and growing, shaping and being shaped. In our curriculum at the UNA, literature is not studied as an isolated discipline, but as part of the total program whose objective is not just to teach the language but to produce culturally competent speakers of that language. Literature is seen as a means to develop both linguistic and cultural competence, and the syllabuses of the literature courses are developed according to that goal.

In the first place, it is necessary to take into account the type of population that attends our classes. Many students at the UNA come mostly from small towns or rural areas. Many of them have never been out of the country and have had very little if any experience with people of other cultures. The only English speaking country about which they have ample information is the United States, and that mostly through television and films, which leads to the transmission of stereotypes, overgeneralizations and misleading assumptions. Concerning the students' own culture, we often encounter a general lack of historical conscience in Costa Rican society, where only a few concerned groups worry about the preservation of our traditions. It is through the study of literature that we hope to develop cultural awareness in its broadest sense, implying both understanding of and respect for cultural differences and the conscience of cultural identity.

It is usual for human beings to believe that our own perspective of things is the only valid one, or that everybody shares or should share our point of view. Literature reveals to us patterns of thought and attitudes towards life and the world different from our own. In novels and stories, plays and poems, the drama of life is enacted for us, with its conflicts, its choices, its rage and passion, telling us that nothing is ever as simple as we would like to believe. Literature demands that we adopt a different perspective as we are introduced to another world. We see characters that we care about and recognize as human making decisions and facing life according to sets of values that challenge our own premises. We are forced to revise our attitudes as we are presented with alternative and often conflicting positions. We are visitors in the

country of literature as we may be visitors in a foreign land. As readers, we and our students must come to understand that values, patterns of behavior, the very basis of our lives are culturally bound and that different human groups have different ways of understanding life and dealing with it, according to their own social, historical and even physical circumstances.

We encourage our students to test their thinking both against the work of literature they are studying and against the experience of life. It is interesting to notice that, when introducing the students to a literary work, the greatest difficulties do not arise from language but from cultural differences. It is necessary to clarify historical and geographical references, but also customs, social attitudes and principles. For example, it is sometimes difficult for Catholic students to grasp Nathaniel Hawthorne's concept of the Unforgivable Sin or the dark fate of so many of his characters, since they have been taught all their lives that no sin is unforgivable and the idea of predestination or determinism is alien to them. On the other hand, they can establish a parallel between Puritan laws in *The Scarlet Letter* and the Spanish Inquisition, though they tend to find public penitence too harsh a punishment for sin. Also, students who live in urban or highland areas and are used to a tropical climate all year round, need visual aids and research to understand the settings, characters and situations of many sea stories by Melville and London. Often the similarities outweigh the differences: life in rural areas, the social climate of small towns, boyhood exploits like Tom Sawyer's, sound familiar to the Costa Rican reader.

Reading the classics of the past as well as contemporary authors allows the students to compare the evolution of cultural assumptions through different periods of history and to compare it to the evolution of their own society. In our experience, Costa Rican students seem to relate more easily to writers before World War II than to more modern authors. For one thing, the style is more accessible to them since stories are generally told in a direct manner and using relatively simple

techniques. Also it seems some writers translate culturally better than others. Ernest Hemingway, for instance, is quite intelligible in the context of Latin American machismo that needs to prove manhood through deeds of courage and physical prowess. On the other hand, Fitzgerald's Jazz era and the glamorous, brilliantly decadent world of *The Great Gatsby* require explanation and illustration in order to be understood since the way of life they evoke is quite unfamiliar to most of our students. When we use these writers in class, the questions that arise lead to the understanding of own cultural values and how they have changed or remained more or less stable in the course of time.

By raising questions, literature not only contributes to the deconstruction of stereotypes about the target culture, but it also changes the ways in which we look at our own society. Human groups, the same as individuals, create their own fantasies to support their self-image and protect themselves from unpleasant realities. But these fantasies and stereotypes, no matter how flattering to ourselves, amount to the distortion and trivialization of life. The most deeply felt literature of the world is not committed to political correctness but to the truth and diversity of human experience. This is the case of multiethnic literature (Native American, African American, Chicano, Japanese American) which only very recently has been incorporated to the curriculum of Costa Rican universities. This is an important step to broaden the students' vision of the world and their understanding of cultural plurality which makes them look at their own culture in a different way. It often happens that we tend to think of the mainstream culture as the only culture of a country. It is a general tendency of Costa Rican society to perceive itself as mostly white, Catholic and of European-Spanish descendance, which in the past has led to an unfortunate biased attitude against other Central American nations and discrimination against our native population. The course on Native American literature is useful to dispel Hollywood stereotypes; it also forces readers to revise their beliefs and to value our native roots and the share of native blood that is part of the heritage of most Latin

Americans. Likewise, the study of African American literature is a revelation to Costa Rican students of African origins, who often feel their culture unvalued and rejected. Cultural diversity as presented through literary works develops awareness of the existence of different human groups within the same society, groups with distinctive patterns of thought, customs, traditions. By understanding ethnic diversity in another country, readers are forced to look at their own in a different way, to become aware of the native and African roots in the composition of the Latin American character, of the contribution of immigrant groups from other Central American countries, Europe and Asia to the shaping of our cultures, and of the fact that a culture is not fixed and immutable but a living entity that grows and expands through the interaction of human beings of different origins.

Literature is one of the most effective tools to develop cultural awareness since it involves us emotionally and intellectually in the individual yet universal struggles of people we care about. We understand our own values as cultural products and ourselves as cultural beings only when we are confronted with other ways of dealing with and interpreting life. We become aware of our beliefs only when they are challenged. Readers must understand that literature does not come in a vacuum but it is the product of human experience within a social context. Awareness comes through identification, through recognizing the humanity of someone I perceive as different and yet basically similar to myself. Works like Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* are about the search for identity both as an individual and as a member of a culture. They offer the possibility of identification to young people in search of themselves, facing a world in crisis, a world which still hesitates between tolerance and hatred, which often threatens our sense of self, and which has already witnessed the disappearance of cultures and civilizations.

As we approach the end of the century and the millennium with a mixture of hope and uncertainty, we must still strive for the goal that

sometimes seems so close and sometimes so distant: reaching understanding between people of different races and different nations, the possibility of living in harmony without paying a high price in the loss of identity. We live in a multicultural world in which our particular culture is only one of many. This is a fact we must accept first if we want to reach that goal. Literature teaches us about what Kurt Vonnegut calls cultural relativity, the respect for alternate ways of living and thinking, the humility that we need to approach one another as fellow humans and not as enemies that threaten their mutual existence. Through the experience of literature, so personal and yet so universal, we examine and re-examine our assumptions, we find ourselves and other people in our similarities and differences, we learn respect. After all, the great subject of literature, no matter in which language it is written, is the human condition, the tragedy of our frailty, the triumph of our strength. And that is something all of us understand.