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Updating the Learner's Culture: A Literary Philosophy, Miller's Death of a Salesman Is an Example

Asst. Prof. Ahmed H. Ubeid*

Dept. of English - College of Education for Humanities, University of Anbar – Iraq

ahmedliterature@gmail.com | ed.ahmed.humaid@uoanbar.edu.iq

<p>Keywords:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- drama- culture-knowledge-Death <p>Article Info</p> <hr/> <p>Article history:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">-Received 14/4/2018-Accepted 20/4/2018Available online 1/5/2018	<p>Abstract: The study aims to consider the literary philosophy behind the process of acquiring a standard of knowledge and culture through literature and specifically tragedies. It tries to show with details the merits of dealing with literary classes in the process of teaching English at college grade. The study presents Miller's Death of a Salesman as an example to improve and update the learner's knowledge and culture. The mechanism of teaching drama will not be discussed as it may deviate the reader towards other criteria that are not sought by the study because the purpose is purely literature.</p>
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*Corresponding Author: Asst. Prof. Ahmed H. Ubeid , E-Mail : ahmedliterature@gmail.com , Tel :009647701715071 , Affiliation: Dept. of English - College of Education for Humanities, University of Anbar – Iraq

تحديث ثقافة المتعلم: فلسفة ادبية / مسرحية ملر موت بائع متجول كمثال

أخلاصه : يهدف البحث لبيان الفلسفة الادبية والهدف من تضمين نصوص مسرحيه جادة في البرامج التعليمية الخاصة باللغة الانكليزية وصولا الى تقييم وتطوير ثقافة المتعلم من خلال التعامل مع نصوص مسرحيه عالمية. حيث يمتلك كل نص مسرحي ثقافة وفلسفة كاتبه وما يحمله في وجدانه من ميول ومفاهيم انسانية مثل الخير والشر والبطولة والفقر والجمال... الخ. وهنا يكمن الانتباه الى ماهية الابعاد الثقافية التي يجب مراعاتها قبل ولوج اي نص مسرحي. تطرق البحث ايضا الى عدد من الفوائد المكتسبة من التعامل مع مواضيع المسرح العالمي أثناء تدريس اللغة الإنكليزية على المستوى الجامعي. تناول البحث مسرحية **موت بائع متجول** كمثال لتطوير وتحديث لغة وثقافة المتعلم. لن يتطرق البحث لتفاصيل آلية تدريس المسرح التي قد تأخذ القارئ الى معايير اخرى لا يربوها البحث لان الهدف منه ادبي فحسب .

الكلمات المفتاحية: المسرح - الثقافة - المعرفة - الوعي المجتمعي.

English and literature

People from different nationalities study English as a foreign or a second language and methods of teaching them are changing radically. In Iraq, departments of English, offer selected items of literature. It is a part of improving language skills for learners and ultimately for their lives and culture. Hashem and Aspinall state that literature of English as a second or foreign language discusses the hope for impact on the learners' lives.¹ However, we felt that there was still a need for a study that directly investigated the impact of English and its literature on learners' wider lives, and ultimately culture.

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¹ F Hashem and P Aspinall, **What Kind of Language**, (Nuffield Foundation and The University of Kent, 2010), p. 12. Available online at: www.nuffieldfoundation.org.

² F Hashem and P Aspinall, **What Kind of Language**, (Nuffield Foundation and The University of Kent, 2010), p. 12. Available online at: www.nuffieldfoundation.org.

English and its impact on learners, one may conclude that there are certain forces which are still at work: Dramatic advances in the field of linguistics; new creative techniques of teaching English; inventions and mass production of recording and viewing equipments; and an extraordinary interest of learning English especially for students and migrant workers.¹ Moreover, there are two clear facts: the first is the strong demand for English as a language of international communication of business and commerce of higher education. Secondly, there has been a tendency to meet this demand by offering traditional types of English courses with assistance from selected international plays of some notable dramatists such as (Shakespeare, Miller, ...etc.). These texts ought to be considered by the teachers who supposed to be qualified enough to teach them.

As the use of English notably spreads across the world,² a clear fact increasingly discussed that any language cannot be taught well without coming close to its cultural content. There can be no real learning of a language without understanding something of the culture of which it is a part. Many justifications are for using literary texts as language teaching resources and cultures. Using literature can be shown in three different levels: linguistic, cultural, and personal as follows:

- Linguistically, literary texts offer variety of style at many levels of difficulty. This presents learners with a rivaled richness of input that can be feed into vocabulary acquisition, extending the range of syntactic patterns, developing a feeling for textual cohesion and coherence and a sense of linguistic satisfaction.

¹ H. Coleman, **English Language in Development**, (London: British Council. 2010), p.8.

² D. Crystal, **English as a Global Language**, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) p.17.

- Literary texts are usually considered vehicles for cultures. This is not to say that we can learn the culture of a language through its literature. Indeed, the nature of culture is so complex and problematical that it defies simple categorization. However, the settings, characterizations, situations, and human concepts that literary texts embody offer opportunities for raising awareness of difference and for developing tolerance and understanding.
- Literature involves effect and emotion. It is therefore the perfect medium for involving students personally in their self-perception. This refers to how individuals view themselves in terms of values and motivations.¹

Literary texts are treasures of knowledge and in order to process them, we have to embark on a process of making imaginative interpretations of the reality they represent. Interaction with a literary text usually involves a deeper level of mental processing, a greater personal involvement, and response and a greater chance of leaving traces in the memory. Such texts are generally more motivating and more enjoyable than many of the referential texts, which students often have to process. A student who has worked with literary texts has usually learnt a lot about reading critically, empathetically and creatively.

An additional powerful reason for using literary texts is that they are open to multiple interpretations. It is rarely to find two readers interpret the same text in an identical way. Within the total field of education and language learning, the study of literature can make its maximum contribution in the following ways:

1. Skills:

¹ Z. Dornyei, 'The L2 Motivational Self System' in Dornyei, Z and Ushioda, E (eds) **Motivation, Language Identity and the L2 Self**. (Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2009) p.9–39.

It is a well known fact that language skills are of four types; listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The inclusion of literature and specifically drama in the curriculum help students train with these skills. A learner listens to certain extracts read aloud by the teacher (or on records). He may participate in certain discussions that the play stimulates within a class trying to defend his opinion and to justify his points of view and finally to convince others. It can also provide plenty of interesting opportunities for writing too. A learner may oblige himself to recall and use certain patterns or words according to the subject he is discussing. Thus, exchanging with others he will listen, try to practice new vocabularies and patterns of language according to the concepts and ideas offered to him.¹

2. Knowledge:

Literature does not, of course, concentrate on a particular area of knowledge, as for example does chemistry or history. Literature, we can say for some reasons, is concerned with all aspects and affairs of man and the universe in their entirety. Certainly, every work of literature is about something, often about many things; and the more a person reads, the better-stocked will his mind be with knowledge. "Miller believed that tragedy brings sadness, sympathy and identification and fear, but equally importantly it brings knowledge or enlightenment."²

Knowledge is a complex conception; but we can acquire some of it from literature in a number of ways. There are, for examples, the facts that are actually encountered and explained in

¹ www.ielts.org.skills.

² Iyer, K.S. ed., **New Directions in American Literature**, (Chaman Offset Press, New Delhi 110002, 2003) P.18.

different works of literature. There are also the facts that we are impelled to discover from other sources in order to understand particular situations or problems that are presented within literary genres. Students will come to realization that certain facts in themselves are less important than the way in which they support and illustrate each other. Most important of all is the realization that the facts worth knowing are only facts about culture and the way people should speak, behave or respond accordingly.

When you read a piece of drama, you will read about a life experience through the eyes of someone other than yourself. You get a new perspective about another culture or life situation. It offers you the opportunity to explore a period, an experience, or an opinion while learning how to use language dealing with that text. Through literature, the facts about culture and life include not only the answers to the questions concerned with a literary form that excites such questions: Who is he or she? How and why? In addition, it may provide a perfect purified culture out of well-experienced man, presented as lessons from life. While it would be foolish to claim that literature has all the answers to all questions or issues that may a person face, it may safely be claimed that it covers a lot of his affairs and for sure many aspects of others' cultural backgrounds. Most important of all, perhaps, it can stimulate scholars or learners to think differently and ask relevant questions, so that they are more likely to arrive at a true understanding of their life and culture, whether by reading literary works or by other methods of investigation via literature.

A special kind of knowledge that every society must foster is connected with its own culture. Nevertheless, the word culture is used lavishly nowadays, with many different meanings and implications. Here, we use it to signify what are peculiarly characteristics of a particular community, including its organizations, laws, customs, art, and to certain extent religion. It is

important in any system of education to impart to each individual a comprehensive insight to his own culture. This may give him pride, self-confidence and a sense of belonging.¹ Some of this knowledge can be transmitted by the parents, TV. programs, in places of worship and some in various parts of the school curriculum. Drama, however, can often fill this gap and weld the whole into a meaningful picture.

Nowadays we live more and more in one world, "global village" as it has been called and this remains true regardless of various political divisions. Improved communications are helping us to develop an international culture, and one of the tasks of education is to acquaint us with widest range of human achievements without destroying pride in our indigenous culture. Studies in certain classic plays, if wisely undertaken, will bring us to be in contact with some of the world's great minds and personalities, the great teachers and thinkers of all ages. We could manage to live without knowledge of such things and such people, but having made the acquaintance, we could not wish to live without them. Without some acquaintance with the total field of human culture, we should often find ourselves baffled by what other people are talking and writing about.

3. Development:

We cannot for long think of education and culture only in terms of abstract like skill and knowledge for, as every teacher must be aware, every student is an individual, with his own particular personality, his own abilities, his own problems, and his own rate of development. It is important therefore "to see the whole of education as a process of development in the

¹H. Moody, **The Teaching of Literature in Developing Countries**, (London: Longman Group LTD.,1971) p. 43.

individual."¹ While the individual is, as the word suggests, a complex unity, it is possible to see in him/her a number of different faculties. Some of these faculties must be developed in harmony if he/she is to realize his fullest potential and make the most useful contribution to the affairs of his/her generation.

The principal faculties to be trained, as the researcher believes, are the sensory, the intellectual, the feelings, the social, and the religious sense. For each of these, drama can provide the suitable materials and encouragement.² It can be urged too that better than any other subject, drama provides opportunities for the development of all these faculties in relation to each other, which comes very near to the aim of education as follows:

The Intellect

The study of drama might be used to extend the range of perceptions of different senses. Many playwrights have themselves been men of philosophy, sensitiveness, and refinement, who have sought to convey their understanding and experience to the rest of humankind. Following their insights and interpretation of the words they used, the reader will be led to recognize an ever-extending range of perceptions and distinctions.

The training of the intellect is often thought to be the special field of non-literary subjects such as mathematics and other sciences; this is a view that should be strenuously challenged even though it is true that those subjects demand strict intellectual and logical procedures far from imagination and literature. Great efforts are needed today in developing societies for the

¹ Brobert Lado, **Language Teaching: A Scientific Approach**, (USA: Mc Graw-Hill, Inc.,1994) p.17.

² P. Gurrey, **Teaching English as a Foreign Language**, (London: Lowe and Brydone LTD.,1969) p.7.

application of logical and rational methods to vast ranges of non-scientific problems. Among these fields is the study of literature, if rightly guided, can provide an excellent training how to think and react. The operation of the rational faculties as opposed to such alternatives as guesswork, impulse, habit, custom, can be as well illustrated and practiced in the study of drama as in any other field.

The logical process depends on such things as accurate perception, precise interpretation of language, the grouping and classification of data, judgments of various kinds and the formulation of appropriate courses of action. Many students are not expected to confront all these weighty responsibilities. However, qualified teachers and especially of literature can encourage respects for facts, distinguishing between the evidence for an opinion, recognizing incorrect methods of argument, and so on.

The feeling

The culture of feeling and of emotion is frequently associated with the study of literature. Yet some teachers, unfortunately, do not always make clear what does this mean. While there are many phenomena in human life that can best be dealt with rational procedures, (shall I go by bus or train? Shall I do this or that? Now or next year?...etc., there are also those which, over and above intellectual recognition, demand some kinds of emotional response. For example; the sight of the sea breaking upon a rocky coast demands our awe and admiration. We may say that anyone who fails to make normal response towards this sight is less than others are in certain human responses.

Social awareness

The process of growing up for the human individual is a very long one, especially when it is connected with the recognition and appreciation of other people and of course this is often a painful process, involving conflicts, clashes and friction of many kinds. A successful educated person is the one who has achieved an attitude of respect towards all other people around him, including his family, his friends and milieu but then beyond that all other nations and races he may encounter in the world. A mature attitude is based on understanding and interest, and to be expressed in tolerance and friendliness. To be effective, one's understanding must embrace all the aspects of other people ways including their language, behaviour, customs, religion and so on. Drama can support this attitude to in terms of experiences exposed in each literary work we tackle. "A dramatist, who does not care for the wishes of his audience, does not know which side of the bread is buttered."¹

The religious sense

At first, religion may not be a topic on which many people wish to spend much time. Others find that they can understand and manage their daily life only if their thoughts and actions are based on some underlined system of beliefs. These may be thought of in many different ways, involving religious concepts, or other kinds of philosophical doctrines. It is true enough that whether we like it or not, whether we know it or not all our thoughts and actions are based on some assumptions, and intelligent human beings will wish to base their lives on better rather than on worse foundations.

What the researcher needs to add is that teachers who see the need for the exploration of fundamental questions will find abundant material in the realms of drama for the reason that the

¹ S.P. Sengupta, S.C. Agarwal, S.C. Mundar, *Advanced Literary Essays*, (Raman Brothers, India PVT LTD., 2008) p. 95.

most imaginative writers have been extremely interested in such issues. However, students should not assume that every author is in a position of the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Some authors argue passionately for certain beliefs; others are more concerned with attacking and reforming: "always there is a need for the critical assessment of what any particular author seems to be advocating."¹

Death of a Salesman

Written by Arthur Miller in 1949, this tragedy is tackled by researchers through decades from different literary perspectives. Each person draws his or her individual conclusions. This study, may re-appreciate the play as a source of language and culture for non-native learners. Thus, it considers the literary philosophy of dealing with **Death of a Salesman** in the departments of English for students whom supposed to be teachers of English in schools. The text is rich to provide the learners with many corners of English (linguistic, cultural, ...) besides lessons and experiences of benefit to improve the learners who may make use of what Miller presents like type of characters, family relationships, themes, motifs, characterizations, ... etc. On this perspective, a qualified teacher may highlight many linguistic opportunities and open free discussion to use the skills of language. Then, he may lead the learners to acquire new experiences and cultures by avoiding or adopting certain actions done through the play by this character or that. The following brief appreciations of certain views related to the play may support this philosophy:

¹ www.britishcouncil.org . jo

Arthur Miller presents the main character, Willy Loman, as a salesman who is old and self-deluded. "He is past sixty years of age, ...his exhaustion is apparent."¹ He lives in his own world of imagination with past events as if they are real. At the end, feeling depressed, and not achieving his goals as a father and businessman, Willy committed suicide. This character provides the reader with a stand to be with or against, to imitate, or to blame. As such, it may enhance human perceptions and understanding of what an old man should be. Miller through the tragedy of Loman shows the reader a philosophy that should be appreciated as well. It reflects an age and system when a worker has nothing to do but waiting death. As such, the play comes with many concepts if they are discussed logically, the students will find it useful in many aspects of what the study showed previously. The play's conflicts and themes appear not to be uniquely American. This may testify its universality.

The second main character is Linda, Willy's loyal and loving wife. She is passively supportive and docile when Willy gives speeches about hopes for the future. She supports Willy eagerly even though Willy sometimes does not respond to her positively, ignoring her suggestions over those of others. "She more than loves him, she admires him, as though his mercurial nature, his temper, his massive dreams and cruelties." (p.4) She seems to have a good knowledge of what is really going on in her family. She rebukes her sons for not helping their father. She urges her son Biff to make something of himself. Such an example of a wife may excite women to re-evaluate their priorities in their family relations. How to be obedient to

¹ Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. (Cox & Wyman Ltd, Great Britain, 1973), p. 3. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition; page number will appear after each quotation.

certain extent but not beyond limits. Her dreams with the husband turn nothing but nightmares when they are not armed with real means to achieve such dreams.

Biff, Willy's older son, seems active in life but he did not make a success. He failed in the high school. He hesitates between going home to fulfill Willy's dream for him as a businessperson and ignoring his father by going out West to have a farm. He likes being outdoors and working with his hands. "He is finding himself."(p. 6) He wants to do something worthwhile so Willy will be proud. Once, Biff steals because he wants an evidence of success, even if it is false. Overall, Biff remains a realist and informs the attendance of his father's requiem that he is just a normal man and will not be a great one. "He had the wrong dreams. All, all, wrong. He never knew who he was." (p.102). This sketch of a character is an example that many boys can find themselves in. To be like or to ignore will need a decision and justification by a lot of them. Here, the role of teachers will come to explain and guide students philosophically towards human concepts of success, loyalty, responsibilities in life ... etc. Other characters can be tackled in the same range of discussion and analysis to dig up ideas explored in this literary work the intention behind is to update experiences and cultures. The following brief examples of discussions may support this view:

Willy believes that a personally attractive man in business will undoubtedly acquire the material comforts in life. Willy's interpretation of likeability is superficial. His blind faith in the American dream leads to his rapid psychological decline. He is unable to accept the disparity between the dream and his own life. He also believes that if people are rich and well liked, they will have money and be happy. He never bothered to try to be happy with what he had like his simple job and family. People around him do not like him as much as he thinks is necessary for

success. The models of business success provided in the play all argue against Willy's "personality theory." Charley, Willy's neighbour and apparently only friend, has no time for Willy's theories of business, but he provides Willy a do-nothing job to keep him bringing home a salary.¹

Miller is able to use simultaneity to present Willy's memory during the reality. The illusion not only suggests the past, but also presents the lost life. The more he indulges in the illusion, the harder it is for him to face reality. Biff is the only one who realizes that the whole family lived in the lies and tries to face the truth. After seeing his father's real identity, Biff does not follow his father's "dream" because he knows that "Willy does *see* his future but in a blind way. Meaning that he *can* and *cannot* see at the same time, since his way of seeing or visualizing the future is completely wrong."² Biff has a dream to get a farm, and work hard with his own hands, but his father prevents him from pursuing his dream. At the end of the play, during Will's funeral, Linda realized that their dream was wrong and she has no answer for many questions. "I don't understand it. Why did you ever do that?" (p. 111) Ultimately, what is exposed in this play can be found among us, inside our culture of living. The themes are not only concerned with Will's family. It is our responsibility to get and highlight the culture behind.

Conclusion

As a recapitulation, one may come so close to a fact that learning and mastery of English via literature is something grows and expands in each individual by recognizable stages. Works of literature involve many shades of language complexities based not only on range of subject matter but also on other factors. For instance, the author's own way of grasping the subjects he

¹ Harold Bloom, **The American Dream**, (Info-base Publishing, 2009) P.51.

² Ziaul Haque, Kabir Chowdhury and Fahmida "the concept of blindness in Sophocles' king Oedipus and Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman" International Journal of Applied Linguistics and Literature, vol. 2, no. 3; 2013, p. 118. Retrieved on Nov. 20, 2017.

deals with, the literary conventions prevailing at the time he is writing, the kind of reader he assumes himself to be writing for and ultimately, what culture he came from or what culture he is trying to show.

To be successful, the teachers of English literature may update their information with what is new in this field. They should urge themselves always to improve the skills of selecting literature, the subject matter, and the language of which are in a suitable relation to the students' capacity and need. They also have to select rich and interesting texts to be tackled and understood besides what is related to human culture since the final goal is to prepare and support a future teacher.

The aim is not to make students pass but simply to use literature as a source to learn language then to get the lessons of life behind. This means we do not need to be concerned much with critical commentary and historical explanations. Our aim is to engage students interactively with the text, to achieve different goals; knowledge and culture might be the first among all. The learner may hit two birds with a stone in the process of learning, i.e. what is scientific (language) can be mixed with what is fictional and philosophical (drama) but with the help of a good qualified teacher.

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