

Original Paper

Empathy and Sympathy Learned from British and American Novels and Short Stories

He Huan¹

¹ Department of Foreign Languages, Sichuan University of Science & Engineering, Yibin, China

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Abstract

Foreign literature courses, including both British and American literature, serve as compulsory and core courses for Chinese English Majors (CEMs). Literature courses make CEMs grasp aesthetic meanings as well as immerse themselves in a literary world, most importantly empower them to access different cultural experiences, and experience ups and downs of fictional characters. This article mainly delineates empathetic and sympathetic factors inherent in English novels and short stories included in literary textbooks used in foreign literature classes, such as A Guide to History and Anthology of American Literature, A Guide to History and Anthology of British Literature, Selected Readings in American Literature, and Selected Readings in British Literature. Some novice teaching staff usually find that the assiduous efforts they have to put into the teaching of foreign literature class are due to limited academic duration, numerous writers, countless literary works, difficult literary languages, complicated character maps, exotic life experiences, as well as a range variety of students' demands and interests. This article aims to find out empathy- and sympathy-themed excerpts from the above-mentioned textbooks to help novice literature teachers to accustom themselves to the teaching of the courses, and even to realize a favorable teaching result. The effective pedagogy includes pre-teaching, during-teaching and after-teaching. The examples of literary texts contain both American and British writers. The exemplified text genre includes novels and short stories. The academics in literature courses can follow the suggestions and endeavors mentioned in this paper to better guide their teaching activities.

Keywords

empathy and sympathy, British and American literature, Chinese English Majors, favorable teaching results

1. Introduction

It is well-known that English, as a foreign language, has been taught in China for several decades. Many Chinese students even start to learn English before they attend primary school. As a subject, English has been taught at primary, secondary and tertiary education. Institute of Higher Education at all levels requires that their students have to take English as a requisite course in their first and second year of study. Various tests have been used to examine the English proficiency of undergraduate and postgraduate students in China, such as College English Test (CET) for non-English majors and Test for English Majors (TEM). Besides, the number of students who take part in IELTS and TOEFL is increasing day by day. Hence, it is obvious that English is of paramount importance in the eyes of Chinese people because it directly affects their study and work. As Chinese English Majors (CEMs) always feel stressful and concerned in that they are surrounded by English enthusiasts whose English is exceedingly proficient even though English is not their major. Then CEMs who spend four years in learning the foreign language frequently ask these questions, what can differentiate themselves from other students? What makes CEMs stand out in the job market? The answers to the two questions are obvious. Students proficient in listening, speaking, reading, writing, translating, interpreting and communicating skills will easily get a promising job opportunity. However, most people frequently fail to realize the importance of foreign literature classes. Literary texts abound with encyclopedic knowledge that can leave an imprint on learners' mind. I have occupied myself with teaching British and American Literature for over 6 years during which my students keep telling me how much they are fond of my class because my way of teaching is professional, humorous, interesting, insightful, meaningful and thought-provoking. I also wonder why they have attachment for my class. It is because I want to keep their passion and zeal for my class. I am delighted to hear my students' compliments on me and my class. After much consideration, I reach a conclusion that I must always put myself in my students' place. As a teacher, I always imagine if I were a student, what would I want to learn from my teacher in literature classes? I always reflect on my classes by asking questions, such as does my teaching benefit my students? Do the contents delivered in my class interest them? Is my way of teaching effective? What would interest new generation of students in literature class? Is there an age gap between me and them? Therefore, before preparing for class, I ask a lot of questions to ensure that I take all students' needs into consideration to the utmost. All in all, I am an empathetic teacher, knowing to prepare for the course from students' perspective.

As Meyers et al. (2019) put it: "teacher empathy is the degree to which instructors work to deeply understand students' personal and social situations, feel caring and concern in response to students' positive and negative emotions, and communicate their understanding and caring to students through their behavior".

Similarly, in the process of teaching foreign literature, I rack my brains to find interesting contents in novels, short stories and poems that would attract students' attention, then enable them to immerse in the sea of literary world. There are three steps that I strictly follow, first to enable them to understand literary texts; second, to reveal interpretation; third, to trigger learners' sympathy or empathy toward literary works. Students and characters in novels and short stories, and connotations in poems have something in common because the literary world is a reflection of the real world. Students differ in experiences, family background, viewpoints, outlooks, perspectives will always find empathetic and sympathetic factors in literary works. The key is to motivate learners to associate themselves with these contents included in literary works, as soon as they find it relevant to themselves and easy to ponder social issues, they will take interest in learning it.

2. Empathy and Sympathy

According to dictionary, empathy means "the ability to share someone else's feelings or experiences by imagining what it would be like to be in that person's situation" (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/empathy>). Literature classes offer students a variety of contents that empower students to enjoy engaging themselves in an imaginary fictional world in which it is hard for students to not identify themselves with it. No matter it is bitterness or happiness that the characters in novels experience, readers can always strike a chord if they focus on reading them. In the process of reading novels, laughter and tears cannot help but burst out from readers because some words, sentences, passages truly and deeply move them. That is the charm and enchantment of literature. The literary world can serve as an ideal place for readers to find a utopia and to admire characters in these books who have the courage to try something they dare not in the real world. An imaginary and dreamy world enables readers to experience something new, exciting, adventurous, and inspiring. At this moment, readers are enjoying the pleasure and relaxation that books make them feel. By contrast, there are dark, depressing, desperate, heartbreaking, harrowing contents in some books. Facing the sadness, misery, pain, tragedy, misfortune, death, harassment in books, readers would usually show their understanding to these characters in books, that is why frequently readers are in tears when they find the untold pain the character is suffering because they can totally put themselves in the character's position, thinking if the same trials and tribulations befallen themselves, they would similarly be reduced into the predicament without anyone to turn to for help. Some researchers found that the contents that leave an imprint on readers' mind are usually most painful, pathetic, woeful. The profound meaning of literature lies in making readers realize that a cruel and ruthless world that all human beings are in. Therefore, they will not feel alone and lonely when they are in the same predicament, they even may find surprisingly satisfactory solutions in books to their tricky issues. That is why even though there have been numerous books written in human history, the majority of have been ignored and forgotten by people, only few of them can be passed down generation after

generation, can even be translated into many other languages to become treasures shared by humankind. Definitely there have been writers who cannot attract his or her contemporary readers' and critics' attention, yet after many years, their works can stand the test of time, being greatly appreciated and applauded by later readers and literary critics, such as William Blake, Herman Melville, and Emily Dickinson. These literary works that can be included in *A Guide to History and Anthology of American Literature*, *A Guide to History and Anthology of British Literature*, *Selected Readings in American Literature*, and *Selected Readings in British Literature* are classic, noteworthy, renowned, successful and fantastic in their own right. Therefore, this frees CEMs from seeking for literary treasures by themselves, only if they pay attention to reading excerpts included in the aforementioned books, they will learn a lot from them. I know some of my students decide to read some novels from A to Z after studying *Jane Eyre*, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Oliver Twist*, *The Scarlet Letter*, Edgar Allan Poe's short stories, etc. Sympathy means "(an expression of) understanding and care for someone else's suffering" (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/sympathy?q=Sympathy>). In the article, both of empathy and sympathy factors in novels will be discussed. Generally speaking, the two terms refer to all factors that will easily arouse learners' interest and curiosity in novels, and that will make students become compassionate and empathetic. And the following contents will include the detailed teaching methods used in literature classes.

3. Teaching Practices—Novels and Short Stories

3.1 *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*

This is a famous short story written by Washington Irving, a famous American short story writer. Firstly, what will attract young students' interest is the triangle love in which both Ichabod Crane and Brom Van Brunt are pursuing Katrina Van Tassel. I would prioritize the complicated romantic relationships among the three protagonists. Next, to use simple and conclusive words to sum up the whole story is to help students know its general content. And then, I would ask students to read the first two paragraphs of the short story, and then I will use both English and Chinese to help them comprehend the content. For example, in the first paragraph, there appear two birds, "quail" and "woodpecker", instead of using Chinese to explain the two birds, I show the two birds' vivid pictures to help them know what they look like. Pictures, compared with words, can always have a valuable impact on learners' minds. As the nature of the story is humor as well as horror, one prominent and recurrent figure is a headless "Hessian trooper". Therefore, an image of a horseman on a horse without head would be shown to students while I teach the relative paragraph to my students. Then another attractive protagonist cannot be ignored is Katrina. While I ask my students to read relative sentences describing her, I ask my students to imagine what she might look like. Then I would show a comic picture of the girl downloaded from the internet. At this moment, I can see that I always can succeed in attracting everyone's attention. They usually burst out laughing when they think the picture is funny.

Then it is known that the motivation of Ichabod to pursue Katrina is not pure, he is greedy and self-content and eats like a horse. Particularly, the short story abounds in paragraphs to reveal his true colours. For example, “The pedagogue’s mouth watered as he looked upon this sumptuous promise of luxurious winter fare. In his devouring mind’s eye, he pictured to himself every roasting-pig running about with a pudding in his belly, and an apple in his mouth; the pigeons were snugly put to bed in a comfortable pie, and tucked in with a coverlet of crust; the geese were swimming in their own gravy; and the ducks pairing cosily in dishes, like snug married couples, with a decent competency of onion sauce. In the porkers he saw carved out the future sleek side of bacon, and juicy relishing ham; not a turkey but he beheld daintily trussed up, with its gizzard under its wing, and, peradventure, a necklace of savory sausages; and even bright chanticleer himself lay sprawling on his back, in a side dish, with uplifted claws, as if craving that quarter which his chivalrous spirit disdained to ask while living”. The quoted sentences serve as the best examples to reveal how rapacious and avaricious Ichabod is. I searched for many pictures of the underlined cuisine to assist learners to better understand the wide range of exotic traditional food mentioned above. Whenever I show these pictures to my learners, they show great interest in them, there is no exception. Before I prepare for the contents, I find that only explanation or interpretation through words might bore my students. I imagine if I were students, I would also desire to see my lecturer to show me exquisite pictures. To conclude, as a teacher, I take my students’ needs and interests into consideration, even prioritizing their feelings. That is why every time I encounter students in their fourth year of study in our university, they cannot stop talking with me and telling me how much my lessons have influenced them and how much they love me. It is of vital importance to understand the literal meaning of a literary text, or else it is pointless and impossible for students to continue reading the rest of it, nor appreciate it. Due to the limited time in class, other parts of the story should be read after class by student’s own effort. Some students express that it is pitiful to find that only limited time can be allotted to each unit, wishing to listen to me to help them study the story from A to Z.

3.2 *Jane Eyre*

When students study *Jane Eyre*, I share some excerpts of the lengthy novel with my students for previewing at least one week before. The electronic excerpts with a total of 6235 words come from different chapters, covering Chapter 1—Jane Eyre’s family background, Chapter 2—Maids’ hostile attitudes toward her, Chapter 4—Mrs. Reed’s vicious treatment of Jane Eyre, Chapter 21—The downfall of Mrs. Reed’s family and Jane Eyre’s kindness, generosity and forgiveness to Mrs. Reed, Chapter 23—Jane Eyre’s love story. I design some quizzes associated with details of the book to test whether they previewed the excerpts. Whenever a large number of students volunteer to answer questions, I can immediately know that they have done a good job. If most of them keep silent and lower their head, I know they are unprepared for it. When they can give a correct answer, the answer will be rewarded; if they cannot, they might be punished by lowering their score in daily performance.

In my class, I never use derogatory words to criticize them harshly or overly. I know they are adults whose dignity and reputation deserve to be protected well in public. University students need tolerant teachers who can respect them and treat them as equals, even as friends. After the test, I would ask they are willing to study which chapter, they choose Chapter 23 with one accord, which surprise me because I have expected that they might want to know more about the sufferings little Jane Eyre had to endure. According to their choice, it is not hard to discover that young undergraduate students crave for beautiful and romantic love. After reading the excerpts from *Jane Eyre*, they feel that the journey to find true love can be rough and bumpy. Particularly when Mr. Rochester lied to Jane by claiming that he would marry Miss Ingram, and ordered Jane to move out of Thornfield, when I helped my students understand these sentences, they took interest in the plot as well as marveled at Charlotte Brontë's ingenious storyline, her magnificent writing proficiency, as well as thought-provoking insights. In addition, when they read sentences, "Do you think I can stay to become nothing to you? ... it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God's feet, equal,—as we are!", they understood that why the novel has been regarded as the epitome of feminism. Because most of CEMs are girls, they know the importance of emotional independence and gender equality. When Jane Eyre spoke out of her innermost voices, she also helped thousands of women who get used to be silent and submissive to speak up. Students would instantly admire the female protagonist, and be encouraged to read the rest of the novel by themselves. Just as I said before, the first important thing is to help students understand the literal meaning, and gradually and naturally they will understand the thoughts, the theme, growing interest in what they are reading. Then their interest will be evoked, and determination to read it from A to Z would be made. Impacts of this book on readers during reading it would be seen. This is the meaning of teaching literature to students, what they read will influence their thoughts, mindsets, perspectives, so as to help them make wise and correct decision in their lives, prevent themselves from being harmed by dangerous people. Particularly, facing injustice and infidelity, they know how to make a right choice as book characters did. Books serve as a prophecy to inspire and guide readers.

3.3 *Pride and Prejudice*

The novel has been very popular among Chinese people greatly mostly due to the success and popularity of the movies, particularly the one filmed in 2005. What has attracted young CEM's attention is the romantic story between Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy, while I know the negative impact of focusing on romance on CEMs, because the moral value in the novel lies in its focus on women's independence and autonomy. Therefore, I should never mislead CETs to focus on romance only, instead I empathize that the novel serves as the epitome of avoiding to fall into the trap of heterosexual attraction (Evans, 1986). Therefore, the excerpts that I provide for students come from Chapter 56—Elizabeth refutes Lady Catherine's unreasonable proposal that the latter orders the former to stay away from her nephew so that her own sick daughter can have a chance of marrying Mr. Darcy.

Through the fabulous and absorbing conversations between Elizabeth and Lady Catherine, an independent, courageous, resourceful, strong, expressive and insightful girl is well-liked by all my students, they wonder at Elizabeth's eloquence in expressing her free will, her bravery in disproving an noble and wealthy yet authoritarian and arrogant lady, and her wits in experiencing and handling difficulties. Besides, the rude behaviour of Lady Catherine toward Mrs. Bennet can be seen in Chapter 56. After studying relative passages about her impolite and arrogant attitude toward Mrs. Bennet, some students may associate it with the similar experiences they have been through, how others despised them, how others looked down upon them, and so on. And they know how to protect themselves and relieve overwhelming pressure on them as Elizabeth does in the novel. While on the other hand, after learning sentences like these, "And will you promise me, never to enter into such an engagement?" "I will make no promise of the kind". "And I certainly never shall give it. I am not to be intimidated into anything so wholly unreasonable. Your ladyship wants Mr. Darcy to marry your daughter; but would my giving you the wished-for promise make their marriage at all more probable? Supposing him to be attached to me, would my refusing to accept his hand make him wish to bestow it on his cousin? Allow me to say, Lady Catherine, that the arguments with which you have supported this extraordinary application have been as frivolous as the application was ill-judged. You have widely mistaken my character, if you think I can be worked on by such persuasions as these. How far your nephew might approve of your interference in his affairs, I cannot tell; but you have certainly no right to concern yourself in mine. I must beg, therefore, to be importuned no farther on the subject", learners will know how to react to irrational and ridiculous behavior and request, because Elizabeth sets a good example here, she serves as a role model for girls to learn from. The motto that she marries only for true love can inspire girls greatly because nowadays people tend to marry for convenience, such conviction causes marriage failures and family misfortune. Therefore, this book is worthwhile for students to develop a mature and healthy marriage conception.

3.4 The Scarlet Letter

This novel has been popular and successful since its first publication. The immortal novel is also famous for its complicated romantic relationships among Hester Prynne, Arthur Dimmesdale and Roger Chillingworth as well as its symbolic connotations. When I teach this novel, I ask students to preview Chapter 2 and 5. The second chapter tells how townspeople think of Hester, especially women's opinions on her. What would strike readers the most should be the comments these women make about Hester's adultery. After reading the insulting and derogatory remarks these women remarked about Hester, readers can not help but sympathize with the heroine, readers would keep thinking who could bear these offensive words. Those malicious words include "hussy", "baggage" and "malefactresses". Meanwhile there are sentences describing Hester's fabulous and spectacular appearance with an air of elegance, determination, bravery, and confidence despite her miserable life in prison with her infant baby. From this, I have then intention to let my students understand Nathaniel

Hawthorne's approving attitude toward her. Particularly he stressed the charm and enchantment the scarlet letter A has, in the eyes of the Puritan elders, A symbolizes sin and infidelity, but for Hawthorne, he believes that A means Hester's passion for true love, and her unconquerable will and indomitable spirit. The fifth chapter tells Hester establishes herself, and supports herself and her baby though needlework. From this, students can learn the sine qua non of gaining economically and emotionally independent. I asked them to imagine whether it is easy for a single mother to raise her baby alone in the 21st century, then all of my students know the answer—no. Then I ask them to imagine that in the 17th century, a woman did so, then my students commence to admire and respect her. I also help them study some sentences about how kind and capable Hester is, such as "Except for that small expenditure in the decoration of her infant, Hester bestowed all her superfluous means in charity, on wretches less miserable than herself, and who not unfrequently insulted the hand that fed them. Much of the time, which she might readily have applied to the better efforts of her art, she employed in making coarse garments for the poor. It is probable that there was an idea of penance in this mode of occupation, and that she offered up a real sacrifice of enjoyment, in devoting so many hours to such rude handiwork". After learning these sentences, students will gradually know how she changes A's symbolic meanings from "adulterer" and "adultery", to "able" and "angle". Here, I ask students to differentiate evil from immoral behaviour by stressing that Hester and Dimmesdale do not hurt others, instead they keep being kind and generous to others, but they keep being injured by other good and moral people. A question comes into our mind, why would good people keep hurting bad people? I call for students to look at their adulterous behaviour from another perspective, given the situation is so complicated, similarly I expect my students to be open-minded and critical to any scandals and controversies. "Do not blindly follow the mainstream" is a lesson students can learn from the novel.

3.5 The Rocking-Horse Winner

The short story was written by D.H. Lawrence as one of his most famous stories. I ask students to preview it before they attend my class, it is easy for them to read it from A to Z because it is short and lucid. I design some quizzes to test the efficacy of their self-learning, questions include "The story begins by introducing which character? (A. Paul's mother B. Paul's father C. Paul D. Bassett)" "What did Paul's mother lack? (A. luck B. money C. power D. beauty)" "What was Paul's mother unable to feel for her children? (A. appreciation B. love C. hate D. respect)" and so on. Usually short stories can attract students' attention, and students are extremely active in answering these questions, thus I can perceive they can have a good understanding of the plot through their effort. Then I would not spend too much time in explaining the meaning of some difficult words, because they can fix these problems by looking up dictionaries. At this moment, it is paramount to point out the themes reflected in the short story. Before I directly analyze these themes, I usually ask them to discuss with their classmates these questions, such as "Are they poor?" "What do you think of Paul's mother? Is she a good mother?" "What is your attitude towards money and love?" Many students show interest in these topics

and are willing to share their thoughts with others because this story really strikes a chord with students. And I would cultivate their awareness of focusing on their children and family, tell them not to be a mother like Hester who only cares about living a luxurious life, while ignoring the feelings of her children. Quality time with family members should be prioritized. And I also ask students to reflect on some distorted values in society where people believe that materialistic wealth outweighs spiritual treasure. It is vital to keep a balance between them, and it would be better if the latter can be put first before the former. They all agree with my statements. Then I deliver the homework: 1) to finish reading the short story and find more details about the ending of Paul; 2) to rethink your viewpoints on money and love, if you don't want to be a mother like a Hester, what should you do to avoid the tragic ending of the family?

4. Conclusion

CEMs have to study British and American literature to strengthen their profound understanding of foreign and exotic cultures, customs, ideology, religions and stories created in Britain and America. Besides, the study of the two countries' literary works can facilitate learners' English proficiency because they can acquire grammar, punctuation, words, expressions, idioms and sentence structures from what they read. It is well-known that as civilized treasure and crystallization of written art, literature belongs to all human beings across the world in that widespread values, humanitarian spirits, pangs of sufferings, the agony and ecstasy reflected in preeminent works can be sensitized by all human beings regardless of their nationalities, races, skins, and beliefs. People can actively respond to emotions poured out by foreign authors if they can comprehend both the literal meaning and interpretation of the written works. As literature teachers, we should not only focus on contents in literary texts, but also we should bear students' needs and interests in mind so that students who are learning interesting literary works would be more cooperative and communicative in literature classes. There are some shortcomings in this article, first I do not adopt multimodal pedagogy to make my classes more vivid and absorbing. As there are many films and TV dramas based on classic novels and stories, if I can play them in classes for my students, they will show greater interest in my classes. In conclude, I will keep reflecting on, improving and perfecting my pedagogy to make my students find my literature classes always useful and valuable. It would be more meaningful that these literary texts would exert an everlasting impact on their life and even help them make right choices, and prevent themselves from dangerous people and things, I, as a teacher, wish for nothing in my career.

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