"O Captain! My Captain!' Trump is President": Teaching American Literature in Tehran

Abstract: This paper is an account of my experience teaching American Literature to graduate and undergraduate students of English Language and Literature in Tehran, Iran. American Literature is planned as a two-hour course for these students and is usually designed based on an official syllabus created by Iran's Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology. This syllabus, however, suffers from the absence of women writers, African American writers, and Native American voices. I tried to revise it to meet the current shift in the way American literature has come to be defined, that is as a multicultural multinational entity. The limited scope of the course is the first limitation that I faced. It forced me, as it has forced my colleagues who teach this course, to leave out some important representatives of American Literature. Lack of background knowledge on American history and Christianity is another issue that creates difficulty in understanding some concepts and texts and consequently, leaves less time to enjoy literary texts. Despite these difficulties, teaching this course has been so far the most exciting part of my academic career.

As I am writing this paper I have the opportunity to teach American literature to some brilliant undergraduate and graduate students of English language and literature at one of the most esteemed universities of Iran in Tehran. I taught American literature to two other undergraduate classes last semester (Spring 2017) as well. Like Thoreau, who puts the experience of his living two years in "the woods" into one, I am going to put my experience of two semesters of teaching American literature to three groups of undergraduates into one semester. My experience of teaching American literature to graduate students is, however, limited to the current semester and the past eight weeks that I have been teaching this course to them.

Like in many other countries, in Iran American literature is not defined as a separate major of study and until a few years ago was only taught as a two-hour course during the master’s period to students of English literature and language (ELL). It is only within the past few years that some universities have come to also consider a two-hour course on American literature for the undergraduate (BA) students of ELL as well. This of course does not mean that ELL students are unfamiliar with American literature or that American literary works are not included in the syllabuses of their other courses. Short stories of Edgar Allan Poe, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Robert Coover, Sherwood Anderson, etc.; plays of Arthur Miller and Eugene O'Neill; novels of Nathaniel Hawthorne,
J.D. Salinger, William Faulkner; and poems of Walt Whitman, Robert Frost, T. S. Elliot, and Sylvia Plath among others, are inseparable parts of their readings for their courses on short story, novel, drama, and poetry. In addition, many American bestsellers are translated daily and are widely read by teenagers and others. However, no part of American literary history is focused on in any of the aforementioned courses and the focus of the ELL field is limited to the literary history of England.

More than a decade ago, I was one of the MA students who experienced a two-hour course on American literature. There is not much that I remember from that course except for my presentations on Willa Cather and Carl Sandberg, and my professor's voice as he was reading Poe's "Raven" to us. Later on, as a doctoral student at the University of Texas at Dallas, when I had the chance to attend courses on early American literature, literature of the nineteenth-century, the Harlem Renaissance, and modern drama, that upon returning home, revising the course on American literature became one of my main academic concerns. I thought that if I was ever given the chance I would at least create two two-hour courses on the subject, dedicating the first to early American literature up to the Harlem Renaissance and the second one to the Harlem Renaissance and the twentieth century. I have not still been in a position to teach these course; however, I believe that in the two semesters that I have been teaching American literature, I have been able to expand the traditional syllabus at least for my own students.

The general outline that Iran's Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology has suggested for undergraduate students of this course includes the following topics and figures:

- William Cullen Bryant, James Fennimore Cooper, Washington Irving
- Emersonian Transcendentalism, "Self Reliance"
- Henry David Thoreau: Walden, "Civil Disobedience"
- Herman Melville Moby Dick
- Edgar Allan Poe: "Purloined Letter"
- Walt Whitman Leaves of Grass
- Realism and Mark Twain
- William Dean Howells and the principles of Realism
- Stephen Crane: "Open Boat" and Red Badge of Courage
- Henry James and Psychological realism
In a short sentence, the suggested syllabus expresses the purpose of this course to be to increase "students’ familiarity with the History of American Literature." For graduate students this official syllabus does not recommend any specific topics, but makes a similar statement about the purpose of the course.¹ As can be seen, the undergraduate syllabus includes a number of most anthologized figures, topics, and works of American literature. However, the syllabus suffers from what many traditional syllabi of American literature suffer from: namely, a lack of emphasis on the multicultural nature of the United States and lack female voices. In other words, the current shift to the "Literatures" of the United States is not considered here.

Inserting some other voices to this syllabus became my first concern. However, perhaps the first limitation that I faced was the fact that the course was only two hours, fifteen sessions of one and a half hours a week. This issue meant omission of some figures. The fact that this was the first course on American literature for BA students and also the first American literature course for the majority of MA students (seventeen out of twenty two) created certain limitations as well. That is to say, a number of sessions, the initial sessions at least, had to be planned in the same way to give both groups an understanding of early American perception of life and the resulting religious nature of the bulk of literature belonging to this period. What led me to assign almost the same readings to the undergrads for the first few weeks was perhaps also my endeavour to prepare my undergrads for a more advanced course on American literature during their future graduate period.

In creating the syllabus for BA students and in omitting some figures from the official syllabus, I benefited from the fact that I was more or less aware which figures of American literature my students were already familiar with. For instance, the fact that I had worked with them on Washington Irving’s short stories like "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Devil and Tom Walker" in their courses on short story and oral reproduction of stories, or the fact

¹Islamic Republic of Iran Ministry of Science, Research and Technology.  http://prog.msrt.ir
that they had read Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* in their novel class and a number of his short stories in their other classes, allowed me to omit these figures from my syllabus and make space for other works and figures. The following syllabus is what I am currently using for my undergraduate students:

**Early American Literature**

- Session One: Introduction: Letters from the "New Found Land"
- Session Three: Benjamin Franklin: from *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*
- Session Four: Richard Gray: from "Inventing Americas: The making of American Literature 1800-1865"

**American Renaissance**

- Session Five: Transcendentalism: Ralph Waldo Emerson: "Self-reliance"
- Session Six: Henry David Thoreau: *Civil Disobedience*
- Session Seven: Walt Whitman: a selection of poems
- Session Eight: Herman Melville: "Bartleby the Scrivener"
- Session Nine: Slave Narrative: from Harriet Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

**American Literature: The Twentieth Century**

- Session Ten: Stephen Crane: "The Open Boat"
- Session Eleven: Langston Hughes: a selection of poems
- Session Twelve: American poetry since 1945: a selection
- Session Thirteen: Sam Shepard: *Buried Child*
- Session Fourteen: Continue with *Buried Child*
- Session Fifteen: Review
Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* was my initial choice for the final two sessions of this course. However, as it has already been covered in their drama class, it seemed a good idea to introduce Sam Shepard instead. Not everything went based on the syllabus, however. We had to spend two sessions on some of the texts and this made Crane and Naturalism the final discussion of the class.

The letters of early travellers were well received and I got to show an initial phase of American dream as it took shape in the way early travellers described the land. On the writings of the early Puritan figures we had to spend two sessions instead of one. This allowed for discussing different concepts such as Puritanism, the rhetoric of mission, and the consequence of these beliefs in the way Puritans came to interpret their journey and their lives in the new world. The state of the Native Americans and the initial theories of black inferiority were also among the subjects that we talked about. The language of some of the texts, such as Winthrop's "Model of Christian Charity," however, became problematic. The question: "why are we reading these?" was sometimes raised out of exhaustion with the text.

The session on Benjamin Franklin allowed for discussing the Enlightenment and tracing its doctrines in the excerpts that we read of part one and two of Franklin's *Autobiography*. It also allowed me to refer to another aspect of the concept of the American Dream as well. By the end of the class, Kimia told me that she thinks Franklin was "not a good person," always thinking about his own interests and Kaveh almost dismissed Franklin's contributions as a scientist. But they all agreed to the way Franklin's life could be inspiring and were quite able to see how Franklin was writing his life to make it work as a model.

When I entered the class during the session we were speaking about Transcendentalism, I asked: "How did you like the text? Did you find some lines for your Instagram or Facebook accounts?" Almost everyone in the class had a small page filled up with lines from "Self-Reliance." Emerson had introduced himself as an "ethereal soul" and his essay proved to be as uplifting as ever among my undergraduates. In the two sessions that we had on "Self-Reliance" and Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience*, I faced some questions about the line between being self-reliant, a non-conformist, and an anarchist or on the border of freedom to act and conformity to social rules and laws. Analogies were also drawn between Transcendentalism and Persian Sufi thought. What has also
remained with me from our sessions on Transcendentalism belongs to the session in which we were reading Whitman. As I was talking about Whitman's "Preface" to The Leaves of Grass, Mehdi said, "Ma'am, can I say something? There is this inscription on the wall that says "O Captain! My Captain' Trump is president!" The class burst into laughter, as if thinking Whitman would have written a lamentation on presidency of Donald Trump. I teasingly asked "did you make that up?" he says "Oh, no Ma'am. It's on the wall."

My initial syllabus for the MA class on American literature was as follows:

**American Literature up to 1820**

- Session 1: Introduction
- Session 3: Captivity Narratives: Mary Rowlandson: from *The Soveraignty and Goodness of God*

**American Renaissance**

- Session 4: Transcendentalism: Ralph Waldo Emerson: from *Nature*
- Session 5: Henry David Thoreau: from *Walden*
- Session 6: Walt Whitman: "Preface to The Leaves of Grass," from *The Leaves of Grass*: "Song of Myself" sections 1 - 8
- Session 7: Herman Melville: "Benito Cereno"
- Session 8: Slave Narratives: Fredrick Douglass: from *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*

**American Realist and Naturalist Writings**


**Harlem Renaissance**

Session 11: Jean Toomer: from *Cane*

**American Literature Between the Wars (1914-1945)**

- Session 12: William Faulkner: *As I Lay Dying*

**American Literature Since 1945**

- Session 13: American Poetry Since 1945: a selection
- Session 14: Toni Morrison: "Recitatif"
- Session 15: Review

The syllabus looked fine to everyone, except for Faulkner with whom they were already familiar. We agreed to dedicate two sessions to a novel by Toni Morrison (*Beloved* or *Paradise*) instead.

Teaching American literature to graduate students has been a different experience so far. It has been full of moments in which they draw analogies between the American figures that we are reading and the English figures on whom they have been focusing. Their focus on different critical approaches such as Marxism or Psychoanalysis and their education in philosophy allows them to interpret the works based on those approaches or to trace different European lines of thought in the writings of American authors, before I mention anything. Alireza, who is interested in English language, always tells us of the rhythm of the texts. The play of language and different voices he has traced in the text has made Mary Rowlandson's captivity narrative his favourite so far. Sadra also always delights us with his Lacanian insights on whatever we read. The number of points that each and every one of them contributes has given a collaborative spirit to the class.

This collaborative spirit is further stimulated in both classes by my strategy of asking for presentations on authors and topics that are not included in the syllabus. So far, the results have been amazing: In the BA class, Mehr Yazdan has presented on the American Revolution, creating a handout that included a range of moments from George Washington, to Thomas Paine, and to Abigail Adams and a PowerPoint that included the "Yankee Doodle" song. Nima, the musician and the jazz enthusiast that he is, is going to give a presentation on jazz in one of our sessions on the Harlem Renaissance in both the
BA and MA classes; Behnaz is going to give a presentation on Chinese American literature; and Kimia is going to present on the Beat Generation.

The most important issue concerning teaching American literature in Iran is lack of background knowledge about American history among undergraduate students. This point is of course not expandable to everyone. In general, however, while most students are totally familiar with the modern American history and some are even following the news of modern America, they are less familiar with the earlier epochs of the country. American literature, at least at some points, however, is totally embedded in American history. To speak of epochs such as early American literature, American Renaissance, or Harlem Renaissance, would not be possible without speaking of the history of the Puritan settlements, slavery, the American Revolution, the notion of Manifest Destiny, Indian Removal, the advent of industry and transportation, or the Civil War. For instance, in the session dedicated to Whitman, discussing the context of his works, which includes a range of the subjects above, was necessary for understanding his celebration of the common people and American democracy. The limited scope of the course though, was and is a persisting problem here as well. Addressing the historical issues leaves little time for discussing and appreciating the actual literary works. This is a point by which I am by Ali, a brilliant undergrad with a beautiful British accent, as he walks with me out of the classroom: "Professor, I was hopeful that today we would read some poems." This statement makes me doubt my approach. It leaves me thinking that perhaps the next time I teach this course, I should focus on just a few works or one period of American literature instead of trying to give my students an overall picture.

Another important issue is that students' knowledge of Christianity comes from their own endeavours and their self education. Teachings of religions other than Islam are not included in their primary education. As students of BA in ELL, they come across Catholicism, Protestantism, or Calvinism, as they are reading the literature of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England and have to become a little familiar with the Bible in order to be able to understand certain texts or certain biblical allusions. However, coming to distinguish between different branches of Christianity or different rituals turns into a confusing issue. What does it really mean to say, for instance, that Walt Whitman's mother was a Quaker and taught him Quakerism, which was affective in shaping his
thought? It is not of course hard to explain these, but they stay remote concepts. In reading texts such as Mary Rowlandson’s captivity narrative or other texts using typology, the problem is highlighted.

I am well aware of the weak points of my syllabus, the absence of Native American literature or more female figures. Introducing American literature in such limited scope forces any instructor to be exclusive. My concern for my students was for them to have an overall picture of American literary history. I was and I am still hoping that they can fill the gaps themselves. This is due to the fact that by referring to any historical moment I have also tried to tell them of the voices at the margin. More importantly, I have tried to make them conscious about how some of the notions we have talked about are applicable to us as well. I have constantly tried to raise the question if the issues we have talked about (providential view of life, racism, women situation, etc.) are limited to the States and if not, how they are relevant to us and to the history of other nations as well. The question of "is that limited to the States?" has always caused a second thought. This perhaps could be a point that allows me to think of "bragging" the way Thoreau did.

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