

FANTASY LITERATURE: CULTURE AND CIVILIZATION COURSE MATERIAL?

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Abstract

The paper starts from the observation that topics of discussion proposed by students for the Culture and Civilization Course I teach at the Engineering in Foreign Languages Faculty centered on myths and mythology of various cultures: Norse, ancient Greek, Chinese, etc. The fact that fantasy novels are very popular nowadays may have influenced them and built their curiosity for these topics. Fantasy novels can be useful for getting the students' interest in culture and civilization topics starting from what they know. We can use as examples of culture identity manifestations these fabulous worlds, with their traditions, habits, heroes, values, rituals. The research methodology is provided by popular culture and English Language Teaching. The hypothesis of the paper is that students have a tendency to prefer certain topics due to the influence of popular culture and that this interest can be used productively to engage them in course participation.

Keywords: English language teaching, motivation, culture identity manifestations, heroes, myths.

1. Motivation

Currently the fantasy genre is very popular when it comes to readers whose hobby is exposed in online discussion groups on Facebook. Romanian young writers notice in Facebook discussions how the fantasy genre is very popular abroad and the way this influenced their country's writing trend too. There are nowadays many fantasy genre writing clubs, and young Wattpad community writers feel the pressure of being asked to write fantasy novels in order to have a reading public. Both mainstream and popular, niche writers are under the influence of the popularity of the fantasy genre, as plenty of readers who are in online reading groups for their entertainment feel willing to read Romanian authors' fantasy genre novels. The current trends influence especially the young generation through popular culture products and they come with these preferences in university classes, regardless of their main domain of study. Current trends also include reading as a popular pastime. Reading for entertainment is currently being promoted in every corner of the world, and the social media is

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promoting funny, serious and inspiring material, with photographs and quotations showing how beneficial as well as enjoyable reading can be.

This is just a hypothesis about the way current trends can influence young people and especially students who will be part of the Culture and Civilization course at the Engineering in Foreign Languages Faculty. The assumption is that this is the background of students who attended this course in the academic years 2017-2018 and 2018-2019, and who, when asked about suggesting topics to discuss in the seminar which are related to their interest suggested world mythology.

These students have been most likely influence by the *Harry Potter* phenomenon, a series of books by J.K. Rowling from the fantasy genre which are like fairy-tales the young generations have lived through their childhood with. They have grown with *Harry Potter* novels and films, as everyone around was talking about them and mass-media was also promoting them. Another famous fantasy novel and popular culture phenomenon is *The Lord of the Rings*, starting from the trilogy written by J.R.R. Tolkien. Its success was confirmed by its being voted as the best book of the 20th century in January 1997. Its popularity continues. Another product of fantasy fiction is the series *Game of Thrones*, which has attracted both media and television public's attention. The fantasy novels and films after them are all around us, and influence inevitably our cultural background. Their impact is stronger on the young audience, as they are more receptive to mass-media advertising, since they feel the pressure of their group, in order to have a common topic of discussion and common interests. Fantasy novels and films prompt their public to do a bit of research on the elements that are common in world mythologies: creatures such as elves and gods such as those in ancient Greek and Roman culture will be referenced commonly. Another source of coming into contact inevitably with this type of fantasy world is represented by computer games. Some games such as DOTA have the structure of a fairy-tale, fantasy story and/ or story in mythology where there is a hero that helps save the current problematic situation.

The inspiring successful stories that translate into books, films and computer games are based on universal elements found in the fairy-tales of the world, as Joseph Campbell listed them in his work *The Hero with A Thousand Faces*: the hero wanders into a different world, goes through trials, then returns and shares his experience with his community. The fight between good and evil is also a common element to all fairy-tales and fantasy stories. Unlike fairy-tales, though, fantasy stories are a mixture between our everyday world and a fantasy world, reminding of a world of fairy-tales and myths. The message could be that everyone can become a hero, and that everyone can identify with a hero at some point in their lives, and thus the universality of the stories comes into the foreground. The will to succeed professionally, as well as in exams, can make the students identify and sympathize with the heroes in these fantasy stories.

These fantasy novels and films, as well as computer games, are part of popular culture. Products such as games, novels, films, youtube videos, online media which appeal to large groups can be considered part of popular culture, according to the definition given by Duff and Zappa-Hollmann (2013: 1). Popular culture can become a tool used for language learning, since it is such a part of daily lives (Murray 2008: 1). Including pop culture materials in foreign language teaching has been considered an advantage due to the fact that pop culture is part of contemporary culture, and binds together groups of students of the same age from all cultures. The current paper will move beyond the field of foreign language teaching towards the domain of Culture and Civilization, a course of lectures during which students can be made aware of the distinction between mainstream culture and popular culture, a distinction which is made more vivid by examples related to their daily lives.

2. Fantasy Worlds, and the way they work: their rules as cultural identity manifestations

The way that the fantasy worlds are built are similar to the ways in which cultures are built, as well as civilizations. There are heroes, values, rituals and traditions to keep in mind, as well as wars which change the situation just like in real-life history. The way in which fantasy worlds and mythological worlds work are very similar to the way real-life historical events work. Perhaps the students will find fictive events more attractive, yet they will also be later able to switch their interest to real-life history by analogy to their favourite stories.

The main textbook for the course is *Culture. An Awareness Raising Approach. Fifth edition* by Professor Sorin Baciu, published in 2013 by Cavallioti (Bucharest). Students will find in the textbook basic terms and concepts they will work with, as well as basic questions, such as: what a culture is vs what a civilization is, when and why civilizations disappear, culture identity manifestations, culture shock, measuring cultures (with reference to the cultural dimensions theory of Geert Hofstede) and globalization. The way that personality is influenced by contacts with other cultures is also taken into account for debate and discussions in seminar classes.

The textbook is meant only as a basis for understanding the main concepts, theories and terms to work with, which will be further on used for discussions and providing arguments for and against when it comes to sustaining their opinions.

The parallels with the ways in which fantasy worlds work serve as motivation elements in the course, as the students probably share a common background composed by popular culture related to fantasy genre in literature and film. Fantasy worlds can also be used to exemplify culture identity manifestations, which include the following:

- a. symbols
- b. heroes
- c. rituals, practices and traditions
- d. values. (Baciu 2013: 32)

Any fictional world has its own rules by which it functions, by analogy with the real, everyday life world of a certain period of time. There are rules which include what should be done in order to protect the usual course of daily life in a certain world, who the hero should be, what the hero should do in case the normal equilibrium is disturbed. From this point of view, we could say that the *Harry Potter* novels function in a similar way to fairy-tales: the world goes on according to a certain set of rules, then the usual equilibrium is disturbed, afterwards the world needs a hero to restore it, who goes through a set of trials with the help of some friends, and then the world returns back to normal, as the problems have all been solved through confrontations and finding solutions in a group of friends. The culture that is promoted is a collectivist one, as the hero works out solutions in order to help the world return to normal for the benefit of the whole community. All these observations can be used to raise the interest of the students in the concepts, terms and theories that appear in the course. The course is, after all, meant to raise their awareness related to everyday life issues as well as events in history. Culture is made up of mainstream culture and popular culture, two levels of which they need to be made aware of. The students should be encouraged through their intuitive knowledge on the topic of culture to express and to argue for their own opinion on a variety of topics.

When it comes to symbols, the students can think of symbols in fictional worlds, and the same can go for heroes, rituals, practices, traditions and values. Once they have their examples handy, it will be easier for them to extend their knowledge to real-life situations and view these cultural identity manifestations in a more realistic and mature way, such as:

Symbols are elements represented by words, gestures, objects, signs, landmarks, artistic forms, but they may also be concrete representations of ideas, concepts or other abstractions. The word, as such, stems from the Greek symbolon which, basically, renders a way of identification. This very identification is based on the convention of a group or a community that, historically or contextually speaking agrees upon such a meaning. The very word symbolon actually derives from sym, meaning together, and bole, meaning to throw, i.e. to throw together. Therefore any symbol is something that, by virtue of association, represents, stands for or suggests something else. (Baciu 2013: 32)

The definition would seem rather abstract without examples, yet, as students have a common cultural reference due to fantasy cultural products, the explaining would go easier, and the examples can be extended to real-life cultures.

The cohesion of the group of students is given by common references, and once their culture is influenced by popular culture and fantasy literature in particular, the teachers can use these in order to facilitate the learning process. The students will feel attracted by the introduction into the course, especially as they will have by now in their first year more difficult courses in the engineering field.

Usually students in engineering look at foreign languages related classes as a means of enjoying a bit of relaxation. The course in Culture and Civilization could be used in the same way.

It is natural to help students relax by helping them start from what they know in order to make the transition to a more academic level discussion and approach easier. They will have a more pleasant time adapting to the new academic environment, as they are first year students.

3. Myths and World Mythology

Helping students enjoy myths and world mythology related topics is easy once they are already familiar with these from fantasy novels. We can show them easier the way in which ancient myths still have an influence on the way we perceive the world today, on our values and more. The ancient Greek and Roman civilizations still have an influence on the way various systems work, in various fields of knowledge, as well as on our systems of values. If they associate these ancient worlds just with museums, art and history it will be more difficult for them to be attracted to something they cannot understand right away due to lack of contact with the topic. Fantasy literature helps build a bridge with cultures and civilizations of all kinds, and we can use references to these cultural products in order to get the students' interest. They need to look on the past and present with the same interest in order to use the concepts, terms and theories so that they can efficiently analyse any culture and civilization.

Issues with which the ancients were confronted are universal, and students will be made aware of it through references to fantasy novels as well as through drawing their attention to how ancient myths are reused in modern literature. An example is given in the article *The Role of Mythology in Modern Literature* by Mark E. Workman (1981: 35-48), where Oedipus in Thebes is reappearing as a contemporary character in *Chinatown* by Polanski and *San Narcisco* by Pynchon.

The similarities with values, heroes, traditions and symbols could be used in class in order to discuss the universality of certain elements in any culture at any time, as well as related to the universality of human nature. Students could be motivated to take part in a discussion on common elements in any culture, which could ensure the acceptance of other cultures due to empathy based on familiar elements.

4. Conclusions

The particularity of a *Culture and Civilization* course at the Technical University of Civil Engineering Bucharest lies in the fact that it cannot make too much use of English for Specific Purposes but of common cultural background of its participants and common interests outside their common field of study in the engineering domain. The teacher holding the course of lecture will need to focus on the values and cultural influences of the generation the students attending the course are part of. This will help keep up the students' cohesion as a group, as they will use their common background and interests in order to perform group activities and projects, as well as ensuring the group of students' attendance and active participation in the course. By helping them use common cultural background elements they will be motivated to keep in touch with each other, work together on group activities and keep coming to the course. Problems arise when a whole group of students no longer attends a course from the Foreign Languages curricula and lose touch with the teacher and other classmates. Then they will rely only on previous knowledge they have gained in highschool which is not enough for what the seminars and courses ask from them. The main requirements for Foreign Languages related seminars and courses consist in active participation and attendance. Students are encouraged and asked to communicate with the teacher as well as with other students, as this is considered a skill required in their future profession as engineers if they wish to establish collaborations with foreign firms and present their work in a foreign language in order to enter or promote a project.

Through the current paper, I tried to show how popular culture influence can be used to engage students to actively participate in a Culture and Civilization course, not just in a seminar of foreign languages. I also tried to use productively the influence of popular culture through fantasy novels, films and games in order to help students find the theoretical material of the course as more understandable. This first application of the theories and concepts to something they are familiar with is intended to be a starting point for further applications of notions related to mainstream culture. Their interest in world mythology, which comes from their contact with fantasy literature and films, can be used as a link to mainstream culture and towards other discussion topics. Using fantasy elements as examples and allowing students to apply them to the theoretical notions has helped engage their interest in the course and better make sense of the course material.

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