

Reçu le: 02/09 / 2023 Accepté le: 19/01 / 2024 Publié le: 21/01 / 2024



Teaching History Through Poetry: The Case of African American Slave Songs and Poems

✉ Ounissa AIT BENALI
ounissa.aitbenali@univ-bejaia.dz
University of Bejaia / Algeria

تدريس التاريخ من خلال الشعر: نموذج قصائد وأغاني العبيد الأمريكيين من أصل أفريقي

✉ ونيسة أيت بن علي
ounissa.aitbenali@univ-bejaia.dz
جامعة بجاية / الجزائر

ABSTRACT:

This article explores the effectiveness of teaching American history through African American poetry. Therefore, taking its bearing from the new historicist approach as explained by Greenblatt, I will try to show that poetry does not only constitutes a "cultural archive" that is shaped and is shaping the socio-historical context of any nation but is a significant means of teaching history. Starting from slave songs to Blues and Jazz, and passing through sonnets and various poems that express the sufferings of black people in America, this study shows the importance of studying both the text /poems to understand the historical context of their writings in an EFL class.

Key Words: Teaching, History, African American Poems, Slavery, New Historicism.

ملخص البحث

يستكشف هذا المقال فعالية تدريس التاريخ الأمريكي من خلال الشعر الأفريقي الأمريكي. ولذلك ، مع الأخذ بعين الاعتبار نظرية النهج التاريخي الجديد كما أوضحه ستيفان جرينبلات ، سأحاول أن أبين أن الشعر لا يمثل فقط "أرشيفًا ثقافيًا" يتشكل ويشكل السياق الاجتماعي والتاريخي لأي أمة ولكنه وسيلة مهمة لتدريس التاريخ. بدءًا من تحليل بعض عينات من أغاني العبيد والقصائد المختلفة التي تعبر عن معاناة السود في أمريكا ، توضح هذه الدراسة أهمية دراسة كل من النص / القصائد لفهم السياق التاريخي لكتابات السود الأمريكيين.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التدريس ، التاريخ ، القصائد الأفريقية الأمريكية ، العبودية ، التأريخية الجديدة.

1. Introduction:

Lougha - Kalaam - Volume: 10 - N 01. - JANVIER 2024

Teaching history through literature and in our case through poetry in an EFL class is the core idea of this article. It is to be noted that teaching history through literature is subject to great debate because some critics think that it is adequate while others categorically reject this idea. As a teacher of literature, I often start my lecture with the study of the socio-historical context of the selected novels, plays or poems. This makes my students aware about the circumstances in which the work has been emerged. Therefore, this article is based on my experience with teaching history through poetry in the module of African American literature that I often start with an example of a slave narrative to introduce the socio-historical context of slavery through the text of Frederick Douglass's accounts of his enslavement and escape from slavery.

2. The Review of the Literature

Many scholars discussed the subject of teaching the English language through poems' analysis in an EFL class. They exposed the major challenges that learners encountered. In this respect, Akbar and Wahas (2020) contend that teaching English through poetry is an efficacious material to develop the students' language and literary skills (p. 195). However, the students' proficiency level, the teaching methods and the selected poems are important factors to be considered in the process of teaching.

In their study Kantz and Wineburg (2002) discusses the importance of historical thinking in teaching the past (p. 808). While their focus is not specifically on teaching history through poetry, their work emphasizes the need for innovative approaches to history education. This supports the idea that incorporating poetry into history lessons can be a valuable strategy for fostering historical thinking skills.

Another study by Miguel Gómez (2022) explores the use of poetry and primary sources to engage students with historically marginalized voices in social studies classrooms. The findings suggest that poetry can provide students with authentic learning experiences and promote critical thinking (p. 218-228). This aligns with the idea that teaching history through poetry can help students develop a deeper understanding of historical events and perspectives.

In his article, John De Gree (2019) states that it is "perpetuating falsehood to teach history through literature". To defend his idea, he provides the example of the blockbuster *Gone with the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell. He contends that *Gone with the Wind* has sold over 30 million copies, and there are few adults who cannot quote at least one line from the novel. However, most fail to understand that this novel is not a history of Southern slavery and the Civil War, but is an expression of the author's romantic vision. In other words, the novel tells us more about who Margaret Mitchell was the time she wrote it instead of narrating the accurate historical setting she placed her novel in. Like most novelists, Mitchell based much of *Gone with the Wind* on her personal life and not on historical facts.

In the midst of these different views, our study comes to substantiate the assumption that using poems can help the students understand the historical moments and think critically about the events in which these texts were written. This study borrows Stephen Greenblatt's concepts of anecdote and self-fashioning that are New Historicism's basic creeds. This approach belongs to the eclectic set of theories and perspectives of literary studies and criticism. It is a theory which considers and regards any cultural or literary work or piece as a product of its history. Thus, history, with all its different political, social and cultural events and happenings, has a great deal of impact and influence on the literary production of any given society or community. In addition, New Historicists believe in the reciprocity of influence, in the sense that, literature once produced, in turn, affects and influences the history of that community, by bringing new perspectives, ideas or views in regards to the different social, cultural or political subject matters. It is fashioning after being fashioned.

3. Theoretical Framework

Throughout the study I will use both new historicism and personal response pedagogy to explore the benefits of integrating poetry in the study of history in an EFL class. New historicists believe that it is power that creates the knowledge that circulates in the society. This means that whoever has power, has more chances to write history and to establish and make some beliefs, knowledge and ideas circulate in society. However, and even if this idea is correct, poetry can circulate real knowledge about history in the classroom since it is a real experience that pertains to a definite time and place.

In the research that follows, I would address the possibility of teaching history through poetry by analysing the poems and the students' responses to the interplay of text and context. Then, I would explain the way this idea becomes effective in peeling out the socio-historical context /behind the poetic words in the selected texts that are marked by the event and contributed in shaping the history of African American people. Therefore, my research aims to show and lead the students to think and understand that there are historie(s) and truth(s) instead of one absolute reality using in my analysis selected slave songs, poems from the Harlem Renaissance and the Protest Period.

4. Case Studies and Practical Examples

4.1 Robert Hayden's "The Middle Passage": Fiction vs History

According to Freedman Frances S. (1970), the history of the Atlantic Slave Trade is the story of more than fifteen million people. These victims of a forced migration arrived in the new world as early as 1518, when the first black cargo from Africa was landed in the West Indies. The slave trade expanded rapidly after 1650, as the plantation system developed and continued to grow even after it was legally abolished by Great Britain and the United States in 1807. It ended only with the Civil War (p. 38). This is the historical account one may read about the uprooting of African people from their lands and their transportation to their bondage in America. However, other truths can be dissected through the writings of the people who actually lived this traumatic voyage. Therefore, reading Robert E. Hayden's poem "Middle Passage" (1966) provides more details about the circumstances of the Atlantic perilous trip. He writes:

Jesus, Estrella, Esperanza, Mercy, (names of slave ships)

Sails flashing to the wind like weapons,

Sharks following the moans the fever and the dying,

Horror the corposant and compass rose.

Middle passage: voyage to death

To life upon these shores

Their moaning is a prayer for death

Ours and their own. Some try to starve themselves

Lost three this morning leaped with crazy laughter

To the waiting sharks, sang as they went under.

.....

The Crew and Captain lusted with the comeliest

Of the savage girls kept naked in the cabins,

That there was one they called The Guinea Rose

And they cast lots and fought to lie with her (1970, p. 42-44).

American official books of history do not relate these horrific facts about their business on human flesh. Yet, the poet relates in details the mishap of these black people to reach American shores. They were put naked on the board like starved animals dying of thirst and cold. Therefore, the student will better understand the actual situation and the circumstances of transporting Africans to America.

The poet Michael S. Harper (1994) refers to Robert Hayden as a symbolist poet struggling with the facts of history (p. 980). Indeed, his poem “Middle Passage” reflects that view. It is both a historically based dramatic narrative and a symbolist poem. The narrative intersperses voices and names which derive from a variety of historical sources. Little-known and well-known “objective correlatives,” historical and literary rather than personal, are used throughout the poem. For example, the poem begins with “Jesus, Estrella [Star], Esperanza [Hope], Mercy,” which are later referred to as “bright ironical names” of “dark ships”. The ship “Jesus” was sailed in 1562 by Captain John Hawkins from England to Guinea. He loaded his ship with Africans, sailed to the islands in Hispaniola, sold his human “cattle stowed spoon-fashion” to planters, and returned with a rich cargo of ginger, hides, and pearls. The large profits Hawkins made encouraged English involvement in the slave trade.

The end of the poem refers to a well-known historical event. In 1839, a group of Africans led by Cinquez on the board of a Spanish slave ship called “La Amestad” (friendship in English) mutinied against being transported to Cuba. Gaining control of the ship, they sailed to Montauk, Long Island, and sought freedom. John Quincy Adams defended the fifty-four Africans before the Supreme Court and gained their freedom. This case is referred to as *United States v. Schooner Amistad*. The United States Supreme Court case resulting from the rebellion of Africans on board the Spanish schooner “La Amistad” in 1839 was an unusual freedom suit that involved international issues and parties, as well as United States law. The historian Samuel Eliot Morison described it in 1969 as the most important court case involving slavery that ended by freeing the mutineers, who were allowed to return to Africa in 1841 (Cornish, 1988, p. 79-80).

In addition to direct historical references, the poem utilizes literary references. One example is a variation on Ariel’s song in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (1564-1616) (act 1, scene 2)- the voice of the invisible consciousness: “Deep in the festering hold [Full fathom five] thy father lies;/ of his bones New England pews [coral] are made/ those are altar lights [pearls] that were his eyes.” Hayden uses history to dramatically recreate the conditions of the African slave trade. The poem’s interrelated voices provide the historical moment and context from which the reader / the student can understand an important portion of truth that imparts another significance to the historical event.

4.2 Slave Songs

Slave song is the second practical example through which the students can learn a lot about American history and slavery. The reader of slavery’s conditions may think that everything is lost for a slave living under the stronghold of a white master’s plantation. However, they still have courage to sing and dance on the floor of their confiscated liberty disturbing the ashes of their persecuted right of being treated as a “normal” human being. The texts of their lyrics do not only speak of their plight but include specific history, personal narratives of slavery as seen and lived by them.

At first glance, these texts expose nothing of historical. However, once delving deep into the depth of words, one can find the roots of slavocracy and the story of the African slaves crying for freedom. In his essay, Jones LeRoi (1963) explores the possibility that the history of black Americans can be traced following the evolution of their music. More than that, he contends that African American music starting from the slave songs influenced the American culture and history. Their lyrical performances constitute their cultural identity that stands in the face of its commodification (thingifying) (p. 28).

As a definition, slave song refers to “spirituals”, “songs of sorrow” or “slave poetry”. one can

notice that it is a lyrical poem that recounts the scares of a slave under his master's oppression and yet this slave dares to dance at his personal sorrow in front of the white master. This paradox in the slave songs is referred to in Frederick Douglass's (1845) narrative as follows:

This they would sing, as a chorus, to words which to many would seem meaningless jargon, but which, nevertheless, were full of meaning to themselves. I have sometimes thought that the mere hearing of those songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery, than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy on the subject could do. I did not, when a slave, understand the deep meaning of those rude and apparently incoherent songs. I was myself within the circle; so that I neither saw nor heard as those without might see and hear. They told a tale of woe which was then altogether beyond my feeble comprehension; they were tones loud, long, and deep; they breathed the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish. Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for liberation from chains. (Frederick, 1845, 11-12).

Douglass's comment on the nature of the slave song and about the way they speak of slavery in an accurate and real tone because they lived the real situation. He couldn't, as a child, understand, but later on, upon growing up he understood the position of being under the chains of an imposed slavery. Among the slave songs that were recurrent in the repertory of the slaves and survived the circumstances are: "Swing Low Sweet Chariot", "Song of the Free", and "Follow the Drinking Gourd" in which the students depict the hidden segment of the American history.

"Follow The Drinking Gourd"

(1)When the sun goes back

And the first quail calls

Follow the drinking gourd

The old man is a-waitin' for

To carry you to freedom

Follow the drinking gourd

Chorus

(2)The river bed makes a mighty fine road,

Dead trees to show you the way

And it's left foot, peg foot, traveling on

Follow the drinking gourd

Chorus

(3)The river ends between two hills

Follow the drinking gourd

There's another river on the other side

Follow the drinking gourd

Chorus

(3)I thought I heard the angels say

Follow the drinking gourd

The stars in the heavens

Will show you the way

Follow the drinking gourd (Winter, 1988 n.p.).

Being testimonies against slavery, slave songs are not only therapies to uplift the tortured spirits of the slaves. But they tell stories and history of the black people and most importantly they are secret codes dedicated to teach the slaves how to run away. This song was published in 1928, but was first

used before the American Civil War. What is special about this slave song is that it alludes to an important historical fact which is that of the Underground Railroad. The latter is a network of secret routes and safe houses established in the United States during the early to mid-19th century, and used by African American slaves to escape into free states and Canada with the aid of abolitionists and allies who were sympathetic to their cause.

The term is also applied to the abolitionists, black and white, free and enslaved, who aided the fugitives. This song was used by an old white sailor named “Peg-legged Joe” who was an Underground Railroad aid for slaves. Joe wore a wooden leg in place of his right foot which had been lost in some seafaring mishap. He would work on plantations and teach slaves after sunset the song that would show them the way to freedom. The first stanza refers to the period of early mid-April when quails breed and call for each other. The days become longer after winter, which is the best time to run away and follow the big dipper star formation pointing north to Canada. The underground Railroad Peg-legged Joe is referred to in the chorus, “Follow the drinking gourd (2) / For the old man is waiting for to carry you to freedom / follow the drinking gourd”. He is “the old man”, which is nautical slang for “captain” because he used to be a sailor. Thus, the escaped slave would follow a carefully blazed trail marked by the symbol of a human left foot and a round spot in place of a right foot. These texts are ingenious examples of signal songs employed by the slaves to pass on secret messages and double meanings concealed in innocent imagery.

The second stanza provides more details about the way to follow to reach the north, and the mentioned river is Tombigbee that ends in Mobile Bay. Its waters extend to northeastern Mississippi the waterway most used by ran away slaves. In the third stanza, the abolitionist aid gives final directions by describing the right road from Mississippi to Tennessee using the river and the hills as signposts still using the Drinking Gourd / Big Diaper as a constant indicator of the north. It is to be noted that the chorus is recurrent to simplify oral transmission and the memorization of the song by uneducated slaves.

Upon reading and analysing this slave song, the students understand that it is not only an account that pertains to culture but it simultaneously circulates with the political and economic circumstance of the period in which it is written. It also provides them with historical context about the abolitionist society and the Underground Railroad that played an important role in antebellum America as a route to freedom. They come to know that together with the sympathetic abolitionists, this web provided a safe haven for thousands of black slaves like Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, and William Wells Brown who escaped to the North.

4.3- Renaissance Poetry: A New Historical Moment for the New Negro

The literature of the African Americans does not stop at any moment of history since it is often fueled by the events of the day and the resulting changes in the status of the African American people that progress, though sluggishly, with the socio-historical context of the main stream American society. After the Civil War and despite the abolition of slavery, the United States was far from being a place of freedom, equality and justice for everyone. Therefore, African American writers like Elizabeth Keckley, Charles Chestnut and Paul Lawrence Dunbar continued to emphasize the theme of slavery versus freedom.

For the black writers of the Reconstruction Period (1865-1900), literature was a means of liberating and transforming the lives of African American in a society in which “separate but equal” policies held sway. The central debate surrounded the questions of social, economic, and political enfranchisement as Smith Rebeka and Jones S., L. (1999, p. 114) state.

In the period known as The Harlem Renaissance (1900-1940) writers reinforced the same themes, highlighting the importance of political, economic and artistic freedom for black African Americans. Writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Dorothy West, and Claude McKay embraced the

idea of “The New Negro”. This concept emphasized self-sufficiency, education, black pride, a sense of African American history and cultural advancement. This concept found shape in Alain Locke’s anthology *The New Negro* (1925). African American writers sought to revise what they considered to be stereotypical notions of African American life, art and culture. Among the poems that refer to the historical events of the Harlem Renaissance and report the spirit of that moment pertain to two major voices of the movement who are Langston Hughes (1902-1967) and Claude McKay (1889-1948) in the two following poems read, analyzed and compared by the students:

“If We Must Die” by Claude McKay

IF we must die—let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
Making their mock at our accursed lot.
If we must die—oh, let us nobly die,
So that our precious blood may not be shed
In vain; then even the monsters we defy
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!
Oh, Kinsmen! We must meet the common foe;
Though far outnumbered, let us show us brave,
And for their thousand blows deal one death-blow!
What though before us lies the open grave?
Like men we’ll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back! (1919, p. 21).

“The Negro Speaks of Rivers” by Langston Hughes

I’ve known rivers:
I’ve known rivers ancient as the world and older than the
Flow of human blood in human veins.
My soul has grown deep like the rivers.
I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln
Went down to New Orleans, and I’ve seen its muddy
Bosom turn all golden in the sunset.
I’ve known rivers:
Ancient, dusky rivers.
My soul has grown deep like the rivers (1921, p. 70).

The second proposed poem, Hughes’s “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” centers on the past and African negritude themes. Hughes’s writing always shows an identification with Africa. Through the images of the river, Hughes traces the history of the African American from Africa to America. The muddy

Mississippi makes Hughes consider the roles that rivers have played in human history. The first poem, McKay's "If We Must Die" speaks of the summer and fall of 1919, in which race riots exploded in a number of cities in both the North and South. The three most violent episodes occurred in Chicago, Washington, D.C., and Elaine, Arkansas. The NEW YORK TIMES lamented the new black militancy stating in one of its articles that, "There had been no trouble with the Negro before the war when most admitted the superiority of the white race" (Wormser, *The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow*)

A Southern black woman, as she identified herself, wrote a letter to THE CRISIS, praising blacks for fighting back. She wrote, "The Washington riot gave me a thrill that comes once in a life time ... at last our men had stood up like men. ... I stood up alone in my room ... and exclaimed aloud, 'Oh I thank God, thank God.' The pent-up horror, grief and humiliation of a life time -- half a century -- was being stripped from me" (Wormser, *The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow*).

5- Discussion of the Students' Reaction and Feedback

Teaching history through poetry proved to be an adequate tool and a subtle way to introduce the students to the socio-historical contexts of the American society in different lapses of time. It shows subversion and sedition in the discourse of African American poet. The students are more motivated as for the study of poems they thought are boring before introducing historical perspective that goes beyond the study of textual devices. The use of imagination, emotion and empathy while reading poems emotionally engages the student and involves them in the hi/story.

For instance, reading Hughes's and McKay's poems at the same time created a scorching debate between the students because of the poets' different messages to the African American people. The majority of the student admires McKay's poem because I think it reflects their desires for rebellion. McKay's "If We Must Die," is much more action-oriented and immediate than Hughes' "Negro Speaks of Rivers" which is more reflective and spiritual in tone. The speaker in McKay's poem is not looking at the past, but is examining the present and planning for a better future.

In exploring these works at the same time, the students begin to see and understand the very different and complex political, spiritual, and social conversations at play within the black community at different moments of history. They come to perceive the new historicist notion of self-fashioning through the events and anecdotes of the moment in the poets' cases and they comprehend the power of poetry in fashioning the individuals by showing them other truths than the official ones that are imposed on them.

The students catch a glimpse of history unfolding among the African Americans and provide their personal interpretations of the works and the historical events what promotes their critical thinking and creativity. For example, some of them made a comparison between "Follow the Drinking Gourd" and the Algerians' deportation to faraway places during French colonialism, while others point at the irony of the middle passage by making a parallel with the African phenomenon of *Haraga*. It pushes them to acquire a personal point of view concerning the historical events and enhances their memory. In fact, the more they know about the past the better they are prepared for the future.

6. CONCLUSION

Teaching history using poetry proved to be an interesting experience for the students. This engage and motivate the students; it develops their critical thinking and analytical skills. Furthermore, reading poetry to dig into history increases the students' empathy and understanding of diverse perspectives. It also contributes in the enhancement of language skills, vocabulary acquisition, and memorization. Superposing poetic devices and historical context improves the student's ability of interpretation. However, and for the sake of overcoming the challenges of introducing poetry to teach history, teachers should resist reluctance and underestimation of the role of poetry in EFL and correct the stereotypes stating the complexity of poetry not only in language instruction but even in addressing other themes like history. From the successful implementation of poetry in history lessons

of our study, the students start to provide positive feedback and reflections on the use of poetry as a teaching tool. By examining the existing literature and providing practical insights, this article supports educators in effectively integrating poetry into their history lessons in EFL classrooms. By doing so, educators can create engaging and meaningful learning experiences that promote historical understanding, critical thinking, and language development.

5. Bibliography List:

1. Books:

- Douglass, Frederick (1845), *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*, Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, Cornhill.
- Freedman, Frances S. (1970), *The Black American Experience*, New York, Bantam Editions.
- Greenblatt, Stephen, *Renaissance Self-fashioning, from More to Shakespeare* (1980), Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- Heyden, Robert E. (1970), "The Middle Passage", *The Black American Experience*, New York, Bantam Editions.
- Jones, LeRoi (1963), *Blues People, Blues People: Negro Music in White America*, New York, Morrow and Company Inc.
- Locke, Alain, *The New Negro, an Interpretation* (1925), New York, Albert and Charles Boni.
- Shakespeare, William, 1564-1616. (1998). *The Tempest: with new and updated critical essays and a revised bibliography*, New York, NY, USA, Signet Classic,
- Smith Rebeka, Jones Sharon L. (1999), *Anthology of African American Literature*, New Jersey, Prentice Hall.
- Wineburg, Barbara Sam (2001), *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press.
- Winter, Jeanette, *Follow the Drinking Gourd* (1988), New York, Scholastic.

2. Journal Article

- Akbar Joseph A. Sayed, Yazid Meftah Ali Wahas (2020), Challenges and solutions in Teaching English through Poetry to EFL Students at Hajjah's University, a Case Study of William Wordsworth's Lucy and John Donne's Death Poems, *Reflection*, Vol 27, N 2.

3. Internet Websites

- Claude McKay, "If We Must Die," *The Liberator* (1919), vol 2, no. 7, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/culture/pubs/liberator/#1919>, (consulted on 7/08/2023).
- Cornish, Dudley T., Review of Mutiny on the Amistad: The Saga of a Slave Revolt and Its Impact on American Abolition, Law, and Diplomacy (1988), *Civil War History*, vol. 34 no. 1, *Project MUSE*, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/420398>, (consulted on 5/07/ 2022).
- De Gree, John, The Perils of Teaching History through Literature (2017), <https://www.centerforlit.com/blog/2017/1/16/the-perils-of-teaching-history-through-literature>, (consulted on 10/03/ 2019).
- Gómez, Miguel, Engaging with Historically Marginalized Voices through Blackout Poetry (2022), *Social Studies Research and Practice*, Vol. 17 No. 2, <https://doi.org/10.1108/SSRP-06-2022-0018>, (consulted on 6 /08/ 2023).
- Hayden, Robert, Michael Harper, Robert Hayden and Michael Harper: A Literary Friendship (1994), *Callaloo*, vol. 17, no. 4, JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2932157>, (consulted on 09/ 08/2023).
- Hughes Langston, Negro Speaks of Rivers (1921), *The Crisis*, Vol 22, N. 2. <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/workers/civil-rights/crisis/0600-crisis-v22n02-w128>, (consulted on 6/08/2023).
- Worser, Richard, The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow, https://www.thirteen.org/wnet/jimcrow/stories_events_red.html, (consulted on 10/ 09/2022).