Journal of Education and Educational Research
ISSN: 2957-9465 | Vol. 10, No. 3, 2024

Teaching of American Literature with Chinese Characteristics

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Abstract: The questions of “For whom to cultivate students”, “what kind of students to cultivate”, and “how to cultivate students” are interrelated issues to the essence of education, which are worth deep thinking for every educator. The teachers of “American Literature” should carry out the curriculum-based ideological and political education, and deal with properly the relationship between explicit and implicit education. It is essential for the teachers to help students guard against the value infiltration of Western countries, strengthen their establishment of local vision, and build the curriculum system which combines professional knowledge and ability training with value guiding, and help students form correct values from the national, social and individual levels, so as to highlight the socialist education with Chinese characteristics.

Keywords: American Literature; Ideology; Value-Guiding; Application.

1. Introduction

The questions of “For whom to cultivate students”, “what kind of students to cultivate”, and “how to cultivate students” are interrelated issues to the essence of education, which are worth deep thinking for every educator. In June 2020, the Chinese Ministry of Education issued the Guiding Outline for the Ideological and Political Construction of the Curriculum for Institutions of Higher Learning, which stated that "the fundamental task of educating students must combine into a whole and inseparable system with the three aspects of value guiding, knowledge teaching and ability building". In fact, in the past years of teaching, teachers often focus more on knowledge teaching and ability training than value shaping, which means the ideological and political education is far from enough. The course nature of "American Literature" determines that teachers should not only pay attention to the appreciation and analysis of American literary works to improve students’ literary aesthetic ability, but also pay attention to the revealing of relevant historical facts and current affairs to enhance students’ literary ability of critical thinking, thus guiding students to form correct values and world outlook.

As a core compulsory course for English majors, American Literature focuses on American literary history and classic works. It inevitably makes students surrounded by American values and western ideology. If the guidance is not proper, it is very risky for students to worship blindly the American capitalist society, or even to resist socialist core values, thus forming unacceptable distorted values. “Our students need to study American literature, and the basic starting point is not to amuse themselves, but to uphold the initial intention of serving the people, relying on their own professional advantages, and dedicate their studies to our national socialist cultural cause and higher education” (Wang Shouren, 2020:8). Therefore, the teachers of American literature should think deeply to carry out curriculum-based ideological and political education, helping students guard against the value infiltration of Western countries, strengthen their establishment of local vision, and build the curriculum system which combines professional knowledge and ability training with value guiding, and help students to form correct values from the national, social and individual levels so as to highlight the socialist goal of educating students for the Communist Party and training the qualified talents for the country.

2. Classroom Application of Values

“American Literature” is taught mainly through the works of American classical writers and the language, history, culture and values of Anglo-American countries, but “Chinese people should view world literature and English literature from their own standpoint” (Wang Zhuo, 2020:70). English teachers in China should “help students establish their own values through curriculum-based ideological and political education, and make them establish their Chinese stand correctly to recognize and evaluate foreign cultural thoughts” (Yang Jincai, 2020: 12). In formulating curriculum objectives, teachers should not take forceful integration, but should deal with the relationship between explicit education and implicit education, and combine professional knowledge with political and ideological connotation. In the course of implementing the goal of ideological and political education, teachers should “strengthen the student’ 'ideals and beliefs, enhance their thoughts of loving the Party, the motherland, socialism, people and the collective” (Ministry of Education, 2020). Teachers should combine the professional knowledge and ideological content skillfully, and enhance the students’ humanistic awareness. At the same time, teachers should be involved in the knowledge of interdisciplinary subjects, especially the relevant history, international politics and diplomatic knowledge. As Professor Wang Ning said, the goal of foreign language teaching is to “start from the undergraduate level and build a variety of interdisciplinary platforms for young students, so that students majoring in foreign languages can extensively engage in humanities and social sciences from the moment they enter the college” (2020: 8). In the classroom practice of helping students to analyze the literary works with critical thinking, teachers may refer to the core values of socialism and carry-on ideological education for students from the three levels of national, social and individual, give full affirmation of the positive thinking, and severely criticize the negative, pessimistic and even anti-human thoughts, taking the essence and removing the dross.

2.1. National Level

The United States is a country that was gradually formed after several European powers established their colonies in the New Continent. *The Declaration of Independence*, written by Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) and signed by the representatives from the thirteen colonies, was issued on July 4, 1776, and is generally regarded as a symbol of the independence of the United States. In the 100 years before the independence, the thought of European enlightenment began to spread in North America. The most important source of *The Declaration of Independence* was John Locke (1632-1704), an English enlightenment thinker. *The Declaration of Independence* proclaims that all men are created equal and that these rights are endowed by the Creator and are inalienable, including the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. These ideas have undoubtedly played a vital role in the formation of the country and in the building of its national confidence, and are still highly valued by the world today. However, it is quite obvious that "all men" in the declaration are not exactly understood as "everybody". From the discovery of the New World by Christopher Columbus in 1492, the West began to colonize the world. Westerners in Africa made their fortune by slave trade, robbing and selling Africans as objects, not treating Africans as human beings. At the same time, westerners also made money by plundering in Asia. They treated Asians as tireless animals, let Asians dig mines and do all kinds of dirty work, and abused them at will. The westerners made their fortune by killing Native Americans ruthlessly and selling African slaves to America for farming. These Africans, Asians and Native Americans were exploited and enslaved by the West, and obviously they are not included in "all men" in the article. The American ancestors were really a group of vicious executioners who saw aliens as ants but disguised themselves as saints. The bloody history of American colonization is also an important part of the bloody history of Western colonization of the world. In fact, although Jefferson, the drafter of *The Declaration of Independence*, was revered as the "father of democracy", he was a great slave owner who completely ignored the democratic equality of the black slaves. He kept numerous slaves throughout his life and refused to free them until he died. In teaching the Declaration of Independence, we should not only affirm the advanced ideas of democracy and civilization advocated in the paper, but also help students to understand the hypocrisy and double standards of Western powers and capitalists, thus guiding students to further identify with the core values of the socialist motherland of "prosperity, democracy, civilization and harmony".

Walden, written by Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862), a representative writer of transcendentalism in the United States, records his unique experience of living alone for more than two years in a wood-shed in the Walden district near Concord, Massachusetts. During this period, Thoreau went deep into nature, experienced simple life, and thought deeply about life, society and nature through observation and introspection. Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), the leading master of transcendentalism, wrote his masterpiece "Nature", a philosophical work on the relationship between man and nature. In this work, Emerson argues that nature is not only the external material world, but also the reflection and symbol of human spirit. He encourages people to talk directly to nature to gain inspiration, rather than to understand the world through traditional history and custom. Through the study of transcendental writers and their works, teachers can encourage students to analyze Chinese Taoist thoughts, deeply explore the relationship between man and nature, combine with the present situation of deteriorating environment, and guide students to raise awareness of environmental protection, respect nature and identify with the true meaning of "harmony". Walt Whitman (1819-1892), in his representative collection of *Leaves of Grass*, extolled the vigorous, tenacious optimism and dynamic and indomitable power of the American common people, and expressed his national consciousness and democratic ideals. In analyzing his classical "Song of Myself", teachers can guide the students to explore the relationship between the individual and the collective, the family and the country, idealism and utilitarianism, and guide them to love our motherland, the common community and respect the common workers. Willa Cather's (1873-1947) masterpiece *O Pioneers!* described the tough journey of immigrants to establish their homeland on the vast Midwest grasslands of the United States from the late 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century. It presented the contradiction between ideals and the reality, constructed a beautiful picture of harmonious development between man and nature, man and society, and emphasized the mutual adaptation and integration of man and the surroundings. On the one hand, the teachers can inspire the students to learn from the central character to love the land; On the other hand, it is necessary to stimulate students' critical thinking, and make them realize that the "Westward Movement", seen as a fantastic, adventurous journey by the American mainstream society, symbolizes the pioneering spirit of the early immigrants, and also implies the sorrowful history of being persecuted and massacred for the Indians.

2.2. Social Level

There are many works in "American Literature" that express positive values from the human and social aspects. In the course of teaching, teachers should fully take advantage of these literary works to guide the students positively, arouse the students' social responsibility and cultivate their spirit of brave shouldering.

To Kill a Mockingbird, a best-selling novel which brought great popularity to the author Harper Lee (1926-2016), has been translated into more than 40 languages and sold more than 30 million copies worldwide. Set in the 1930s in Maycomb, a small southern town in the U.S. during the Great Depression, the novel tells the story of a white lawyer, Atticus Finch, who, despite the growing racial discrimination and personal safety, insists on defending Tom Robinson, a black man falsely accused of raping a white woman. The novel unfolds through the perspective of a child, the daughter of Atticus, and the narrator Scout and her brother Jem have experienced a series of mysterious, troublesome events. Although Atticus eventually found evidence of Tom's innocence, Tom was convicted of crime due to people's racial bias and was killed when trying to escape. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is not only a novel about racial inequality and social injustice, it also explores the importance of social education and family education. Atticus Finch's image became a symbol of justice and moral courage, and might promote students to realize the social values of "freedom, equality, justice and rule of law".

Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-1896) was teased by Lincoln, the 16th president of the United States, as "a little woman who wrote a book and made a great war" for her anti-slavery novel *Uncle* Tom's *Cabin*. Through the story of Tom, a black slave,

the novel shows the cruelty and injustice of slavery in the American South, reveals the destruction of humanity by slavery, and condemns the hypocrisy and greed of the slave owners. Mark Twain (1835-1910) also expressed the democratic ideal that blacks should be set free in his masterpiece *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Black writers such as Langston Hughes (1902-1967), Richard Wright (1908-1960), Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960) and Toni Morrison (1931-2019) also expressed their democratic ideals of racial equality, and presented the sufferings of black people and their yearning for "freedom, equality, justice and rule of law". Teachers can guide students to compare and analyze the status of different ethnic groups in China and America, help students realize that the 56 ethnic groups in China not only enjoy equality in legal sense, but also the minorities might enjoy more preferential policies since they might need more help to realize common prosperity.

2.3. Individual Level

Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790), known as one of the Founding Fathers, not only participated in the drafting of *The Declaration of Independence* and the Constitution of the United States, but also published the most influential autobiographical work Autobiography in American history. With his simple language, cordial narration and profound philosophy, he sketched his personal experience of self-struggle and hard work, and became a model for inspiring generations of ordinary Americans to realize their American dream. This autobiography details Franklin's transformation from a poor printmaker apprentice to becoming a great politician and scientist, not only showcasing his personal struggles and successes, but also sharing his failures and his life wisdom. In this book, Franklin proposed the famous thirteen virtues of “temperance, silence, order, resolution, frugality, industry, sincerity, justice, moderation, cleanliness, tranquility, chastity and humility”, which became the qualities that helped him to reach the peak of his life and are still regarded as important benchmarks of personal cultivation. In studying this work, teachers can not only guide the students to value self-reliance, stamina, perseverance, and thrift through the suffering of the young Franklin, but also compare these virtues with the Chinese socialist core values such as "patriotism, dedication, integrity and friendliness", thus helping the students to realize that all nations share the common human glory, human beings have similar good wishes and pursuits, and the common goal of human beings should be the establishment of a community with a shared future for mankind.

In his *The Great Gatsby,* Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald (1876-1940) shows the influence of Franklin’s *Autobiography* by demonstrating Gatsby’s study plan when he was young. In order to realize his American dream, the hero was very self-disciplined with many of the outstanding qualities. Although Gatsby's diligence and self-discipline seemed to have helped him to realize the American dream, he eventually died of the spell of class transferring, and his American dream was broken up. Similarly, Arthur Miller (1915-2005), a classic dramatist, tells a story of disillusionment in his *Death of a Salesman*. The protagonist, Willy Loman, is a common salesman who believes that the so-called American dream can be realized through personal struggles, but finally he faces the relentless blow and mental breakdown in reality. This work reveals the illusion and deception behind the "American Dream" and shows the fragility and powerlessness of ordinary people in industrialized and capitalist societies. Through Willy's tragic fate, Miller criticized the materialism of the American society and the blind cult of success. Therefore, when studying these two works, teachers can combine Franklin’s American Dream with Willy and Gatsby’s disillusionment, fully stimulate students’ creative critical ability, provide a multi-dimensional framework for understanding and evaluating the texts, and guide students to understand deeply the connotations of American Dream. Then, teachers might encourage students to compare the similarities and differences between Chinese Dream and American Dream, understand the meaning of individualism and collectivism, and then analyze the negative meaning of American Dream.

3. Conclusion

American Literature is a compulsory course for English majors in colleges and universities, which plays an important role in guiding and shaping students’ values. Teachers should “comprehensively promote curriculum-based ideological and political construction, to immerse value guiding in knowledge teaching and ability training, to help students to shape correct world views, outlook on life and values” (Ministry of Education, 2020). Teachers should always be alert to the issues of “for whom to cultivate students”, “what kind of students to cultivate”, and “how to cultivate students”, and implement the task of “strengthening morality” so as to train qualified talents in our socialist construction.

Acknowledgments

Fund Project: This paper is the achievement of New Arts Research and Reform Practice Project "Curriculum-based Ideology in English Literature and Culture Classrooms in Colleges" and “First-class Undergraduate Course of American Literature in Sichuan Province”.

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