

CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES TO (TEACHING) AMERICAN LITERATURE

UDC 821.111(73).09:378.147

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Abstract. *The paper aims to present some of the most important critical approaches to American literature in recent period and their potential application in the classroom. The first part briefly discusses some of the most important and influential twentieth and twenty-first century theoretical frameworks in the study of American literature, including New Criticism, Postcolonial Theory, Race, Ethnic and Minority Studies, Feminist Criticism. The second part of the paper is dedicated to the specific genres and forms of American literature, e.g., short story, drama, poetry and their treatment in theoretical literature. In the case of the short story, attention is dedicated to recent scholarly approaches to the form that try to re-examine traditional essential definitions by inspecting the short story in its historical and cultural context. The paper also outlines the treatment of American short story writers and their contribution to the development of the genre in theoretical literature.*

Key words: *American literature, classics, drama, short story, close reading, genre*

1. INTRODUCTION

Teaching (American) literature at the English Department of the Faculty of Philosophy in Niš has always been oriented towards two general directions and areas of significance. Firstly, it has been a part of a broader philological curriculum directed at raising students' level of the overall knowledge of the English language by integrating linguistic, literary and cultural studies, according to the common practice in tertiary foreign language education (Bredlid *et al.* 2008, 1). Secondly, literature studies have been closely connected with applying various critical theoretical approaches to texts using a combination of more traditional humanistic approaches and more contemporary multidisciplinary paradigms. There seems to be a general consensus these days that no single method, approach or perspective can offer a comprehensive understanding of literature but that it rather calls for "a curiously hybrid and unstable mix of aesthetics, intellectual history, linguistics, social

Submitted March 28, 2023; Accepted April 6, 2023

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and political philosophy, anthropology and, most recently, science studies” (Rice & Waugh 2001, 1). In line with this, mandatory courses in American literature at the English Department (*American Literature – the Classics* and *American Literature – Drama/Short Story*) aim not only to get the students acquainted with some of the best American authors both within and outside the literary canon, but also to offer a comprehensive introduction to some of contemporary approaches to literature. The titles of the courses themselves reflect this comprehensiveness and inclusivity and a sort of a tension between tradition and modernity, just like in contemporary literature studies.

This paper will, therefore, provide a brief overview of some of the most influential twentieth and twenty-first century perspectives and literary theories and discuss their potential application in the classroom. Furthermore, as the study of American short story is the latest addition to the American literature syllabus, we will outline some of the most influential approaches to this literary genre.

2. BEYOND TRADITION AND MODERNITY: APPROACHES TO (AMERICAN) LITERATURE

As a comprehensive survey of all important critical approaches to American literature would go well beyond the scope of this paper, we will outline only a few that are most closely associated with studying American literature at the English Department in Niš.

2.1. New Criticism

New Criticism was the dominant twentieth-century Anglo-American literary tradition from (roughly speaking) 1920s to 1970s. Blackwell’s *A History of Literary Criticism* (Habib 2005, 602) gives a detailed account of the development of this approach, tracing its roots all the way to Aristotle and ancient and medieval rhetoricians followed by philosophers, writers and critics who placed primary emphasis on literary form. The origins of this approach were in England in the works of critics I.A. Richards and William Empson and poets Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot who “gave primacy to the aesthetic qualities of literature over historical, psychological, and moral considerations,” (Habib 2005, 621). From the formalist perspective of New Criticism, works of art (poems predominantly) are analyzed based on their aesthetic and artistic merits and elements, without considering historical or biographical contexts of the authors. This approach was a reaction against the “historical scholarship practiced in universities” beforehand (Culler 2000, 122). New Criticism in the United States is associated with the works of Cleanth Brooks, John Crowe Ransom and W.K. Wimsatt whose seminal works (e.g., *Understanding Poetry*, *Understanding Fiction*, *The New Criticism*, *The Verbal Icon*) further developed concepts such as “intentional fallacy”, “affective fallacy”, and promoted “objective criticism” solely focused on “the words on the page”, i.e., the text itself (Selden *et al.* 2017, 12-3). This literary practice, rather than theory, proved to be better suited to poetry analysis and, although widely practiced at American universities for the better part of the twentieth century, was soon challenged by other approaches and theories which offered more comprehensive paradigms for literature studies and were less insistent on strictly formal analysis.

The most important and long-lasting legacy of New Criticism is the technique still used in literature classes today – close reading. Close reading is a reading practice closely focused on detail and taking into account all formal constituent elements of a work of fiction, e.g., setting, characterization, point of view, figures of speech, rhetorical style, rhythm, plot, allusion, etc. (Rapaport 2011, 4). We find this approach particularly useful in literature classes as it enables

students to fulfill two crucial goals of literature syllabi: acquiring an in-depth understanding of Anglo-American literature and developing broader knowledge of the English language.

2.2. Feminist Politics

As mentioned previously, starting from the 1960s, literary criticism began focusing more towards explaining the context in which a particular work was created. This shift was reflected in numerous novel approaches and perspectives, one of them being feminist criticism. This has been particularly important in American literature classes, as the traditional view of the literary canon primarily included works by male authors often neglecting and ignoring female authors and voices. Introducing some of the insights of feminist literary criticism into the American literature classes not only broadens the scope of works studied and discussed but also represents an inevitable component in the contemporary process of education in the field of humanities.

Feminism, feminist criticism, feminist theory, feminist politics are all different terms used to denote a very broad and heterogeneous field, “less a unified school than a social and intellectual movement and a space of debate” (Culler 2000, 126). Patricia Waugh (2008, 602), an esteemed contemporary literary critic, defines feminism as cultural politics which predominantly deals with “The power of symbolic representation and cultural embodiment in constructing and containing identities and subjectivities.” According to her, art, and, especially literature with its potential to provide multivocal perspectives and representations, is a natural field of study for the practitioners of feminist cultural politics. Two general directions can be singled out in literary feminist scholarship: the first one was related to the second-wave feminism and the issue of representing and, especially, stereotyping women in literature (particularly applicable in *American Classics* course), and the second one to the more recent considerations of creating an alternative women’s literary tradition exclusively centered on women’s writing (this has provided some valuable additions to the works studied in American literature classes) (Rice & Waugh 2001, 144-5).

Some of the most prominent American feminist authors and activists include Margaret Fuller (the nineteenth-century women’s rights advocate, precursor of twentieth-century feminists and the author of the first major feminist work in the U.S., *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*), Betty Friedan (whose *The Feminine Mystique* published in 1963 sparked the second wave of American feminism), Kate Millet (*Sexual Politics*, 1969), Germaine Greer (*The Female Eunuch*, 1970), Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (authors of an influential anthology of critical texts *The Mad Woman in the Attic*, 1979, that re-examines Victorian literature from the feminist perspective), Elaine Showalter (whose *A Literature of Their Own*, 1977, remains one of the most influential studies of American women’s writing and a foundation text for gynocriticism), Patricia Hill Collins (the author of seminal *Black Feminist Thought* from 1990 which drew attention to the contributions of African American authors in this field), Judith Butler (a renowned third-wave feminist whose *Gender Trouble* published in 1990 has had a major impact on feminist and queer scholarship) and many more, including contemporary authors such as Adrienne Rich and Jane Marcus and their noteworthy and influential debates and correspondence on the relation between feminism and post-structuralism or the ongoing problems of activism (Habib 2005, 670).

2.3. Postcolonial Theory

In his *Introduction to Postcolonialism*, Robert J.C. Young (2003, 6-7), a renowned British postcolonial critic and scholar, draws a parallel between feminism and postcolonialism in terms of them not being unified theories, but rather sets of interrelated and juxtaposed perspectives, practices and ideas. Young (2003, 4, 6) defines “elaboration of theoretical structures that contest the previous dominant western ways of seeing things,” as central in postcolonial cultural analysis and postcolonial theory as “a conceptual reorientation towards the perspectives of knowledges, as well as needs, developed outside the west”. The field was established after the publication of seminal works by Frantz Fanon (*Black Skin, White Masks*, 1967), Edward Said (*Orientalism*, 1978) and solidified with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s (expounded) essays (“Can the Subaltern Speak?”, 1983, *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, 1999) and Homi Bhabha’s influential works (*The Location of Culture*, 1994). The goals of postcolonial criticism can be summed up as follows: to reconsider the history of Western colonization from the perspectives of the colonized, to examine the overall effects of colonialism and the process of decolonization on both colonial powers and the colonized and to promote political liberation and equality (Habib 2005, 739). By examining “the construction of the oriental ‘other’ by European discourse of knowledge” and its parallel versions in other minority contexts, postcolonial studies and critics have actively been engaged in the process of recreating culture and knowledge (Culler 2000, 130-1).

Besides helping to keep the American literature syllabi up-to-date in terms of relevant and novel approaches to literature, applying the insights of postcolonial studies in teaching American literature provides a much-needed balanced perspective which takes into consideration the works and insights of American “others”. This approach also inevitably dovetails with race and ethnicity studies and their contribution to literary studies and criticism.

2.4. Race and Ethnicity Studies

Race and ethnicity studies were another line of literary criticism subfields that (broadly speaking) stemmed from the liberalist civil rights agenda in the U.S. during the 1960s. These fields are socio-political in their orientation and goals and highlight the issues of equality, social justice, diversity and identity (Rapaport 2011, 46). In the U.S., particular efforts have been directed towards studying literatures of African Americans, Latin Americans, Asian and Native Americans (Culler 2000, 131). Various minority literatures highlight the experiences of people of color in the U.S. society, and offer their “counter-stories” (Selden *et al.* 2017, 209-10) which complement and often rectify both the American literary canon and the ‘official’ history books.

One of the key figures in the process of recognition of African American contributions to American literature and culture has been Henry Louis Gates Jr. whose ground-breaking works (e.g., *The Signifying Monkey*, 1988; *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, 1984) have paved the way for the development of African American studies, African American literary theory and literary criticism. African American women writers, e.g., Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, Zora Neale Hurston, Lorraine Hansberry and their award-winning works deserve special attention as a part of a wider tradition of women’s writing, as well as personal and collective testimonies of the sufferings and endurance of generations of African American women and are, therefore, invaluable additions to the American literature syllabi. The same goes for Chicano/a authors such as Sandra Cisneros or native American writers such as N. Scott Momaday who deal with the issues of identity and the position of their ethnic

groups within the U.S. society. We can say that America-related literature classes constantly widen their scope of studied works by American authors, which is a direct influence of the development of minority studies.

3. AMERICAN SHORT STORY

The most recent addition to the courses in American literature is the course in American drama and short story. The newly-accredited course (2021) aims to introduce third-year students to some of the key authors and works in the domains of American drama and short story and, hopefully, to spark their interest in reading and discussing (American) literature. Therefore, the following part of the paper will discuss the most important theoretical considerations of the (American) short story as a genre and the most relevant American short story writers.

3.1. Critical Approaches to the Short Story

As one of the most widely read modern genres today, the short story is gradually taking its place next to the novel in terms of both critical appreciation and university curricula. Since the 1980s, the generic status and historical development of the short story have become important issues for literary theorists and critics who have addressed the critical neglect of the form. Two volumes of essays edited by Charles E. May (*Short Story Theories*, 1976, and *The New Short Story Theories*, 1994) mark an important shift in short story criticism as they try to move away from essentialist definitions stemming from Edgar Allan Poe and lasting all the way until the second half of the twentieth century. According to May (1994, xv), the essays included in both volumes assert, deny, examine, debate, and allude to almost every theoretical issue that has been raised about the short story. Many of the essays try to identify what makes the short story a separate genre of fiction by tracing tendencies that most short stories exhibit, and by comparing the form to the novel. Instead of relying on the shortness of the form as the single defining characteristic, several scholars try to prove how shortness has resulted in unique properties of the short story that distinguish it from the novel (May 1994, xvi). For example, Suzanne Ferguson's (1994) essay argues that the shortness of the form is not a sufficient determiner if all the remaining characteristics can be found in the novel as well.

Continuing from these considerations of length, critics have tried to examine how shortness itself determines other characteristics of the short story. Thus, brevity marks the use of more artful and strategic economies, cutting away the kind of material that writers normally depend upon for narrative continuity and coherence, and working with tactical omissions to suggest and imply meaning, rather than stating it directly (Hunter 2007, 2). Another consequence of brevity is the short story's closeness to the lyric poem in terms of language and technique. Although the short story is dedicated to a prose fictional presentation of an event, it makes use of poetry's metaphorically overdetermined language, which results either from the basically subjective nature of the form, or from its necessity to use the most suggestive but economical means possible (May 1995, 114-115).

The pursuit of descriptive definitions and identifying common traits has sparked interest in the historical development of the form. For example, Clare Hanson expresses an opinion that "the short story has no inherent, determinant characteristics, though we may discern tendencies, especially if we place the form in its historical context" (1989, 5). Notably, May's *The Short Story: The Reality of Artifice* (1995) provides a detailed overview of the form's

historical development, including the discussion of its literary antecedents. As May (1995, 113) asserts, various problems in short story criticism are due to the failure of making necessary historical distinctions. Thus, at the beginning of his book, May presents the key precursors of the short story such as myth and biblical stories, folktales, ballads, romances, prose cycles and art-tales, while also explaining how the short story differs from them. Also, the book gives a detailed description of the form's genesis in the nineteenth century and its dynamic development until the end of the twentieth century. This diachronic examination of the short story enables May (1995, 19, 63) to identify two main strands of the form: the "new realism" stemming from Anton Chekhov and James Joyce and appropriated by Sherwood Anderson and Ernest Hemingway, and the mythic style of William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, and Flannery O'Connor who retained the short story's connection with old myths and romances by creating mythic worlds in the American South.

Introducing contemporary approaches to the short story contributes to the overall process of teaching and reading American literature. The form's relatively recent genesis, its popularity and evolutionary nature are useful for thinking about the very notion of genre as a dynamic phenomenon that changes over time and that is inseparable from historical and cultural processes. Similarly, as Ailsa Cox (2011, 1-3) explains, the short story, as a self-contained form, has proven to be particularly suitable for the classroom because questions of style, imagery, structure and narrative strategy can be addressed through a single text. In addition to close reading, discussing a single text in the classroom encourages application of the contemporary approaches introduced in the first part of the paper which circumvents any reductive readings and improves the students' overall ability to perform textual analysis.

3.2. The American Short Story

The short story has proven to be one of the most important genres within the whole American literary tradition. As Scofield (2006, 1) explains, the short story, since its emergence in the nineteenth century, has held an eminent place in American literature. Likewise, Bendixen claims that "the short story is an American invention, and arguably the most important literary genre to have emerged in the United States" (2010, 3). In addition to May's (1995) historical overview of the form, Martin Scofield's *The Cambridge Introduction to the American Short Story* (2006) and *A Companion to the American Short Story* (2010) edited by Alfred Bendixen and James Nagel represent extensive and exhaustive attempts at outlining the richness and complexity of the short story in America. By placing the form in a historical perspective, both of these books show how the short story changed its conventions over time, how various literary movements affected those changes, and how different authors made immeasurable contributions to both the form in particular and American literature in general. In the light of feminist criticism, postcolonial theory, and race and ethnicity studies, they also include important considerations of the African American, Jewish American, and the Multiethnic American short story, as well as the feminist tradition of the American short story, accordingly emphasizing many important achievements in the form that might have previously been neglected.

Recent extensive historical overviews of the American short story point to the most important authors and their immeasurable contributions to the form. Thus, Scofield (2006, 2) points to Washington Irving as the most immediate forerunner of the American short story. Irving's focus on tone rather than incident illustrates a new emphasis on the teller and accounts for the combination of attitudes that come together to create the short story in the U.S. (May

1995, 6). However, the crucial moment for the development of the short story in the USA was the influence of Romanticism on Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne. Then, Herman Melville initiated the transition of the short story toward literary realism, while also retaining the sense of a mysterious romantic underlying significance and suggestiveness, which is not to be found in the realistic novel (May 1995, 9). This fusion of Romantic and realistic traditions coexisted in a tense balance throughout the twentieth century in the works of Faulkner, Hemingway and Sherwood Anderson (Patea 2012, 17). What practically saved the short story during the domination of naturalistic novel in the nineteenth century is the impressionism of Henry James and Stephen Crane. These American writers, who exercised the most profound influence on the short story of the twentieth century, did not want to present their subject matter realistically, but they were also aware of the importance of technique and form, and the construction of tone and atmosphere (May 1995, 12).

Some of the most important American short story writers in the twentieth century are Sherwood Anderson, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, and John Updike. Anderson and Hemingway were developing methods to express a multitude of viewpoints that make up the objective reality without submitting them to the homogenous tendency of the novel (March-Russell 2009, 103). Notably, Hemingway's short stories, under the influence of Chekhov, brought the technique of expressing complex emotional states through seemingly simple and accidental arrangements of concrete details to the limit (May 1995, 18). Despite the new realism of Anderson and Hemingway, the short story retained its connection with myths and romances. The mythic tradition of the short story was masterfully appropriated and transformed by Faulkner, O'Connor and Eudora Welty (May 1995, 63). In the second half of the twentieth century, authors such as John Cheever, J. D. Salinger, and John Updike greatly contributed to the further development of the form. The stories of these writers are characterized by well-crafted structure, coherent narration, and specific use of leitmotifs to express internal emotions of characters (March-Russell 2009, 41).

Historical approaches to the American short story have tried to explain the rapid development of the form in terms of American cultural and historical specificities. For example, Scofield (2006, 8) makes a connection between the fast developing rural and urban culture in America, characterized by the diversity of its traditions and the mixed nature of its population, and the short story's brevity and mobility. Equally, the short story is notable for the leading part it has played in the fictional treatment of many ethnic groups within American society and thus disseminating ideas of cultural diversity and challenging the concept of a literary "mainstream" (Scofield 2006, 8-9).

Besides introducing one of the most important literary forms to students of American literature, the newly-accredited course aims to raise their awareness of tradition, historical development of literature, and the role of a complex interplay of literary movements and techniques in the making of the short story. We find this approach useful in literature classes as it encourages students to understand the immense contributions of most important American authors and the importance of their aesthetic innovations.

4. CONCLUSION

Courses in American literature at the English Department of the Faculty of Philosophy in Niš are designed to combine traditional methods of reading literature while also incorporating contemporary approaches to studying and thinking about (American) literature. The aim of

this review article was to briefly outline some of the most relevant theories and practices of studying and teaching American literature and to introduce the most recent course in American drama and short story. Although the American short story has been an integral part of our *American Literature – the Classics* course for many years, the newly-accredited course devotes greater space to the study of such an important genre in American letters. We find that getting students acquainted with the most important works by American classics, playwrights, novelists, poets and short story writers will significantly contribute to their overall knowledge and interest in literature. What is more, including the insights of feminist, postcolonial and minority studies in the American literature syllabi will hopefully keep the students of the English Department abreast of the contemporary trends in literature studies and humanities in general and make their education process more comprehensive and worthwhile.

Acknowledgement: *Prepared as a part of the project “Scientific publications in teaching English Linguistics and Anglo-American Literature and Culture”, conducted at the University of Niš – Faculty of Philosophy (No. 300/1-14-1-01).*

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SAVREMENI PRISTUPI AMERIČKOJ KNJIŽEVNOSTI I NJIHOVA PRIMENA U NASTAVI

Rad ima za cilj da prikaže neke od najvažnijih aktuelnih kritičkih pristupa američkoj književnosti i razmotri mogućnost njihove primene u nastavi sa studentima stranog jezika i književnosti. U prvom delu su ukratko predstavljene neki od najuticajnijih i najviše primenjivanih teorijskih okvira u proučavanju književnosti u 20. i 21. veku, poput, Nove kritike, Postkolonijalne teorije, Studija rase, etniciteta i manjinskih grupa, Feminističke kritike. Drugi deo se bavi žanrovima i formama američke književnosti, poput, kratke priče, drame, poezije kao i teorijskom literaturom iz ove oblasti. Kada je u pitanju kratka priča, posebna pažnja posvećuje se savremenim akademskim diskusijama koje iznova pokušavaju da definišu ovaj žanr prevazilazeći tradicionalne okvire i baveći se istorijskim i kulturnim kontekstom. Takođe, rad evaluira i doprinos američkih autorki i autora kratke priče razvoju ovog žanra kao i njihovim pozicioniranjem u akademskom kontekstu i literaturi.

Ključne reči: Američka književnost, klasici, drama, kratka priča, pomno čitanje, žanr