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COUNTERING XENOPHOBIA AND RACISM THROUGH SHORT STORIES FOR HISTORY STUDENTS

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Abstract

Short stories provide suitable reading materials to enrich the study of American History. Using literary works can help foster transformative history teaching, especially when discussing the violent past to construct a better future. This study aims at examining two American short stories that deal with racism and prejudice. Used as primary data are “Désirée’s Baby” (1893) which tells about racial intolerance in a pre-Civil War plantation society; and “Shame” (1964), a story about intolerance experienced by a Black schoolboy. Critical reading method is applied by making contextualization with different American historical periods. The results show that (1) themes of xenophobia, racism, and intolerance are evident in these short stories; (2) authorial backgrounds help explain their dealing with the history of racism shown in their works; and (3) stories of inter-racial relations make good reading supplements for teaching American History. In conclusion, literature is history which is beautifully condensed that can help raise students’ awareness about the evil pasts and to grow a historical empathy in facing current realities in order to build a more just, civil, and compassionate society in the future.

Keywords: racism, short stories, xenophobia

Introduction

The essence of teaching history at all education levels is to foster not only critical thinking in conducting historical analysis but also to grow awareness of the diversity and complexity of human beings’ socio-cultural, economic, and political experiences over time. Unquestionably, the objectives, nature, and challenges in learning history remain issues worth investigating from time to time (Kartodirjo, 1989; Senen & Barnadib, 2004).

One of the recent research trends in Indonesia, for example, is to conduct research on online history teaching and its impacts that has grown rapidly during the COVID-19 pandemic (Amboro, 2020; Far-Far, 2021). While Amboro (2020) claims that this pandemic is a historical event to be studied contextually, Far-Far (2021) argues that synchronous meetings during the pandemic is often proven ineffective although it is the most viable way for the current situation.

The studies above are very important at present, but the use of literary works as historical sources is equally important and this field has not received much attention. Literary texts have proven to be quite effective as a learning resource as exemplified in history teaching across the globe, for example in America (Stoddard, 2012; VanSledright & Kelly, 1998), Australia (Clark, 2004), and Europe (Einhaus, 2016; Hower, 2019). In general, literary works that are used as historical “texts” can help develop some conceptual knowledge and historical empathy. Imaginative works are useful to assist learners in understanding and making judgments on important events including controversial issues in history.

Besides, short stories are flexible to use as supplementary materials. Online learning that has been running since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic makes it possible to provide students with learning materials or resources for enrichment, including short stories that are relevant to the historical topic being studied. Students of history can allocate their own time to read the literary enrichment materials. It is this kind of critical, creative, and contextual learning of history that makes research on American short stories important.

Therefore, analysing American short stories that can be used as learning materials in teaching American History is useful to enhance history teaching. Indeed, American literature and American history are inseparable as evident in the wealth of studies that link the two fields. To name but one literary text, David Mamet’s *Glengarry Glen Ross* continually piques the interest of both literature and history scholarships (e.g., Kavan & Burne, 2009; Mianani, 2019; Sepehrmanesh & Dehghani, 2014). Further, studies on the positive impacts of reading historical fictions toward the development, understanding, and empathy of learners have been widely documented (Cruz & Thornton, 2013; Sanchez & Mills, 2005; Stambuk, 1999). Many studies have also shown the success of this method of using short stories in history teaching (Frost, 2012; Sanchez & Mills, 2005; VanSledright & Kelly, 1998; Youngs, 2012). Students develop an understanding of past conditions and realize that all living beings are connected to one another. Novels, for instance, provoke readers to think, feel, and visualize real historical figures in the past. Through literary texts, readers also gain a better understanding of not only the historical sequence of events but also how human histories have developed over time. Reading literature, readers also learn to recognize biases and prejudices as well as various viewpoints and ways of dealing with differences.

Based on the above background, this research will answer the following question: Which American literature in the form of short stories can be studied and taught critically to build historical empathy when dealing with bleak realities such as hypocrisy, racism, and intolerance? The dynamics and political changes that have been so fast in America lately can perhaps be concurrently examined – to what extent the nation’s past history is represented in literature.

Method

This research is a textual, descriptive-qualitative study. First of all, an extensive library research was carried out, namely listing American literary works in the form of short stories that correspond with the historical milestones of the nation. Data were obtained through previous studies on the existing works through textbooks, recent scientific journal articles, papers, theses/dissertations, and other

relevant sources. From these directory data obtained, two short stories were chosen as primary data for further examination. The secondary data (articles, scientific journals, synopses, book reviews in newspapers or magazines, etc.) concerning the context of the short stories and relevant events in American history were examined next. Furthermore, critical reading method were applied to interpret the three short stories. Corresponding themes were finally determined, i.e., hypocrisy and racism. The two short stories chosen for discussion may shed light on the current dynamics and political changes in the post-Trump America. Each text and its analysis can later be used as supplementary learning materials in teaching American History.

Findings and Discussion

Contesting xenophobia

The imaginations of slavery and racism alongside their implications are evident in American literature. For example, written in 1893 by Kate Chopin, “*Désirée’s Baby*” follows the tragedy of an intermarriage in the state of Louisiana during the antebellum period. To synopsise the story briefly, *Désirée* was the adopted daughter of Monsieur and Madame Valmondé, French Creole aristocrats in Louisiana. Abandoned by her parents as an infant in the pre-Civil War era, she later grew into a beautiful woman. She married Armand Aubigny, the son of another wealthy and respectable French Creole. When *Désirée’s* baby was born, people were surprised because the skin color was dark, resembling that of an African descent child to Armand’s disappointment. Armand became cold to the point that he ridiculed and let *Désirée* go. The young mother took the baby out and walked into the swamp; and the two were never to be seen again. Armand burned *Désirée’s* belongings, including all the letters they wrote for each other. Among the bundles of letters was a letter from Armand’s mother, Madame Aubigny, who lived in France. She wrote to her husband to keep a secret about the fact that their son Armand had black ancestors.

The historical context of this short story is slavery in the Southern region of the United States. The history of slavery in America can be traced mainly to the Southern periphery states such as Mississippi and Louisiana, where cotton and sugarcane plantations once required large numbers of slaves to sustain the economy (Cook, 2016). It is the region that becomes the setting of most Chopin’s works that have earned her a name as a feminist writer because she critically underscored gender bias and social inequality. Chopin, whose real name is Katherine O’Flaherty, took as backgrounds of her stories the multi-layered lives of Louisiana society. She witnessed American history that was impacted by the effects of industrialization, urbanization, and immigration. Society became increasingly stratified culturally, economically, and politically that was finally culminated with the Civil War. It turned out that war and Reconstruction were also unsatisfactory, followed by a severe financial crisis in 1873.

The presence of African people in America began in 1619 when twenty African slaves boarding a Dutch ship arrived in Jamestown, the first British colony in the continent (Blackwell, 2011). European settlers subsequently brought more slaves to the United States for they made cheap labor forces. Bloodlines, reputation, and family status were very important in the plantation culture of pre-Civil War Southern America. In *The Soul of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois the

African American scholar who was an influential figure in African American movement and literature has this to say: “The main problem of the twentieth century is the problem of color-line.” (Stepito, 2003, p. 339). Marriage, friendship, and other relationships were heavily influenced by social stratification and power.

Désirée’s origin was unclear because Monsieur Valmondé, Désirée’s adoptive father, found the beautiful baby “between two stone pillars” on the front fence of his house (Chopin, 2014). Armand used Désirée’s obscure background as the cause of the darkened color of their baby’s skin. The social hierarchy in Louisiana in the mid-19th century had placed white landowners at the top of the social ranks and black slaves at the bottom; hence, the arrival of the Anglo-Americans in the state of Louisiana resulted in the enactment of stricter laws to govern slavery. Injustice and physical as well as mental abuses against the African slaves have left smudged historical imprints that are hard to erase (Hirsch & Bell, 1998). Armand comes across as xenophobic, unlike his parents and the adopted parents of Désirée who managed mixed-race realities better.

American Southerners were said to be generally nostalgic about their past that seemed stable and uncomplicated. But Kate Chopin was not. She wrote her fictions in the style of a Realist author (Sutomo, 2017; Tadjibayev, 2020; Wheeler, 1994). It is clear that her writing style is straightforward and does not play with fancy words to cover reality. Although she married to a businessman Oscar Chopin who was part of the high society in Louisiana at that time, she did not hesitate to write as it was about the realities of her people. Chopin confronted xenophobia and hypocrisy of the upper class. Armand’s characterization, for example, is that of a young man commonly found in the rich family such as owners of large plantations. Armand was depicted as a violent young master and he often tortured the slaves in his family plantation.

In teaching the history of the United States of America, we can add short stories like “Désirée’s Baby” to the list of enrichment reading materials. Stories about conflicts triggered by cultural arrogance and xenophobia can help open the awareness of the learners. Reading such a story, they learn to respect differences, fight for justice, and uphold human dignity while studying the history of a nation. We can comprehend why modern slavery like human trafficking, for example, still persists until today and how to rectify the problem. Learning from people in the past as portrayed in literary works can help foster historical sensitivity and empathy so that the same mistakes are not repeated whilst finding some new ways to correct them (Stambuk, 1999; Stoddard, 2012).

Resisting racism

Written in 1964 by Dick Gregory, a humorist, Civil Rights Movement activist, and social critic, the second story “Shame” is also a story of discrimination. An orphan African American boy named Richard was infatuated by his classmate Helene Tucker who was rich, clean, and smart. Richard was so poor that he went to school with no breakfast, wearing his only clothes that he had to wash, dry off, and put on again to school only to see Helen. Like any ordinary boys, Richard wanted recognition and attention from his love interest until one day he learned about shame. That was the day when Richard’s teacher called out each name of the students whose father would like to donate to the Community Chest for the poor Black families in the neighborhood. Richard would like to

donate the more money he had already saved than Helen's father to impress the girl. Upon knowing that the teacher left out his name, Richard was told that the donation was for people of similar social status with him and that he did not even have a father. The teacher's comment made the little boy embarrassed. This incident had impacted his life that he managed to get it over when he turned 21.

"Shame" is set in Gregory's own time when African Americans suffered racial inequalities. Afro-Americans were considered noteworthy and treated like animals in the society. To quote Arnez in his essay about Dick Gregory and other Black authors, "to be a Negro in white America is to be branded as a lesser mortal. Yet even against these tremendous obstacles, the Negro has forged a culture which Americans of every race are only now coming to understand and to appreciate" (1969, p. 61). The narrator of the story was able to fully recover from his bitter childhood experience after several years when he had a family of his own. His teacher's comment – "We know you don't have a daddy." – clearly depicts intolerance of the dominant White culture toward the colored people (Gregory, p. 2). It is true that Richard was wrong for lying that his "father" would like to donate some money. Richard was not blameworthy here because he sincerely wished to give the money even if his reproachable action was to gain the attention of Helen, the "light-complexioned little girl with pigtails and nice manners" (Gregory, p. 1). Unlike the teacher, the students came across as more tolerant. The narrator says this: "Helene Tucker turned around, her eyes full of tears. She felt sorry for me. Then I couldn't see her too well because I was crying, too." (Gregory, p. 3). Empathy was also shown by the whole class as told by the narrator thus: "Everyone had heard what the teacher had said, everyone had turned around and felt sorry for me." (Gregory, p. 3).

Next, the narrator in "Shame" presents another miserable occurrence near the end of the story. Little Richard failed to help a homeless man who was beaten to bleed in a restaurant. The boy intended to pay for the 25-cent-food that the man ordered. Richard saved some money by selling newspapers and shoes polishing. The wino man felt offended. Shouting, he snubbed angrily: "Keep your twenty-six cents. You don't have to pay, not now. I just finished paying for it." (Gregory, p. 3). The wino later apologized, but Richard could not help feeling rejected as he moaned, "I was pretty sick about that. I waited too long to help another man." (Gregory, p. 4) Here we see the author's pretext beneath this short story: American people are too ignorant and arrogant to help each other. Gregory's short story calls for respect and sympathy to the weak and marginalized, in this case, a poor Black American boy.

Thus, in "Shame" one can read racism in American history whereby the White society at that time denied the rights of the African American their status as the United States citizens. Despite Abraham Lincoln's 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution that declared slavery illegal, African American continued to face discriminatory and racist treatments. Through his writing Gregory attempted to enable the oppressed to voice out their rights without offending their dignity. Indeed, outstanding writers began to emerge, thanks to the Civil Rights Movement that Gregory helped to support. Like their fellow Black activists, he advocated to end segregation and racism. To grow Black Nationalism, these writers promoted human rights and justice for all in their works. Gregory was one of the numerous African American authors of the twentieth century who

continued to write about the lives of the Blacks in battling prejudice and inequalities. Besides writing, Gregory was known more as a celebrated comedian who used humor as social criticism.

Race-related violence had left a deep, personal impact on Gregory and this was reflected in, for instance, the protagonist in “Shame”. As a poor fatherless boy, Gregory himself, like little Richard, was often bullied by his schoolmates and neighbors. Except for his later success as an entertainer, Gregory found that the color of his skin continued to impede him throughout his unfinished university life and a brief military career, hence his firm commitment to fight racism. It seemed that 1963 was the most unforgettable year for Gregory despite his delight of having his name mentioned in 1963’s *Who’s Who in America* (Harris, 1982). Gregory lost his two-and-a-half-month-old son (also named Richard) and his best friend was murdered in a race-riot. Right after attending the two funerals, Gregory flew to the South to grieve with the family of the four schoolgirls who were killed when a bomb exploded during a Sunday morning service in the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama on September 15, 1963. Two years later Gregory was shot but survived when addressing a crowd during his peaceful activism. He refused to be taken to a hospital until the police had dispersed the Black protesters. Like Martin Luther King, he employed a non-violence method in battling racism. On August 19, 2017 Gregory died of heart failure at 84 and forever remembered as a multi-gifted artist who struggled for human as well as animal rights.

Teaching history of the Civil Rights Movement can therefore be made effective by supplying students with stories like “Shame”. Besides, a close look at the author himself helps broaden the students’ understanding of the brutal physical and political oppressions, racial humiliation, and socio-economic deprivations experienced by the African American society dated back from the slavery time. There has been a huge amount of improvement on civil and human rights for the African American today, despite the fact that inequality and discrimination remain unresolved issues.

Conclusion

This research has shown that the two short stories from American Literature, namely “*Désirée’s Baby*” and “*Shame*” are suitable to use as supplementary reading materials in American History class. The short stories provide a chronicle of how human history has developed by identifying American society’s racial prejudices and how the nation has responded to and coped with differences over time.

It has been shown that, *first*, intolerance almost always colors every phase of civilization. Intolerance towards individuals or groups who have different skin colors from the dominant group is depicted in these stories. Intolerance occurs because the majority feels superior compared to the marginalized Other. The stories portray the reality of American white supremacy. The obsession with skin color made Armand Aubigny not realize that in fact he inherited the blood of the dark skin-colored race he had always underestimated. Meanwhile, little Richard in Dick Gregory’s short story was bullied by his teacher and people in his neighborhood because of his poverty and dark skin. Further, these characters gave their respective responses to the marred race-relations. *Désirée* gave up and had

nothing to do to correct the situation as she herself was a victim of her bigot husband. In different ways, Richard managed to get over the pain of racial discrimination in his adult life.

Secondly, the short stories studied emerge from a social framework that has been consistent on racial domination and oppression of the colored-people into which each author was born. After marrying her husband who was a native of New Orleans, Louisiana, Kate Chopin was familiar with slavery life in antebellum Louisiana. She observed and wrote about how the Creole survived in the South. Despite his humble origin, Dick Gregory took up various jobs before his success as an eminent comedian and civil rights activist, thanks to his multi-talents and the fact that he knew what it meant to be poor and bullied because of his skin color. Thus, it is partly inspired by their own respective lives that the three authors represent the fictive characters' dilemmas, fears, hopes, thoughts, and many other feelings.

Finally, in relation to the study of American History, both short stories make historical events more alive, interesting, and meaningful to learn. Diverse important facts and details in some certain historical periods of any nations are often easier to remember when recounted imaginatively through literary works. Above all, if transformative history teaching is the goal, suitable reading materials like the short stories discussed may help increase students' empathy and acceptance of self and others.

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