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## ***Orbiting* by Bharati Mukherjee: A Contemporary American Short Story in the English Classroom**

### **Abstract**

The article puts forward arguments why American short stories should be used to teach English as a foreign language. It also describes the method which might help to teach literature in secondary schools. Additionally, it presents the results of the research conducted among students in Lomza, Poland, which aimed at examining the pedagogical potential of applying ethnic American short stories in teaching English as a foreign language. This was done by comparing the literary critical analysis of *Orbiting* – a short story written by Bharati Mukherjee with its intuitive interpretations by young Polish adults. Finally, the article is supplemented with the passage from the said text as well as lexical and reading comprehension exercises based on its contents, which can be used in the English classroom.

### **Keywords**

Applied linguistics, teaching English as a foreign language, American short stories, ethnic literature.

Lots has been written in Poland about using literature in teaching English as a foreign language. Still, it is not common for teachers in Polish secondary schools to apply literary texts in practice, which, they claim, are too difficult for their students. However, students are not really against reading literature, particularly if the texts they are given reveal an unknown aspect of an English-speaking country.

This article describes the results of the project which aimed at applying ethnic American short stories in the English classroom. The students from three secondary schools in Lomza, Poland were given short stories to read and discuss. They were also to write loose interpretations of the texts they enjoyed reading most. These works were handed in anonymously and were analysed in terms of their intellectual, emotional, cultural or social contents. The outcomes of the experiment proved that ethnic American short stories constituted a very useful educational tool. As they depict such aspects of American lifestyle which Polish students are not acquainted with, they helped to stimulate classroom discussion. Thus, students' linguistic and intercultural competences developed without their being aware of it.

Although more than 50 short stories were used in the research, I intend to discuss its effects by analysing students' responses to only one of them, namely *Orbiting* by Bharati Mukherjee. The article compares critical analyses of the said story with interpretations written by Polish students. It is also supplemented with a passage from *Orbiting* published with the writer's consent. It comes with exercises, questions and tests on its content which were used to teach English to Polish students.

## **1. Theoretical perspective**

The question why to use American short stories in the English classroom is easy to answer. First of all, one has to consider their readability. This literary genre has been the most commonly read for the last two hundred years, which means that it appeals to a wide spectrum of recipients throughout the world covering all sorts of issues. Therefore, Polish students should also find short fiction enjoyable to read. Secondly, short stories are considered to belong to high art generated by American society, although they describe down-to earth problems of life in the United States. Therefore, thanks to reading short stories Polish students have access to the elevated literary genre and at the same time learn about the subtleties of American life. This way students can immerse simultaneously in two types of culture: (1) high culture since short stories have been recognised as the national literary heritage of the USA, and (2) popular culture as their topics relate to the sphere of customs, behaviours and beliefs of American society. That is why, they will support a kind of acculturation – adaptation to move in a cultural environment of a target language group. What is more, if students get acquainted with ethnic short stories, they will learn about the ethnocultural diversity of the

USA. Therefore, the term *American culture* will not be understood only as the culture of the dominant group.

Finally, as Friedman<sup>1</sup> admitted, since the reader is able to familiarise himself with the text in a short time he perceives the whole narrative in one go. Therefore, the short story draws attention not only to its fictional contents, but also to the language: sentences, phrases and words. This is very useful to a foreign language learner who can unconsciously acquire a great deal of new vocabulary while reading for pleasure. Short stories are also inspiring for teachers, who have a chance to change the syllabus by replacing less interesting texts by more appealing ones and by the introduction of new topics. Due to their brevity, short stories or passages from them can be read in the classroom, which could allow speaking and writing activities to be brought in as well as grammatical and lexical exercises. As a result, all linguistic skills are improved, which is the main goal of foreign language education.

Teaching English through literature demands a special methodological foundation which would prompt students' linguistic development. I based my approach on the transactional theory formulated by Margaret Rosenblatt<sup>2</sup>, who is presently considered to have had the most profound influence on teaching literature in schools<sup>3</sup>. Although, she drew her conclusions on the grounds of American circumstances, her observations apply to Polish schools, too. Rosenblatt argued that every literary text transmits efferent and aesthetic meanings, which signifies that in the act of reading one can focus equally on (a) information, facts and ideas or on (b) emotions, moods and images. The problem of literary education in American schools, as Rosenblatt<sup>4</sup> proved, lies in deprecating an aesthetic approach and overrating an efferent one. The latter involves analysing texts critically by examining facts, generalising, summarising, paraphrasing or discussing such issues as main characters' vices and virtues, plot, time and setting. A student, who has only been educated in an efferent approach, will not know how to take pleasure in reading and will never feel the powerful emotions

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<sup>1</sup> N. Friedman, *Recent Short Story Theories: Problems in Definition*, in: S. Lohafer, J.E. Clarey (eds.), *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads*, Baton Rouge – London 1989, Louisiana State University Press, p. 13-31.

<sup>2</sup> L.M. Rosenblatt, *Literature as Exploration*, New York 1995, The Modern Language Association of America.

<sup>3</sup> W. Booth, *Foreword*, in: L. Rosenblatt, *Literature as Exploration*, New York 1995, The Modern Language Association of America, p. vii-xiv; J. Connell, *Continue to Explore. In Memory of Louise Rosenblatt (1904-2005)*, "Education and Culture" 21 (2005) 2, p. 63-79.

<sup>4</sup> L.M. Rosenblatt, *Making Meaning with Texts. Selected Essays*, Portsmouth 2005, Heineman.

conveyed by literature. Therefore, a new method of literary education has been proposed.

Teachers who want to inculcate an aesthetic attitude to reading should ask their students such questions which would draw their attention to what moved them, evoked pleasant or unpleasant responses, what annoyed or puzzled them, what seemed known, strange, shocking, interesting or surprising and which fragments provoked such feelings. It is important that readers should have a chance to compare their reactions. This will allow them to notice differences in their responses and ponder on the reasons for such variations. Consequently, this might lead to a transaction of meaning, which will help them to explain and justify their responses. As a result the focus of attention can be transmitted from the text to the student-text relation. Literature then is personalised and reading becomes an individual and social experience, since students learn to listen to various opinions and respect one another. An important element of an aesthetic response to literature lies in leaving students a certain amount of time to express their feelings. This can be done by allowing them to put their thoughts in writing or forming smaller conversational groups to discuss their reactions.

Rosenblatt's theory refers to teaching native literature, however it might be used in applied linguistics, too. Polish scholars<sup>5</sup> argued that literary texts have more implications in teaching foreign languages than the mother tongue because they are not only a source of knowledge about foreign culture but also a means to acquaint students with lexical and grammatical structures in a target language. Thus, they contribute to students' development of receptive skills and the production of individual utterances. Due to their aesthetic and emotional potential, literary texts stimulate readers to form and express their opinions and views. Therefore, they allow students to develop their communicative and intercultural competences. What is more, the analysis of literary texts activates linguistic progress on multiple levels, because students read both aloud and quietly, express thoughts orally or in writing, learn about and memorise lexical and grammatical information. Literary texts are also useful in the process of self-education, as they can efficiently compensate course book deficiencies, such as a monotonous schema of units, artificial topics to discuss or a shortage of reading tasks. All this confirms that teaching English through literature creates a perfect environment for developing students' interactive skills by means of reading, speaking, writing and listening.

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<sup>5</sup> H. Komorowska, *Metodyka nauczania języków obcych*, Warszawa 2001, Fraszka Edukacyjna; A. Kozłowski, *Literatura piękna w nauczaniu języków obcych*. Warszawa 1991, Wydawnictwa Szkolne i Pedagogiczne.

My classes which taught English through literature aimed at two targets. Firstly, students dealt with original American short stories that stimulated them to think and express their opinions in English. As the questions did not only concern the content of the stories, they could compare the reality presented in the texts with their own experience. Secondly, they prepared for their final English exam by doing reading comprehension exercises. Testing tasks included multiple choice or true/false questions, matching, ordering, classifying, etc. As a follow-up they did grammatical and lexical exercises such as gap filling or word building, thus memorising the linguistic knowledge they had acquired.

The students' main task was to interpret the stories in writing. Their comments usually included answers to three questions: "What problem does the story present?", "What surprises/moves you in the story?", "What does the story remind you of?". The analysis of these written responses helps to pinpoint how much and to what degree American academic literary analyses differ from what young Polish adults conclude from the text. It also assists in identifying possible linguistic benefits or interpretational difficulty while teaching English through literature to secondary school students in Poland.

## 2. Critical analysis

Bharati Mukherjee's literary output attempts to portray the transformation that the USA has undergone due to immigration. White America changes the mentality of the ethnic newcomers, and at the same time the identity of the traditional Americans is irrevocably altered by the ideas of the nations arriving from all over the world. Mukherjee expands the notion of globalisation, which commonly refers to the spread of American culture. She is convinced that Asian cultures influence American society in the same degree as American lifestyle affects the life of Asian immigrants. The clash of these two different mentalities of the West and the East is clearly visible in her short story *Orbiting*, which describes the Thanksgiving celebration of an American family of second generation Italian immigrants and their guest – a present day immigrant from Afghanistan.

Since the beginning of its existence, and particularly since 1803 when the Louisiana Purchase opened the way to the West, the USA has been the country of pioneers. Mukherjee states that nothing has changed in over two hundred years. America still lures new nations to come to settle down and acquire new areas of social and economic activities. As Mukherjee shows in *Orbiting*,

current immigrants from Asia are as equally pioneers as the older generation of immigrants from Europe and those born in the United States to second or third generation.

The first American pioneers were desperadoes who ‘have squandered [their lives] in other lands’<sup>6</sup> as Willa Cather – an American writer from the turn of the nineteenth century – says. This is what happens to Ro – Mukherjee’s main character. He flees Afghanistan to avoid being arrested for the distribution of prohibited political leaflets. Ro comes to America having nothing except for an Afghan dagger and a praying rug. He severs his ties with the past to start a new life. Arrival in the USA delineates a new beginning – it gives him a new identity. He wants to become an electrician. Had he stayed in Afghanistan, he would have probably perished in combat with the Soviet army.

As Rao and Kasyap<sup>7</sup> assume, people who are uprooted from the known reality and taken into another place, experience cultural and spiritual displacement. It might cause a psychological crisis, intercultural conflicts, alienation or isolation. Despite the many substantial benefits that might be derived from living in the USA, Ro finds his new homeland scary and hostile. Here he has experienced racial depreciation and restrictive persecution. He has to hide from the Immigration officers for fear of being deported to Afghanistan, which would mean torture and death. Even the Americans who come into contact with Ro notice the rapacity of their political system. It is like looking at America from the other side of the telescope. Suddenly, they realise that the USA might be a country of raids, arrest, custody and detention.

Although fascinated by immigrant life, Bharati Mukherjee believes that the arrival in a new country is always linked with the drama of personal transformation<sup>8</sup>. However, her stories focus on the positive side of immigrants’ personality, showing their mental and emotional strength which is necessary for survival. To achieve success, immigrants have to have a flexible attitude to the new reality, which Rao and Kasyap call ‘alternative’<sup>9</sup> in contrast to the native ethnic culture. They also have to possess a flexible approach to their own personality. Arrival in the USA gives Ro a chance for gradual cultural

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<sup>6</sup> W. Cather, *Willa Cather’s Collected Short Fiction 1892-1912*, Lincoln 1969, University of Nebraska Press, p. 496.

<sup>7</sup> A.R.K. Rao, R.V.J. Kasyap, *A Critique of Immigrant Psyche: A Study of the Selected Works of Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri*, “The Icfai Journal of English Study” III (2008) 1, p. 27.

<sup>8</sup> K.H. Katrak, *The Aesthetic of Dislocation. Writing the Hybrid Lives of South Asian American*, “The Women’s Review of Books” XIX (2002) 5, p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> A.R.K. Rao, R.V.J. Kasyap, *A Critique of Immigrant Psyche: A Study of the Selected Works of Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri*, “The Icfai Journal of English Study” III (2008) 1, p. 32.

transformation. He discards the elements of his tradition that seem inappropriate from a new perspective, for example he rejects Afghan 'culture of pain'<sup>10</sup>. The burns and scars that he got in Afghanistan are now a cause for shame, and not for pride. He thinks that a hunger strike against deportation that his cousin wants to organise is inappropriate and reprehensible in the current conditions. This cultural plasticity allows him to adjust well to a new situation.

Ruth Maxey<sup>11</sup> states that Mukherjee's works depict the writer's ambivalent attitude to the representatives of the white race who, on the one hand, embody colonial ideology, and on the other hand are indispensable for immigrants to assimilate, Americanise and mix with other races. That is why, as Victoria Carchidi<sup>12</sup> says, *Orbiting* disseminates the idea that intimate contacts with Americans are the best way for immigrants to integrate in the USA and that an intercultural marriage is the best way to enrich national culture. Renata wants to get married to Ro only if he decides to do so. It might seem that Renata should dominate in their relationship as she can help legalise Ro's residence in the USA. However, it is Ro who defines the degree of their mutual intimacy. In their relationship he is strangely courteous and jealous, gentle and macho. This extraordinary combination of traits, which Renata has never seen in a man, makes him an ideal partner. As Ruth Maxey<sup>13</sup> notices, Mukherjee ennobles a dark complexion, not only as a sign of belongingness to the Asian ethnic group, but also as a metaphor of having desirable features of character. Relationship with the Afghan allows Renata to look at the men in her family from another angle. Compared to Ro who has been through lots of events, her father and brother-in-law seem like little boys who have not experienced much except for domestic skirmishes and bruises from football matches. That is why, it is Renata who pursues Ro despite knowing that he comes from the culture in which men chase women. Opposing his standards, Renata initiates Ro in principles of American morals, and, what is more significant, emphasises the social importance of relations with a coloured man.

The most intriguing transformation that occurs in the story is depicted in the mentality of the other American participants in the international Thanksgiving celebration. All of Renata's family undergoes irrevocable changes, that is her

<sup>10</sup> B. Mukherjee, *The Middleman and Other Stories*, New York 1988, Fawcett Crest, p. 76.

<sup>11</sup> R. Maxey, *Who Wants Pale, Thin, Pink Flesh?: Bharati Mukherjee, Whiteness, and South Asian American writing*, "Textual Practice" 20 (2006) 3, p. 538.

<sup>12</sup> V. Carchidi, *Orbiting: Bharati Mukherjee's Kaleidoscope Vision*, "MELUS" 20 (1995) 4, p. 97.

<sup>13</sup> R. Maxey, *Who wants pale, thin, pink flesh?: Bharati Mukherjee, Whiteness, and South Asian American writing*, "Textual Practice" 20 (2006) 3, p. 532.

father – immigrant in the third generation, her mother who was raised in the Calabrian village, her sister, Brent – her brother-in-law and Franny – her niece. Ro's Asian distinctness engenders astonishment as well as admiration. The father stiffens when he hears the word 'detention' and is not able to understand the latter part of Ro's story about torture in prison which he survived. In his opinion Thanksgiving should not be so literal. Brent feels embarrassment, he has never come across such passion. So far he has thought that only Americans have definite political opinions. He does not understand the rabidity of the educated, intelligent man who is ready to devote his life to a cause Brent has never heard of. However, twelve-year-old Franny is the person who is agitated the most. After the first surge of disdain and irony caused by Ro's appearance, she feels so thrilled by his story that she practically licks his fingers while he is carving the turkey.

Thanks to the contacts with Ro, Renata and her family open to unknown traditions, which corroborates Mukherjee's conviction that multiculturalism does not impoverish, but enriches the society. What matters in this situation, as Victoria Carchidi<sup>14</sup> says, is the fact that Renata's family is willing to meet Ro. Cultural diversity gives them a feeling of harmony. Ro is just another element of multicultural kaleidoscope that the De Marco family is experiencing. Renata's father married an immigrant from Italy. Although they come from the same national group, they are differentiated by the conditions in which they grew up. Renata's sister got married to an Amish man. They are both Americans but they differ from one another in religious denomination. Now Renata wants to marry an Afghan, who comes from a dissimilar ethnic and religious group. Ro is Asian and Muslim.

The culture that Ro represents is astonishing and exotic to her family, so Renata considers herself as a mediator in the clash of two mutually incomprehensible worlds. The Afghan stands out from American standards. His trousers sewn in Kabul are too short in the USA. His body posture seems unnatural. However, his mental and intellectual distinctness as well as life experience make him stand above the men Renata has known before. That is why, she puts him in charge of the most important task during the Thanksgiving dinner – he has to carve the turkey. Instead of an electric saw, he uses his Afghan dagger. This symbolises the multiculturalism of the whole event. Ro introduces new rituals to the American tradition, which are accepted by the other participants of this international meeting.

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<sup>14</sup> V. Carchidi, *Orbiting: Bharati Mukherjee's Kaleidoscope Vision*, "MELUS" 20 (1995) 4, p. 97.



*Orbiting*, however, shows that acceptance of multiculturalism has its price. As Sant-Wade and Radell<sup>15</sup> write, the multiplicity of choice available in America, can be frustrating. One has to know how to use this freedom in order not to get lost, balancing between known and unknown patterns of cultural behaviours. In this sense, Mukherjee's characters are pioneers, discoverers and explorers. Empirically, by trial and error they search for the best way to mix various cultural patterns. This process of constant alteration to become someone new is the essence of Americanisation. A true American, according to Mukherjee<sup>16</sup>, is not a person who has lived in the USA for a long time, but a citizen who undergoes transformation and actively influences the surrounding reality. That is why, neither Renata nor Ro are afraid of the challenges they have to face up. They become new American pioneers who change the US culture. They both can be treated as immigrants, because they have to adjust to the changing countenance of their country.

Mukherjee's narrations, according to Drake<sup>17</sup>, consist of American stories saturated by Hindu sensitivity. Hence, their impression of the lack of causality and unlimited middle could suggest that the writer does not have an idea for a good beginning nor an interesting ending. The reader is drawn straight away to the complicated plot that does not aim towards a culmination. Mukherjee's short stories comprise accidental episodes, which apparently do not affect one another. As Drake<sup>18</sup> suggests, this form of perception is also seen in computer technology. There are no impossible things in a computer image, even the tiniest detail can be exposed. Moreover, the computer enables elements taken from different pictures to be combined. As in a computer collage, Mukherjee's narrations glue together Hindu imagination and American experience, not discriminating against any of these elements. So, the written short stories depict American reality supplemented by immigrant narrations. Consequently, the perception of all participants of intercultural contacts is changed.

Mukherjee's stories, as Jennifer Drake<sup>19</sup> states, are reminiscent of Mogol miniatures – works of art done by Islamic monarchs of Northern India in the period from 16<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. They differ from European paintings because

<sup>15</sup> A. Sant-Wade, K.M. Radell, *Refashioning the Self: Immigrant Women in Bharati Mukherjee's New World*, "Studies in Short Fiction" 29 (1992) 1, p. 11-17.

<sup>16</sup> J. Drake, *Looting American Culture: Bharati Mukherjee's Immigrant Narratives*, "Contemporary Literature" XL (1999) 1, p. 71.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 64.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 69.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 68.

their surface is filled with many figures shown from different perspectives. Not keeping to one point of view, Mogol miniatures make an impression of visual chaos, as if all elements of the picture competed with one another to draw the viewer's attention. Similarly, in Mukherjee's narration there are a lot independent threads, which may distract the reader from the main plot, and which aim at filling in the reader's consciousness. As a result, you never know which narrative element is of major, and which one is of minor importance, which affects the imagination more, and which recedes into the background. Plurality of details does not destroy the general vision. Like in Mogol miniatures, *Orbiting* compares America to the picture that consists of many elements which are not fully the same nor distinctly different. Thus, Mukherjee promotes the notion of unity in difference. She believes that it is important to preserve immigrants' ethnic identities within the limits of the larger society, because American uniqueness is equally formed by the immigrant past and ethnic heritage as well as the present and dominant US lifestyle.

### **3. Students' responses**

The students that interpreted the passage from Mukherjee's story concentrated on three issues: the cultural differences between Ro and Renata's family, the universality of the emotions described in the story and a comparison with Polish circumstances.

Students were fascinated by the way the comfortable American reality is juxtaposed with dramatic Afghan experience. They acknowledged the nervousness of Renata's family caused by the presence of a stranger. Some readers claimed that the story shows that cultural differences can result in two types of reactions: attraction and repulsion. That is why, they appreciated Renata's efforts to help Ro acclimatise to the culture of the USA and criticised her family members for their intercultural ignorance. So, they came along with the idea disseminated by Mukherjee that multiculturalism is positive for society.

Most of the students said that the story presents real life problems, that is an ordinary family with its ups and downs and the couple who support one another even if they do not understand their cultural backgrounds very well. They paid attention to this dimension of the narrative which conveys that irrespective of the place of origins, human emotional needs are always the same. Unlike literary critics, they underlined Renata's role in Ro's acculturation. They admired her because she is able to accept a foreign boyfriend and wants to teach him everything

from scratch. The reader identifies with her and can almost feel her emotions. So for the Polish students the most obvious perspective of interpreting the text was from Renata's point of view, which resulted in stressing how much she helps to transform Ro. They did not allow the thought that this relation is two-sided, and he influences her, too. On the other hand, they agreed with Mukherjee's notion that intercultural marriages are fruitful. Although they did not explain why, they approved of the international relationship between Renata and Ro.

Not knowing much about the writer, the students sensed her Hindu sensitivity that permeates the story. So in this they corroborated critics' opinion that the story combines Asian and American imagination. They noticed that there is no action in the text which they expected but the story is saturated with feelings, which are never directly described. However, these emotions are almost tactile, surfacing in the characters' reactions. So, the text made the readers imagine what all the characters were feeling when they acted or spoke. They were particularly fascinated by the way Renata's attitude towards Ro is presented, which oscillates between admiration, pride and love. In the students' opinion reading the story was so enjoyable because it proves that no matter where you are from what matters is your personality not your appearance.

The readers generally marvelled at the truthfulness of the description of a foreign country. However, they were also surprised that the main characters seem to know so little about the rest of the world. These characters do not have a clue where Afghanistan is and mistake Afghanistan for Poland. Contrasting the narrative with Polish reality, students concluded that Poles learn about other countries throughout their entire school education. Therefore, they are prepared to understand other cultures better. Some students even compared Ro's experiences from Afghanistan with the situation of Poles during the Second World War and the communist regime. In their opinion the story has such a positive undertone because it shows people who have survived the tragedy of war and political persecution and can still lead a normal life.

Although the text was mostly understood, it posed some problems. A few students had difficulty in defining Renata's nationality. They thought that since Renata is a Polish name, her family must have Polish roots, though they were struck by the fact that she takes Afghan words for Polish ones. The interpretational error might have resulted from the fact that the passage did not reveal the information about Renata's Italian origins.

The most complex interpretation of the story is presented below as the evidence of the students' positive response. The sample opinion is quoted in an

original version without grammatical or spelling corrections. The first name and surname initials are cited with the authors' consent.

**Ewa S.** "This is a story about Thanksgiving dinner, which takes place in Renata and her family's house. She, her Mum, Dad and her lover Ro are meeting with Brent, Cindy and Franny. Renata is paying close attention to how Ro is behaving around these people and what are the culture differences between them. During the meal Ro becomes more and more talkative. He explains what was his life like when he was still living in Afghanistan and this makes the rest of the people at the table uneasy. Then Ro talks about his time in Afghanistan prison and how he got out. When he takes out his knife, Franny who seemed to be indifferent, suddenly starts to take interest in Ro and his 'gutting habits'. At the end Renata recalls how she asked Ro about his scars all over his body and how he became shy and withdrawn. Then she realizes how much she loves him and that she thinks he is a hero.

The emotions in this story seem to underline the cultural differences between Ro and other people. He is different and he can see that, so he tries to hide his nerves by babbling at the table about his life, which is almost unimaginative for Dad and Brent. They are uncomfortable by the fact that Ro is willing to die for his beliefs they don't actually understand. Franny is oddly fascinated by Ro's skills with knives. Renata, on the other hand, is analyzing her feelings for Ro. She loves everything about him – how he holds himself, the way he moves, his scars and his unwillingness to talk about them. At some point, she seems so absorbed with his differences and obsessed with analysing his behaviour that it sounds more like fascination than love.

I like this story because of the strange play of emotions, not quite shown, but just under the surface. It shows how things such as a different upbringing and culture draw some people and push away others. As far as the associations with Poland are concerned, Renata is certainly a Polish name and her Dad is greatly disturbed when Ro recalls his arrest, so I guess, he had got arrested in Poland, before he came to America."

#### **4. Discussion and conclusion**

The analysis of the students' responses led to a number of conclusions. The stories can be used to teach students whose English is classified as at least intermediate. The stories might be too difficult for students with a lower level of English competence. Though, lower language skills would not exclude them

from reading and discussing the short stories. Simply, their interpretation will be less advanced, which does not mean that they will not benefit from reading literature. Similarly, the older the readers, the more complex interpretation the teacher will elicit.

The second conclusion is that it is not an interpretational obstacle if students only read a passage from a longer story. The results of the experiment proved that this prompted interesting commentaries since students could imagine the events outside the scope covered by the narrative. To achieve this purpose they were asked to complete the missing parts of the text. What is more, as comparison with critics' analysis shows, students' conclusions are similar to professional ones, although not so sophisticated. It seems that the factual and emotional message of the text is so obvious that interpretation does not leave much space for doubt. On the other hand, taking the pedagogical aspect into consideration, it is important that students do all the reading comprehension and lexical exercises, to which any passage from the text can be a good stimulant.

The students' analyses of the stories written by American writers contained lots of comparison to Polish culture, customs and traditions. It appeared that reading prompted discussion about national differences and similarities. This was a very desirable effect – cross-cultural study led to intra-cultural reflection. From this point of view, even a short fragment of the short story could trigger an immediate linguistic response. However, readers often focused on the universality of the short stories, and overlooked their ethnicity. Because of this, a teacher who wants to work with short stories should pay attention to their ethnic background by delineating the ethnocultural context of the analysed literary text. This will help to interpret them not only from a Polish perspective but also comprehend their meaning in American society.

All in all, reading and interpreting short stories of ethnic writers might help to build students' linguistic and intercultural competence as well as emotional and intellectual maturity. What is more, it might also develop sensitivity to a multicultural society and expand students' knowledge about US culture as the readers become acquainted with an unknown picture of ethnic America.

## Appendix

### Pre-reading activities

I. What kind of holiday is Thanksgiving?

II. Find synonyms:

- |               |         |
|---------------|---------|
| 1. scrutinize | A. hit  |
| 2. unfasten   | B. undo |

- |            |                         |
|------------|-------------------------|
| 3. whack   | C. adapt                |
| 4. stiffen | D. boast                |
| 5. adjust  | E. become still         |
| 6. smirk   | F. watch carefully      |
| 7. brag    | G. smile in a silly way |

[...] Brent and Cindi take forever to come. But finally we hear his MG squeal in the driveway. Ro glides to the front window; he seems to blend with the ficus tree and hanging ferns. Dad and I wait by the door.

„Party time!” Brent shouts as he maneuvers Cindi and Franny ahead of him up three flights of stairs. He looks very much the head of the family, a rich man steeply in debt to keep up appearances, to compete, to head off middle age. He’s at that age – and Cindi’s nowhere near that age – when people notice the difference and quietly judge it. I know these things from Cindi – I’d never guess it from looking at Brent. If he feels divided, as Cindi says he does, it doesn’t show. Misery, anxiety, whatever, show on Cindi though; they bring her cheekbones out. When I’m depressed, my hair looks rough, my skin breaks out. Right now, I’m lustrous. [...]

Franny gives up the Baggies and the jar of dressing to me. She scrutinizes us – Mom, Dad, me and Ro, especially Ro, as though she can detect something strange about him but doesn’t take off her earphones. A smirk starts twitching her tanned, feral features. I see what she is seeing. Asian men carry their bodies differently, even these famed warriors from the Khyber Pass. Ro doesn’t stand like Brent or Dad. His hands hang kind of stiffly from the shoulder joints, and when he moves, his palms are tucked tight against his thighs, his stomach sticks out like a slightly pregnant woman’s. Each culture establishes its own manly posture, different ways of claiming space. Ro, hiding among my plants, holds himself in a way that seems both too effeminate and too macho. I hate Franny for what she’s doing to me. I am twenty-seven years old, I should be more mature. But I see now how wrong Ro’s clothes are. He shows too much white collar and cuff. His shirt and his wool-blend flare-leg pants were made to measure in Kabul. The jacket comes from a discount store on Canal Street, part of a discontinued line of two-trousered suits. I ought to know, I took him there. I want to shake Franny or smash the earphones.

Cindi catches my exasperated look. „Don’t pay any attention to her. She’s unsociable this weekend. We can’t compete with the Depeche Mode”.

I intend to compete. [...]

Brent drinks three Scotches to Dad’s two; then all three men go down to the basement. Ro and Brent do the carrying, negotiating sharp turns in the stairwell.

Dad supervises. There are two trestles and a wide splintery plywood top. „Try not to take the wall down!” Dad yells.

When they make it back in, the men take off their jackets to assemble the table. Brent’s wearing a red lamb’s wool turtleneck under his camel hair blazer. Ro unfastens his cuff links – they are 24-karat gold and his father’s told him to sell them if funds run low – and pushes up his very white shirt sleeves. There are scars on both arms, scars that bubble against his dark skin, scars like lightning flashes under his thick black hair. Scar tissue on Ro is the color of freshwater pearls. I want to kiss it.

Cindi checks the turkey one more time. „You guys better hurry. We’ll be ready to eat in fifteen minutes”.

Ro, the future engineer, adjusts the trestles. He’s at his best now. He’s become quite chatty. From under the plywood top, he’s holding forth on the Soviet menace in Kabul. Brent may actually have an idea where Afghanistan is, in a general way, but Dad is lost. He’s talking of being arrested for handing out pro-American pamphlets on his campus. Dad stiffens at „arrest” and blanks out the rest. He talks of this „so-called leader”, this „criminal” named Babrak Karmal and I hear other buzz-words like Kandahar and Pamir, words that might have been Polish to me a month ago, and I can see even Brent is slightly embarrassed. It’s his first exposure to Third World passion. He thought only Americans had informed political opinion – other people staged coups out of spite and misery. It’s an unwelcome revelation to him that a reasonably educated and rational man like Ro would die for things that he, Brent, has never heard of and would rather laugh about. Ro was tortured in jail. Franny has taken off her earphones. Electrodes, canes, freezing tanks. He leaves nothing out. Something’s gotten into Ro.

Dad looks sick. The meaning of Thanksgiving should not be so explicit. But Ro’s in a daze. He goes on about how – *inshallah* – his father, once a rich landlord, had stashed away enough to bribe a guard, sneak him out of this cell and hide him for four months in a tunnel dug under a servant’s adobe hut until a forged American visa could be bought. Franny’s eyes are wide, Dad joins Mom on the sofa bed, shaking his head. Jail, bribes, forged, what is this? I can read his mind. “For six days I must orbit one international airport to another”, Ro is saying. “The main trick is having a valid ticket, that way the airline has to carry you, even if the country won’t take you in. Colombo, Seoul, Bombay, Geneva, Frankfurt, I know too too well the transit lounges of many airports. We travel the world with our gym bags and prayer rugs, unrolling them in the transit lounges. The better airports have special rooms”.

Brent tries to ease Dad's pain. "Say, buddy", he jokes, "you wouldn't be ripping us off, would you?"

Ro snakes his slender body from under the make-shift table. He hasn't been watching the effect of his monologue. "I am a working man", he says stiffly. I have seen his special permit. He's one of the lucky ones, though it might not last. He's saving for NJIT. Meantime he's gutting chickens to pay for room and board in Little Kabul. He describes the gutting process. His face is transformed as he sticks his fist into imaginary roasters and grabs for gizzards, pulls out the squishy stuff. He takes an Afghan dagger out of the pocket of his pants. You'd never guess, he looks like such a victim. "This", he says, eyes glinting. "This is all I need".

"Cool," Franny says.

"Time to eat", Mam shouts. "I made the gravy with the nutmeg as you said, Renata".

I lead Dad to the head of the table. "Everyone else sit where you want to".

Franny picks out the chair next to Ro before I can put Cindi there. I want Cindi to know him, I want her as an ally.

Dad tests the blade of the carving knife. Mom put the knife where Dad always sits when she set the table. He takes his thumb off the blade and pushes the switch. "That noise makes me feel good".

But I carry in the platter with the turkey and place it in front of Ro. "I want you to carve", I say.

He brings out his dagger all over again. Franny is practically licking his fingers. "You mean this is a professional job?"

We stare fascinated as my lover slashes and slices, swiftly, confidently, at the huge, browned, juicy breast. The dagger scoops out flesh.

Now I am the one in a daze. I am seeing Ro's naked body as though for the first time, his nicked, scarred, burned body. In his body, the blemishes seem embedded, more beautiful, like wood. I am seeing character made manifest. I am seeing Brent and Dad for the first time, too. They have their little scars, things they're proud of, football injuries and bowling elbows they brag about. Our scars are so innocent; they are invisible and come to us from rough-housing gone too far. Ro hates to talk about his scars. If I trace the puckered tissue on his left thigh and ask "How, Ro?" he becomes shy, dismissive: a pack of dogs attacked him when he was a boy. The skin on his back is speckled and lumpy from burns, but when I ask he laughs. A crazy villager whacked him with a burning stick for cheekiness, he explains. He's ashamed that he comes from a culture of pain.

The turkey is reduced to a drying, whitened skeleton. On our plates, the slices are symmetrical, elegant. I realize all in a rush how much I love this man with



his blemished, tortured body. I will give him citizenship if he asks. Vic was beautiful, but Vic was self-sufficient. Ro's my chance to heal the world.

I shall teach him how to walk like an American, how to dress like Brent but better, how to fill up a room as Dad does instead of melting and blending but sticking out in the Afghan way. In spite of the funny way he holds himself and the funny way he moves his head from side to side when he wants to say yes, Ro is Clint Eastwood, scarred hero and survivor. Dad and Brent are children. I realize Ro's the only circumcised man I've slept with.

Mom asks, "Why are you grinning like that, Renata?"

### Questions to discuss

1. Why do you think Franny became interested in Ro's story?
2. Why do you think Dad feels shocked by Ro's story?
3. Why is Renata so fascinated by Ro?
4. What feelings and associations does the story evoke?
5. Are cultural differences an advantage or disadvantage in a relationship?

### Testing questions

Answer the questions by choosing the appropriate person A-F:

A – Renata      B – Cindy      C – Franny  
D – Ro      E – Brent      F – Dad

1. Who doesn't feel at ease?
2. Who takes care of the meal?
3. Who looks up to somebody else?
4. Who does not mind their suffering?
5. Who is thought to be a kindred spirit?
6. Who is distinguished by their posture?
7. Who is mostly critical of another person?
8. Who believes they have found their ideal?
9. Who wants to devote their life to another person?
10. Who seems uninterested in the family gathering?
11. Who seems to have lost their position in the family?
12. Who becomes fascinated by another person's story?
13. Who does not have the foggiest idea about geography?
14. Who gets engrossed in the activity they are performing?
15. Who becomes slightly alarmed by another person's story?
16. Who can't stand hearing about somebody else's suffering?

### Key:

Pre-reading activities: I. Open question. II. 1F, 2B, 3A, 4E, 5C, 6G, 7D

Questions about the text: Open questions

Testing questions: 1D, 2B, 3C, 4D, 5B, 6D, 7C, 8A, 9A, 10C, 11F, 12C, 13F, 14D, 15E, 16

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