

# DIALOGIC LIMINALITY IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

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## *Abstract*

The explorations of liminality, understood as a transitional and potentially transformative space, as inherent in American literary texts, can help unleash Romanian students' literary communication skills. Romania's position at the border between East and West and, within it, the historical region of Transylvania with its cultural and ethnic mosaic, also represent such a liminal space, in which historical, social, cultural, dialogic, and literary confrontation and complementarity become possible.

The paper looks at the liberating potential of liminality inherent in American literary texts, and the advantages of a new reading of American literature through dialogic interpretation.

**Keywords:** liminality, hybridity, dialogic teaching, liberatory discourse

## **Introduction**

The explorations of liminality, understood as a transitional and potentially transformative space, as inherent in American literary texts, can help unleash Romanian students' literary communication skills. Romania's position at the border between East and West and, within it, the historical region of Transylvania with its cultural and ethnic mosaic also represent such a liminal space, in which historical, social, cultural, dialogic, and literary confrontation and complementarity become possible.

By its very nature, much of American literature inhabits a liminal space in which cultures, histories, ethnicities, languages and beliefs blend, inform and transform one another. A reading of American literary texts done within another liminal space, that of Transylvania, will have an enriching and transformative effect on both the texts and their readers.

For Romanian students of English, understanding and interpreting American literature is a true necessity for their own growth as individuals and as inhabitants of an increasingly complex hybrid, ambivalent and globalized society.

But, in order to have an enriching, transformative effect, the question arises as to how this reading is to be done within an educational system still steeped in tradition and, to a certain extent, still bearing the cultural authoritarian stamp of communism. Part of the answer lies in the potential advantage the Romanian student reader has as actor in this historically and culturally liminal environment, and as consumer of an increasingly diverse and hybrid set of cultural norms. The potential is there but it can only be realized in the act of guided, inquiring reading, and here the role of the educator comes into play.

## **Pop-Corniș and Freire: Didactic Models and Experiences**

This paper was first inspired by the work of two educators: Paulo Freire, a Brazilian teacher and Marcel Pop-Corniș, a Romanian critic as well as US academic; more precisely, we looked at a dialogue between Ira Shor and Paulo Freire in an article called “What is the ‘Dialogical Method’ of Teaching”, published in 1987, and an interview with Marcel Pop-Corniș (2012) about the model of transitional elements, liminality and hybridity, between languages and cultures.

While the former article speaks about didactic experiences, the latter relates the author's experience as both a literary critic and pedagogue, as a theoretician as well as practitioner, and looks at both literature and other disciplines and mediatic forms of discourse (historical, anthropological, sociological, electronic, audio-visual, etc.); the theme of the dialogic confrontation and complementarity between different discourse types is also considered in this oscillation between the traditional hermeneutic critical interpretation of a literary text and its cultural rewriting.

In both the dialogue and the interview what resonated for me as an educator was the idea of the power of language and dialogue in my teaching. The project I'm starting here is a continuation of a previous subject of interest for me, namely the theme of dialogic confrontation and complementarity of various discourse types in an attempt to rewrite culture. Within literary Romania the confrontation takes place between the ideological literature of the communist era and another, 'alternative' literature (Prof. Pop-Corniș), which appeared during and after the fall of communism, confronting and transforming the dominant ideology.

In this respect I have experimented with success the innovative model of inquiry and cultural rewriting of literary texts chosen by my students of American literature. Although divided by a span of twenty-five years, both Paulo Freire and Marcel Pop-Corniș see the reading activity as a rewriting of the text, a consequence of approaching literature from a comparative and interdisciplinary perspective, as well as of the combination of traditional methods of text interpretation (text hermeneutics) with poststructuralist methods that emphasize the transformative role of rewriting a text culturally.

In the interview, Marcel Pop-Corniș speaks about two opposing models of interpretation belonging to critical rewriting: 1) a traditional hermeneutic model that searches the hidden meanings of a literary text and 2) an innovative model that adapts the meanings of a text to the context of reception. As an innovative technique meant to help the student reader in her 'reinvention' of the text, Pop-Corniș mentions (post)structuralism (especially in its 'deconstructive' variant).

Shor and Freire's article speaks about liberatory education. The liberatory education suggested by Freire uses a dialogical method of teaching. Dialogic teaching has both cognitive and transformative aims. It transforms social realities, raises awareness about relations in society, and recreates knowledge through a mutual learning process.

This mutual learning process involves both the teacher and the students. They both reflect on reality as they make and remake it. The teacher relearns the material when she studies it with her students. Thus, knowledge is not fixed, it is challenged and rediscovered.

Education starts from the students' comprehension of their daily life experiences. Students speak from their understanding of the world and then begin to develop critical thinking skills. The dialogical technique does not imply the loss of the teacher's role as educator. She starts this process of illumination, hence the beautiful metaphor used by Shor, the teacher as 'a lamp-lighter': "The teacher walks into a classroom, provokes some illumination, like turning on a light-switch, and then walks out, mission accomplished". (22) She achieves transformation by giving food for thought, objectives, direction and advice as well as delegating responsibility and encouraging active participation and self-reliance. Her students can be silent by their own choice but are fervent listeners and active researchers prior to listening to a lecture on reality. They ground their academic training in reality and become self-directed learners.

The predominant American ideologies: transformation demanded by American historical experience (no reality is stable), self-help, individualism and emphasis on 'self', empowerment, ambivalence and ambiguity (myth and reality, Evil and Good live together) and freedom are basic ingredients in this dialogic method. Both the teacher and her students are speakers and listeners.

In their conversation about the dialogical method of teaching, Shor and Freire also talk about the role of art in transformative teaching: "a plastic material already shaped into one thing and capable of being reshaped into another" (28). The aesthetic nature of education is given by the shaping model itself. Students and teachers alike, in a collaborative process, are given birth again through the aesthetic exercise of recreating teacher and students as speakers and listeners, of making and remaking the social reality depicted in literary texts.

### **Bakhtin and Bhabha: Liminality of Hybridity or Dialogue at the Borders**

M. Bakhtin (b.1895) and H. Bhabha (b.1909) are two important theorists whose ideas on dialogue and discourse ambivalence add to the discussion on dialogic teaching.

Bakhtin's notion of dialogic confrontation assumes that "any literary work carries on a continual dialogue with other works of literature... Dialogic literature is in steady communication with multiple works. This is not merely a matter of influence, for the dialogue is mutually extensive in both directions. Both, the previous work of literature as well as the present one are altered by the continuing dialogue". (qtd. in Sellen 6)

Bakhtin's presumption about any text never being the result of just one mind but a literary process consisting of many intermingling voices, ideas and authors is also acknowledged by a writer's multiple identities, as Sellen claims. Hence, the dialogue provides the reader with competing voices where no one voice has the final say. Dialogism emphasizes the socially located and constructed nature of meaning, while inevitably having a political dimension by highlighting the contending forces in society and their unequal nature.

Bakhtin's theories pertain to the dichotomies and hierarchies existing in both society and the text. Here, I will make reference to his theory of hybridity, according to which both text and context are important in analyzing a work since there is a dialogic interaction between them.

Hybridity is an effect of multicultural America and it is associated with the emergence of postcolonial discourse and its critique of cultural imperialism. A key text in the development of this notion of hybridity is Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994), which analyzes the liminality of hybridity. He argues that colonial hybridity as a cultural form produced ambivalence in the colonial masters and as such altered the authority of power. Today hybridity is not restricted anymore to migrant populations; it also refers to a flow of cultures in which "both give and receive from each other" (Wikipedia).

Bhabha derives his idea from Mikhail Bakhtin's perception of the written work as an open and dynamic dialogue. Bhabha's theory places interest in what happens on the threshold of cultures, in that liminal space and time where the colonizer and the colonized, the Self and the Other, meet. He believes that this cultural mixedness is central to the creation of new cultural meaning. (Huddard 7)

According to Tim Woods (44), Bhabha attempts to deconstruct the old dichotomies of East/West, Self/Other and Center/Margin and explores the increasing hybridity and liminality of cultural experience.

The same idea is supported by Shor and Freire: “Dialogue is not a mere technique to achieve some cognitive results; dialogue is a means to transform social relations in the classroom and to raise awareness about relations in society at large. Dialogue is a way to recreate knowledge as well as the way we learn. It is a mutual learning process where the teacher poses critical problems for inquiry. Dialogue rejects narrative lecturing where teacher talks silences and alienates students. In a problem-posing participatory format, the teacher and students transform learning into a collaborative process to illuminate and act on reality. This process is situated in the thought, language, aspirations and conditions of the students. It is also shaped by the subject matter and training of the teacher, who is simultaneously a classroom researcher, a politician, and an artist.” (11)

Through dialogue, reflecting together on what we know and don’t know, we can then act critically to transform reality.

### **Dialogic Liminality and Literature as Communication**

All writing is communication and communication presupposes a receptor (reader) as well as a sender (writer).

We can combine Bhabha’s idea of liminality (threshold, inhabiting two worlds, in betweenness) with Bakhtin’s term ‘dialogic’ used in his book on *Dialogic Imagination* for creating that liminal space where conversation generates knowledge and mutual understanding. By transferring the two terms to academic education, dialogic teaching and learning lays accent on “communication between teachers and pupils in which ideas are developed cumulatively over sustained sequences of intersections.” (Davies 90)

Romanian students, unlike American ones, continue to be ideologized into rejecting their own freedom and their own critical development, thanks to the traditional curriculum and communism ideologies (collectivism, lack of individualism and self-help ideals, tradition, class distinctions, no transformation or empowerment). Thus, only a rise, through a new type of education, of a critical perception of reality by our students, can bring about change and social transformation. In Romania, education for social change (which in America is supported by a predominant ideology of self-help) can start with a hermeneutic approach to literary texts, asking the students to think of what the text means to them: “The answer is never the answer. What’s really interesting is the mystery. If you seek the mystery instead of the answer you’ll always be seeking. I’ve never seen anybody really find the answer—they think they have, so they stop thinking. But the job is to seek mystery, evoke mystery, plant a garden in which strange plants grow and mysteries bloom. The need for mystery is greater than the need for an answer.” (Ken Kesey in “A Flight Over a Cuckoo’s Nest”). By developing their perceptive skills, our students can create a multitude of potentially unexpected links with a text. The literary text itself as a reflection of cultural values and social power relations can contribute to the ideological formation (Marxist, feminist, postcolonial, poststructuralist, etc.) of society as well.

Acknowledging the importance of a transition that exists at a global level towards visual and virtual text can also turn the reader into a creator of bridges/links between literature

and other media forms (electronic, audio-visual, kinetic, etc.), which can open new perspectives over textuality and its interactions with other disciplines.

American literature courses as mentioned before are important in constructing intellectual bridges between the two multicultural societies (Romania and USA) as well. Literary courses in general must pinpoint the elements of transition between languages and cultures, that liminal space which combines different interpretive models that encourage innovation.

Reader-oriented approaches to narrative texts assume an interaction between text and reader. Most students of literary narrative, indeed, try to be informed readers when they add to their understanding of a text by relating it to contextual information (Cf. Herman 283).

Our approach makes the receptive student interact with the writer in this world of hybrid intersections, recreating the text, and hence intervening culturally through his own literary analysis. We can approach literary texts in terms of liminality and hybridity and hence change the ways we traditionally and stereotypically interpret texts from the unique angle of the mainstream or the colonizer. The ongoing, fluid sense of identity in this age of transitions places the postcolonial discourse in this liminal space and time and thus helps alleviate the characters' journey towards 'connecting' and/or 'belonging'.

Teachers of literature have a special role in creating bridges between theory and practice, between literature and other cultural entities. We can and must combine literary and visual cultural elements by moving toward some kind of liminal space between academic fields and cultural fields. The literature courses must emphasize this liminal space theorized by Homi Bhabha in which the students are encouraged to innovate by combining different methods (traditional and new), different interpretive models (psychoanalytical, feminist, postcolonial, poststructuralist, etc.) in an attempt to adapt the text meaning to the cultural context of reception. This apparent discordant intersection of hybrid elements and values leads to an extremely interesting dialogue between literature and life.

"The text is no longer regarded as a self-contained structure but rather as an open and multi-stranded texture linked with the extra-textual context... The classical search for textual coherence is replaced by an investigation of the ways in which the text leaves things undecided, open, and even contradictory." (Herman 461) In this respect, the poststructuralist approach to narrative is similar to the deconstructive approach of Jacques Derrida according to which there are multiple layers of meanings in literary texts and the reader's interpretation is just as important as the author's.

As a practical application of the concepts discussed above, Nathaniel Hawthorne and James Fenimore Cooper's fictions can be analyzed in terms of dialogic liminality. They have portrayed liminal situations of time and history in order to imagine and examine cultural alternatives. Themes like liminality of adolescence or the frontier fits the two American writers mentioned, who were historians as well. Their liminal space is a neutral space, along the physical or metaphorical frontier line, where the Actual and the Imaginary, Past and Present, colonizer and colonized meet in a dialogical confrontation.

The Romanian student is encouraged, for example, to rewrite the Hawthornian text by comparing it to the metaphor of the liminal circle used by Liviu Geogescu, a Romanian writer, and to analyze the two texts from a double perspective: the critical rereading and rewriting can be applied on the eastern text (Geogescu) through western theories

(Hawthorne) and vice-versa. She is given the task to discover central metaphors of connection and/or division in this literary network of strings that intersect and create seemingly meaningless cultural spaces that gradually acquire meaning due to the personal touch and her interpretive power. She can also make connections with other arts such as painting and sculpture in the case of N.Hawthorne.

## Conclusion

Human understanding can never be final: understanding literature presupposes active reader participation and a gradual unfolding of the text meanings until it establishes a personal relationship with it.

Tradition may become a tool for ideological manipulation. Literary texts are ideological and permit insights into ideologies. Through dialogic confrontation with each other, each student's understanding can be challenged and complemented. They are encouraged to respond both appreciatively and critically to literary texts.

The Dialogic teaching and learning involves both teacher and students in deep dialogue, working to select themes related to their experiences and to find forms of articulation for them. In a Romanian traditional and silencing teaching environment, the understanding and application of this method liberates students' minds and arms them with adequate knowledge and communication skills to negotiate in an increasingly competitive global context.

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