

A PROPOSAL FOR TEACHING AMERICAN HISTORY THROUGH LITERATURE: LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS OF COLONIAL AMERICA

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Abstract

The essay shows a proposal of teaching History through literary texts in the framework of the subject taught at the College of Humanities of Albacete (University of Castilla-La Mancha) “Lengua Inglesa y su Literatura II”, in which students take classes of American Literature. In order to give a detailed and clear view of how the methodology depicted throughout the ensuing pages is put into practice, the authors cite examples of literary texts pertaining to the Colonial period and show how they are used to make the students understand aspects from the historical context. After having introduced a brief reference to the theoretical debate concerning the relationship between History and Literature, and having shown how the methodological proposal abovementioned is carried out in class, the essay concludes underlining the benefits of this methodology and reflecting on the convenience of not

Resumen

El presente artículo ofrece una propuesta para la enseñanza de la Historia a través de textos literarios en el marco de la asignatura impartida en la Facultad de Humanidades de Albacete (Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha) “Lengua Inglesa y su Literatura II”, en la que los estudiantes reciben clases de Literatura Norteamericana. Con el fin de proporcionar y mostrar una visión clara y detallada de cómo se pone en práctica la metodología esbozada en las siguientes páginas, los autores citarán ejemplos de textos literarios pertenecientes al periodo colonial y mostrarán cómo se utilizan para hacer que los estudiantes entiendan diferentes aspectos a través del contexto histórico. Tras la introducción de una breve referencia al debate teórico acerca de la relación entre Historia y Literatura y mostrar cómo la metodología anteriormente mencionada se pone en práctica en el aula, el artículo concluirá señalando los beneficios de dicha metodología y reflexionando acerca de la conveniencia de no aislar los textos literarios de otras

isolating literary texts from other disciplines—in this case History— so that students can get a wider and deeper comprehension of the events from the past.

Keywords: teaching, interdisciplinary, proposal, American Literature, American History, Colonial period.

disciplinas –en este caso la Historia– de modo que los estudiantes puedan adquirir una comprensión más amplia y más clara de los acontecimientos del pasado.

Palabras clave: enseñanza, interdisciplinar, propuesta, literatura norteamericana, historia norteamericana, periodo colonial.

1. INTRODUCTION

Though strange it may seem nowadays, History and Literature were traditionally regarded as disciplines belonging to the same genre. This situation changed by the end of the 18th century, when scholars began to underline the necessity of raising an epistemological wall between the two disciplines as they followed different objectives and methodologies. Thus, the blurred line separating History and Literature started to be more and more distinct, and this to such an extent that, in the last decades of the 19th century, authors such as Hegel and Ranke stated that History was closer to Natural Science than to Literature. Far from being closed, never-ending discussions about the relationship existing between History and Literature lingered on during the 20th century. In the 60's and 70's, historians like Hayden White, among others, tried to draw the attention of their colleagues upon the crisis in which History had fallen as a result of the abuse of certain literary genres such as narration. This groundswell of opinion focused on the fact that the historical narrative discourse never can be neutral, as it always entails ontological and epistemological choices with political and ideological implications (Fumero 2003).

Given these particularities of narration, the use of description and explanation instead of the narrative mode in the writing of History was seen as the key to assure objectivity in the historical discourse. Nevertheless, as this tendency gained more and more followers, authors like Lawrence Stone pointed out the inconvenience of basing History exclusively on descriptions and explanations, since, by doing so, it would become a discipline deprived of coherence. During the 80's, tendencies such as the Cultural Studies and the New Historicism emphasized the importance of keeping the ties that traditionally had bound History and Literature. Later on, new theories emerged in the 90's to focus on the importance of language in the construction of reality through meaning. Nowadays, the debate raised by the

relationships between these two fields of knowledge is still problematic insofar as the scholarly community has not reached a general consensus yet.

The main goal of this essay is to show the methodology followed in the teaching of American Literature at the College of Humanities of Albacete (University of Castilla-La Mancha) as a proposal for being carried out in other educational centers, especially other colleges of Humanities. More specifically, we try to focus on one of the guidelines of that methodology, which is the consideration of the literary text as a means of approaching the teaching of History in an alternative way, different from the traditional methodology based almost exclusively on the learning of typically historical data such as dates, battles, political and ideological issues and so on. We also want to underline that our experience teaching American Literature has strengthened our conviction that the reconstruction of a historical period through Literature results in manifold benefits, such as the acquisition of an enriching and widening comprehension of literary writings, and the knowledge of aspects to which History handbooks have often paid little attention, especially those related to culture, domestic life, and systems of belief. In addition, we would like to make clear that this methodology is put in practice from the assumption that students must not interpret the text as a mere tool of historical analysis, but as a literary manifestation of a historical period; by doing so, we hope that they can find in Literature –in this case, American Literature– an artistic expression usually fraught with contextual references which enable them to construct an overall view of the historical background –here, Colonial America.

2. AN INTERDISCIPLINARY METHODOLOGY FOR THE TEACHING OF AMERICAN HISTORY: AN APPROACH TO THE COLONIAL PERIOD THROUGH LITERATURE

The experience we are going to convey in the following pages takes place in the framework of the subject “Lengua Inglesa y su Literatura II,” taught at the Faculty of Humanities of Albacete (Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha). This second-year subject is the continuation of “Lengua Inglesa y su Literatura I,” where students learn English Language (upper-intermediate level) and obtain an overall view of English Literature, which is also used as a means of learning English History. As a consequence, when students take “Lengua Inglesa y su Literatura II,” they are already familiarized with the main currents of literature produced in Great Britain and with the main milestones of its history too. This circumstance enables

students to establish a constant relation between British and American literary traditions. By doing so, students can also be in possession of enough knowledge to participate in the widespread debate about the moment at which American Literature is considered to be born.¹ Following what scholars like Susan Belasco and Linck Johnson have stated, we assume that, whether teaching English or American Literature, we are teaching History too (2008:xii-xiv). Therefore, our classes are not entirely about historical events nor literary works, but a synthesis of both fields. This approach is especially interesting and necessary in our case, as we work with students of Humanities who take several subjects related to History. Despite the historical knowledge they learn, students are more acquainted with European History rather than American. Thus, we have to undertake the challenge of teaching historical events by means of literary texts to students who have scarcely been introduced to History of the United States. The topic which we are going to focus on here is the teaching of the main political, social, and religious events which took place in Colonial America from the establishment of the first settlements at the beginning of the 17th century to the starting of the pre-Revolutionary period around 1750. The selection of this chronological frame mainly stems from our conviction that it is one of the stages in American History where the historical context is most clearly reflected in the literary discourse. Moreover, the circumstance that the literary activity developed in Colonial America is the first issue our students learn when dealing with American Literature makes this period a suitable example to illustrate and draw some conclusions about the way the students start to work and perform in the methodological context described here.

Before getting our students acquainted with the establishment of the first British communities in North America and their later development, we consider that the study of this period must start from the consideration of two facts: on the one hand, the incursions carried out in the American continent by other European countries besides England and, on the other, the most important differences between the Spanish and English colonizing models.² By taking into account these two aspects, the student does not only learn basic concepts concerning the British colonization of North America, but also puts them in relation to other conquest projects prior to the beginning of the 17th century, such as those executed by Spaniards in South and Central America. According to our teaching experience, we can guarantee that this methodology enables the student to widen, enrich and better understand the study of this early period of the History of the United States.

¹ For further discussion about this issue see Martínez Gutiérrez (2003:9-12).

² For further discussion about this issue see Elliot (2002:237-264).

As regards the first aspect mentioned above, we state that Britain was not the first country to fix its eyes onto the lands spreading on the other side of the Atlantic. Starting from this premise, we teach the students that the notion of America as a promised land goes back to the depiction of the Garden of the Hesperides described by Hesiodus in his *Theogony* (around 700 BC): “[...] and the Hesperides who guard the rich golden apples and the trees bearing fruit beyond the glorious Ocean” (2000:7). We also make reference to myths of legendary islands such as Atlantis or Avalon as imaginary places shared in the collective consciousness of the Europeans that could correspond to some intuition about the existence of unexplored lands beyond the boundaries of the world hitherto known. Going forward in time, we allude to the first expeditions carried out during the Renaissance which supposed the shift from an “imagined America” to an “explored America” (Martínez Gutiérrez 2003:5). This important transition was possible due to the explorations of travelers like Leif Erikson, John Cabot, Giovanni de Verrazano and Jacques Cartier. However, they were not as relevant as the incursions made by Columbus and later on by Cabeza de Vaca, Hernán Cortés, Narváez, Ponce de León, Hernando de Soto, and Francisco Coronado. We resort to excerpts from texts written by some of these Spanish explorers, such as Columbus’s *Diario*, Cortés’s *Cartas* (1519-1526), and Núñez de Vaca’s *Relación* (1542), to make students conscious of both the main reasons that drove their voyages –romantic adventure, craving for material wealth and fame, political acknowledgement– and their contribution to spreading the image of America as a savage and marvelous land, an aspect which is clearly seen in the representations of the territories discovered and their native inhabitants.

Meanwhile, the role of England in the context of the expansionist politics followed by Spain in America is shown as that of a country which did not catch up with other European states –Spain and France mainly– in the colonization of the American continent. However, we insist at the same time on the fact that the translations of Spanish and French chronicles in England aroused a growing interest in the New World; in this sense, we underline the influence of works such as Richard Eden’s *Decades of the New Worlde* (1555), which is a narration about the mishaps found by the Spanish colonization, and Richard Hakluyt’s *Divers Voyages Touching the Discoverie of America* (1582) and *A Notable Historie Containing Four Voyages Made by Certain French Captaynes into Florida* (1587). It was not until the late 16th century that England began to take an active role in the conquest of the New World. The voyages of English explorers and the appearance of the first English settlements at the beginning of the 17th century are constantly put in relation to the rivalry maintained with Spain and France. We insist on the propagandistic tone of writings such as Thomas Harriot’s *A Briefe and True Report of the New-Found-Land of Virginia* (1588) to underline how the European powers struggled to impose their political and economical interests in America, a circumstance which,

in the long run, would forge the fate undergone by the British colonies and, later on, by the United States.

The establishment and political and religious development of English settlements in North America during the first half of the 17th century are studied throughout William Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation* (1630-ca.1650) and John Winthrop's *The History of New England* (1630-1650). Regarding the former as one of the texts from early American literature with a wider historical interest (Gilbert 2009:29), we consider that Bradford's work thoroughly fits our aim of teaching U.S. History through American Literature. Organized in two books, the first constitutes a detailed account of the fate and mishaps suffered by the separatist congregations which left England in 1608 and, after twelve years in Holland, arrived in North America in 1620. The second is a chronicle of the settlement of Plymouth between 1620 and 1644. This part allows the student to obtain a detailed view of the main political, economical, and social events that occurred in the colony during its first twenty-four years of existence. We pay special attention among them to "The Mayflower Compact" –signed on November, 21st 1620–, which we introduce both as the first step to the independence of the British colonies and the first relevant political document of the future nation, since its signatories constituted a political body based on the fulfillment and respect of the laws to which they subscribed (Manuel Cuenca 2006:28). When dealing with the second book of Bradford's chronicle we encourage our students to bear in mind two facts: on the one hand, that the particular case of Plymouth may be taken as an example illustrating the colonizing pattern followed by the early colonies and the difficulties and challenges which they had to face to carry it out and, on the other, that many events related throughout the work must be analyzed in the light of the Protestant Reformation in Europe in general, and the controversial changes inside the Anglican Church and its clash with the Catholics in particular. In this sense, we underline that the first American settlers described by Bradford made up a group of pilgrims whose absolute rejection of the Anglican orthodoxy forced them to leave England. However, we make clear at the same time that the groups of exiles who settled in the Massachusetts Bay later on –between 1628 and 1643– would not follow the separatist doctrines of Plymouth, as they still kept some ties with the Church of England. Another example that we propose to illustrate how the background of Bradford's chronicle is mostly that of the political and religious struggles in England during the first half of the 17th century is the author's fear about the possibility that the victory of Cromwell could minimize or cloud the reformation made by the separatists in America; taking this into account, the student can easily understand why Bradford vindicates that the defeat of Charles I had to be attributed to a great extent to the decisive influence of the experience which the separatists were carrying out in America.

As it is a day-by-day account of life in New England during the period comprised between approximately 1630 and 1650, Winthrop's text reveals itself as an interesting literary source to analyze the phenomenon of heresy in the heart of the first Puritan communities. In *The History of New England*, the author alludes to the cases of the "dissident" Anne Hutchinson and Roger Williams. Once we have gone through their respective stories, our main goal is that students are able to infer the reasons which propitiated such episodes of dissidence. By doing so, our intention is that they reach the conclusion by themselves that those instances of nonconformity shown towards the Puritan theocracy were the result of the religious intransigence which had a strong bearing on many aspects of the social life in New England. That spiritual intolerance stemmed from a literal and rigid interpretation of the Bible whose main literary manifestation can be found in the plain and categorical style of books such as *The History of New England*, John Cotton's *The Way of Life* (1641) and *The Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven* (1649), and the jeremiads composed by John and Cotton Mather. As a contrast with these works proclaiming the necessity to punish all those who endeavored to corrupt the purity of the community, we make reference to William's books *The Bloody Tenant of Persecution* (1644) and *The Bloudy Tenent Yet More Bloudy* (1652), where he responds to the intransigence shown by John Cotton by proclaiming freedom of conscience and the convenience for religious congregations grounded on democratic and tolerant principles.

Toward the end of the 17th century, witchcraft became one of the main manifestations of dissidence. In order to see how the Puritan writers tackled this issue, we resort to Cotton Mather's *Memorable Providences, Relating to Witchcraft and Possessions* (1689), and *The Wonders of the Invisible World* (1693). By reading these texts, the student can see how the Puritan orthodoxy attributed witchcraft to the moral degeneration of the community. What authors like Mather condemn as plain spiritual corruption is, in fact, the by-product of the changes which were taking place in the economic and social framework of the colonies; in this sense, we underscore that at the turn of the century, New England society was evolving from an economic model based on agriculture to one structured on complex commercial relationships. According to our opinion, this inevitably led to a higher material prosperity which caused an inversion in the scale of values of the community; now, the dedication to theological matters was at risk of being substituted by more earthly activities like commerce. Similarly, we assert that the moral decadence denounced in Mather's works would also be propitiated by some political measures taken in England such as the revocation of the Charter of Massachusetts in 1691; this document, signed in 1621, excluded the non-Puritans from the political life of the colony. However, the new Charter recognized the voting right of all the Christians with properties, excepting the Catholics. Puritans

saw in this political decision a serious threat to their role as Chosen People, sent to accomplish a sacred mission in savage America; the relevance gained by other religious groups in the political and social life of New England would thwart and corrupt that enterprise.

Once all these facts are taken into consideration, we expect that students see beyond the Puritan denouncement of moral downfall a firm reaction against the political, social, and economical transformations undergone in the colonies during the late 17th century and early 18th century. The influence of the Enlightenment in America, the erosion of the theocratic power in New England, the proliferation of new religious groups and the interference of the Crown in the organization of the colonies aroused the reaction of writers such as Cotton Mather himself and Jonathan Edwards. These authors led a movement of Puritan regeneration known as the “Great Awakening”. From our point of view, Mather’s *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702) and Edwards’s “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” (1741) constitute two literary sources which mirror two central features of the “Great Awakening,” such as the religious zeal and the attachment to a past where religion prevailed over any other aspect of social life. In order to show the student the Puritan rejection of a changing world, we make use of *Magnalia Christi Americana*, a work where, once again, as we could see in *Of Plymouth Plantation*, literature and history are closely interwoven. By reading some excerpts from Mather’s encyclopedia, the student is encouraged to notice the epic rather than historical prose employed by the author, which contrasts with the scientific rigor promoted by the Enlightenment, as well as his attempt to restore the Puritan religious and political leadership in the community.

Along with the rest of Edwards’s manuscripts, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” embodies the most canonical and influential doctrine of the “Great Awakening.” Apart from this reason, this text is studied in class because it permits us to stress three aspects of the society to which it was addressed. Firstly, we urge the student to appreciate the concentration of images and the suggestive verbal rhythm of Edwards’s discourse and their function as instruments to produce a certain psychological effect on the audience; this circumstance reflects the importance that the spoken word still had in New England society in the 18th century, as it evinces the high efficiency of sermon as a rhetorical device to reach the religious and emotional conversion and the great deal of preachers –such as George Whitefield, Gilbert Tennent, and James Davenport –who traveled around the colonies in order to ‘awaken’ the religious consciousness of their inhabitants. Secondly, “Sinner in the Hands of an Angry God” shows a progressive turn in Edwards’s thought as he stresses the particularity and feelings of the individual in contrast with the rigid doctrinal and providential scheme of Puritan typology. Though we do not go through later treaties like *The Great Christian Doctrine of*

Original Sin Defended (1758) and *The Nature of True Virtue* (1765), we make reference to them because they allow the student to see how the ideas contained in the analyzed sermon will evolve into a complete recognition of human understanding by affirming that the human being can notice some divine plans through the physical world. The fact that such ideas were uttered by one of the most orthodox and influential preachers in the religious history of New England is underscored as it illustrates the opening of the colonial society to the Enlightenment principles. In fact, we regard Edwards as the main representative of the “religious” side of the American Enlightenment, though his ideas are more outdated and extreme compared with those postulated by Benjamin Franklin in his *Autobiography* (1771-1789). Lastly, the parallelism which Edwards establishes between the wrath of God and the panic caused by Indian attacks is indicative of the fear and repulsion that the natives still aroused among the American settlers.

When dealing with the second aspect on which we base our teaching of Colonial America through the literature of this period –the comparison between the English and Spanish colonizing patterns–, students’ expectations are often fulfilled when we state that both models differ concerning the relationship with the natives. The divergences are evident if we take into account that while the Spaniards intermingled with the local population, the first English communities in America adopted a segregationist attitude towards the natives (Elliot 2002:240), a circumstance which we stress to understand the importance of the frontier in the American History and mentality –in further units, we deal with this topic throughout the study of texts by authors such as Cooper and Irving. The isolationist behavior adopted by the first communities in New England is explained as the consequence of the exclusiveness which pervaded their religious beliefs; the Puritan colonists carried out a typological interpretation of the Bible, which enhanced the correspondences between the characters from the Sacred Writings and themselves. According to this vision of the Bible, they were convinced of their condition as the Chosen People, to whom God had entrusted a sacred mission which entailed the colonization of the New World. As time went by, the Puritans started to deem this enterprise as a long and difficult process due to the constant attacks of the Indians. From our point of view, we consider that it is important for the student to go through Increase Mather’s *History of the War with the Indians in New England* (1676) to take notice of how such a relevant work in the history of American thought is pervaded with those beliefs. This chronicle clearly reflects the portrait of the native painted by the Puritan historiography as a hostile and devil-like being. Mather’s work is also interesting to underline how many New England chroniclers addressed any earthy contingency to God’s plans; this is essentially what Mather tries to convey in his book when interpreting the war against the natives as a divine punishment on account of the supposedly sinful behavior shown by the New

England inhabitants. At the same time, we contrast these Puritan chronicles and their radical and nightmarish interpretation of historical facts with some later authors belonging to the Southern historiography –Robert Beverly, Hugh Jones, William Byrd II– who offer a more complex and amiable view of the natural resources and social organization of New England.

We also insist on the fact that Puritan historiography does not only differ from later historiographic models, but also from attitudes adopted by contemporary northern authors such as Roger Williams and John Elliot. The former developed a deep interest in the tribe of the Narragansett, that drove him to write *A Key into the Language of America* (1643), which we present not only as a mere study of the language of the Indians, but also as a book in which the author states the necessity of establishing a cultural dialogue between the natives and the Europeans. From our point of view, it is interesting that the students compare Williams's with Bartolomé de las Casas's *Brevisima Relación de la Destrucción de las Indias* (1542), where the Spanish clergyman is advocating for a colonization which had to be fair, peaceful, and respectful with the true dwellers of the New World. Like Williams, Elliot also wrote several works concerning the Indian language –*Indian Grammar Begun* (1666) and *Indian Primer* (1669); though we do not go through these treatises, they are mentioned as the spin-off of an evangelical task which had as its main goal the immersion of the Indians in the English customs. The first years of the European colonization render other examples offering a benevolent and integrating view of the natives such as the depiction of Pocahontas in Smith's *A True Relation* (1608) and Thomas Morton's *New English Canaan* (ca. 1635), where the Indians are represented as innocent beings full of humanity and as model Christians. Another literary source to study the relationship of the English settlers in North America with the natives is the captivity narratives. At this point we especially focus on Mary Rowlandson's *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God* (1682); unlike the fixed picture given by the abovementioned authors, Rowlandson evolves from an intolerant and hostile attitude towards the Indians –described as barbarian, heathen, and savage creatures– to a more understanding consideration of their culture. When dealing with this text, we underscore the fact that the changing vision offered by the writer is the result of her integration in the Indian world spreading beyond the frontier, in what the Puritans considered to be an infernal region. Captivity narratives are not only used in class to study the different opinions and reactions which the natives aroused in the settlers, but also to make reference to the political context. This is the case of John Williams's *The Redeemed Captive, Returning into Zion* (1707). Unlike Rowlandson, Williams just touches on some general details concerning his captivity under the Indians, and focuses on the disputes between England and France in North America which would give rise to the Seven Years' War (1755-1763).

We would not like to finish off this essay without alluding to the way in which we deal with some aspects concerning the domestic life in New England during the colonial period by using literary sources. More specifically, we resort to the figure of Ann Bradstreet to focus on topics like gender discrimination, marriage, family relationships, and depiction of household equipment. Before going through her poems, we give the student some outlines of her life in order to obtain a view of the harsh reality that women had to face in the new lands; Bradstreet's existence in colonial America is that of a woman who wrestled with a series of difficulties which many a female suffered in the colonies such as the adaptation to the hostile conditions of the colonies, the numerous pregnancies, and the multiple tasks involved in maternity and housework. Moreover, we stress the hostility that the Puritans showed towards those women who dared to have literary or intellectual interests, as we can see for example in the social impact aroused by the case of Anne Hutchinson. Bearing in mind the unpromising context in which women spent their lives in New England, the student can be more aware of the extraordinary value of Bradstreet's compositions; in this sense, we do not focus on the literary quality of her poems as much as the above mentioned social conditions in which they were written. Like Hutchinson, Bradstreet rebelled against the conventions imposed by the Puritan society, where women played a secondary role. Thus, we remark that she blatantly showed a critical voice with regards to the position of women in Puritan society, as we can observe in her "Prologue:" "I am obnoxious to each carping tongue / Who says my hand a needle better fits, / A poet's pen all scorn I should thus wrong, / For such despite they cast on female wits; / If what I do prove well, it won't advance, / They'll say it's stol'n, or else it was by chance."

Students get acquainted with the Puritan conception of marriage throughout the verses of "To my Dear and Loving Husband." On dealing with this topic, we observe that students share a series of preconceptions which generally tally with the explanations given in class, since many of them identify marriage in the context of the Puritan thought with a relationship where love is attached to strict moral restrictions. However, students do not find their expectations fulfilled in that poem, as its passionate and sensual images are diametrically opposed to the plain and austere style of Puritan sermons regarding marriage like, for example, Winthrop's "A Model of Christian Charity" (1630). In our view, by establishing a contrast between Bradstreet's poem as a remarkable exception inside Puritan literature and more orthodox writings, students can better understand the implications and influence of the moral doctrines which pervaded every inch of the domestic and social life in the colonies. Furthermore, this poem is an excellent tool to make the student conscious of the double moral pattern which was deeply rooted in the Puritan communities, so far as it shows the clash between the individual real emotions and the constraining doctrinal dogma.

The fact that domestic life constitutes one of the topics of the poems by Bradstreet is explained in class as the consequence of the Puritan conviction that everyone had to reflect upon any aspect of daily life, since it could enclose a divine message. Then, it is no wonder that poems like “Here Follows Some Verses Upon Burning Our House” and “In Reference to Her Children, 23 June, 1659” deal at length with this topic. More specifically, we resort to the former as a literary source to study the household equipment in an average mid-17th century colonial home, as her author recalls throughout thirty verses her beloved material possessions lost in the burning of her house. As regards the latter, we believe that the student can get an idea of what the relationships were like in a Puritan family. Like “My Dear and Loving Husband,” “In Reference to Her Children” is a poem where Bradstreet reveals herself as a writer adopting a heterodox attitude in relation to the conventions of her time, since it is her, and not the father of her children, who is shown as the representative figure of authority and power inside the family. By underscoring the transgressor character of Bradstreet’s vision of relationships in the sphere of domestic life, once again the student can be aware of the huge gulf which separated men and women in the Puritan society.

CONCLUSIONS

The conveyance of our experience in the previous pages concerning teaching Colonial America through some instances of the literature written in that period aims to highlight the connections existing between History and Literature and how these relations broaden new horizons for teaching practice. The every-day job we carry out with our students reaffirms our conviction about the versatility and interest of literary compositions as a means of teaching History. In fact, we have observed that any of the texts mentioned in this essay is susceptible to historical analysis; this is not only because they have been carefully selected to propitiate such an approach, but also, and above all, because they are bound to the conventions and realities of their time.

The positive results we have perceived throughout the course strengthen our assurance that an interdisciplinary methodology based on the dialogue between History and Literature is essential to reach a series of benefits. Firstly, we have realized that Literature helps students to be more engaged and involved in the instruction when dealing with historical issues, which are often not quite attractive enough for students who already study History in other subjects of the degree of

Humanities and hope to deal just with Literature when they enroll for our sessions; we find that what makes the teaching of historical issues through literary writings more relevant and interesting for students is the fact that sometimes Literature gives them the chance to have access to a period by means of personal accounts which may shed light on aspects usually forgotten by the traditional historical discourse, which is more concerned with events on a national and worldwide scale than the set of values, beliefs, and everyday life of anonymous individuals. Moreover, we have realized that students find in Literature one of the most natural ways to learn History, as they work with firsthand information, with primary sources away from any interested and distorting interpretation (Sánchez & Mills 2006:270).

Secondly, we have seen that, by encouraging an approach to the literary work not as an artistic manifestation isolated from the social, political, economical, and ideological circumstances of a certain period, but as a historical construction in the sense that many a time the values and feelings expressed by the author are a reaction for or against the political, social, and economic system, students can find in literary texts a source of information which may be complementary to those which are specifically historical and are contained in History handbooks. By doing so, they have the possibility of focusing on a past event or period from multiple perspectives –historical and literary– that allows students to make History more understandable for them (George & Stix 2000:25).

Lastly, our experience has led us to believe that teachers can also benefit from this method of instruction. Examining History through Literature provides the setting for deeper and intriguing discussion in contrast with the traditional class where everything boils down to the teacher giving information and the student receiving it. This methodology is perfect for creating a more collaborative atmosphere in class, since student and teacher move through the material together, feeding off one another. Moreover, this close collaboration gives the teacher the opportunity to learn and think with the student in ways that other teaching strategies do not offer.

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