

## **A CROSS-CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF HEMINGWAY'S *CAT IN THE RAIN* FOR THE IRANIAN EFL CONTEXT**

**Mohammad Reza Hashemi**

Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Iran

**Hesamoddin Shahriari Ahmadi**

Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Iran

### **Abstract**

Hemingway is characterized by simplicity in style and language, which renders his works suitable for the EFL classroom. Nonetheless, his discourse has seldom been critically analyzed to determine to what extent it is suitable for foreign language learners coming from a distinct cultural background. Aiming to fill the niche, a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of *Cat in the Rain* was undertaken to not only understand the beliefs imparted by Hemingway through this short story, as understood by the Iranian reader, but also to inform teachers of the possible effects the narrative might have on readers. To this end, a number of 30 learners of English as a Foreign Language were asked to read the designated short story and respond to a series of open-ended items. The findings of this study suggest that EFL teachers should take heed of and consider a multitude of factors before choosing to use any particular literary text in the language classroom.

**Key words:** Critical Discourse Analysis; Literary symbolism; Language curriculum.

### **Introduction**

Teachers of English as a foreign language must be aware of the wide array of variables involved in the selection of texts which are to be presented in the classroom. Often this selection process is approached from a linguistic point of view. However, it is vital to consider the text from the perspective of the discourse analyst, especially given the cross-cultural differences seen in the EFL setting, which could easily result in misinterpretation on the part of the reader. It is also of utmost importance for teachers to be aware of the suppressing and/or liberating effects any given text may have on their learners.

The present study aims to determine whether Ernest Hemingway's short story *Cat in the Rain* is suitable for being taught in the Iranian EFL context, as well as detecting the issues and difficulties which may accompany its use. With this purpose in mind, a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of the short story was undertaken.

Through CDA, we seek to expound on the thematic messages conveyed by the short story. Our study will be aided by occasional references made to other works by Hemingway, and will analyze the rhetorical devices employed by the author both in general and in the short story at hand.

### **Critical Discourse Analysis**

Led by Fairclough, Wodak and van Dijk, among others (Wodak & Meyer 2001), the field of CDA attempts to uncover the manipulation and dominance of society by those in power. The relevance of CDA, however, extends to any given means of influence even literary means. According to Fairclough (1995), power is described in terms of “asymmetries between participants in discourse events” and the “unequal capacity to control how texts are produced, distributed and consumed...in particular social contexts” (p.1). To him, all features of discourse are potentially ideological, and texture (the form and organization of a text, not just its contents) is an “extraordinarily sensitive indicator of sociocultural processes, relations and change” (p.4). He discusses the ‘orderliness’ and ‘naturalisation’ of state-produced ‘autonomous subjects’ (although ‘state’ is used interchangeably with any ‘group’ or ‘culture’), shaped to integrate and be ‘competent, non-resistant’ participants in society (p.27). Fairclough (1992), in his seminal work *Discourse and Social Change*, attempts to create a model of textually based discourse analysis, and includes group and personal ‘ethos’ in the equation. However, criticisms of CDA include its overtly political, potentially contentious nature (Kress 1990); its inclination to be reductionistic and deterministic (Pennycook 1994); and its proponents’ tendency to remain uncritical of themselves (Widdowson 1998).

The central goal of CDA is to highlight the use of language in the unequal maintenance of power and control over people (Fairclough 1995; Wodak 2001). Therefore, it is primarily an endeavor of social awareness and emancipation through analysis of spoken or written texts, with the aim of uncovering specific ideology, often implicitly portrayed by the author. As such, and despite the various approaches advocated by the forerunners in CDA development (see Meyer, 2001:15-16), CDA assumes the importance of both a historical and contemporary discourse context, and demonstrates its interdisciplinary nature. In addition, CDA includes analysis of interdiscursive and intertextual relationships, distinct from other methods.

Attempting to explain how conversations in texts can be critically analyzed, Fairclough (1995) and Kress (1990) point out that one should observe whether communicative interaction is evenly or unevenly distributed. In other words, whether one person dominates the communicative event in any situation/conversation or there is an active sharing of conversational turn-takings. They suggest that one should examine whether individuals are placed in the subjected position in institutional interaction or are allowed to be active participants in dialogue.

Fairclough (1995) recommends a manner of conceptualizing communication interactions from a critical analysis perspective whether they be oral or written. First, he proposes that interactions have scripts as to what is included in what is mentioned and what is excluded; furthermore, there is a need to determine the reasons underlying these decisions. Second, he suggests that in order to critically analyze an extract, a conversation, or any text written or oral, we need to deconstruct a person's script. A person who listens, watches, or interacts with others, needs to think and arrive at her point of view about the scripts presented to her from her own perspective. In one sentence, CDA is concerned with discovering how ideologies become natural and are used to wield power over individuals through language.

Critical Discourse Analysis largely attends to language patterns which can be found in texts and aims to determine the underlying indications they have for the power relationship established between communication partners. For instance, a study by Fairclough (1989) on clinical institutional discourse revealed that there were some meaningful differences between the language used by doctors and their patients and the language used by nurses with the same patients. This study demonstrated that doctors have a more detached and impersonal approach to their patients, as compared to nurses.

For instance, doctors ask patients closed questions, which limit their accounts. They also tend to filter their answers and focus them on medical issues. This is done to assert their power over patients. Nurses, on the other hand, follow up on patients' clues and responses and accommodate their communication styles to the needs of the patient. This difference in communication patterns shows that doctors exercise more power than nurses over patients.

### **Ideology and the language curriculum**

The language curriculum in general and the textbook in particular directly relate to power. Sleeter & Grant (1999: 79) claim that debates regarding curriculum content can be understood "as struggles for power to define the symbolic representations of the world and society, which will be transmitted to the young, for the purpose of either gaining or holding onto power." They further argue that representations in books are associated with power on three important dimensions. First, symbolic representations are largely used to grant legitimacy to dominant groups. Discourse selected by dominant groups endorses the position of those groups whose culture and accomplishments are to be viewed as being important. Secondly, symbolic representations render socially constructed relations as natural. What comprises good literature or legitimate activity is described within a text. Thirdly, it is crucial to be conscious of the fact that the curriculum screens specific ideas and knowledge. Having been allowed limited access to information, students are to think and act in a specified way but not consider other possibilities. Given this, the

curriculum serves as a method of social control. It is a means for giving legitimacy to the present social relations and the eminence of those holding power.

Textbooks not only decide material conditions for teaching and learning but also define what elite or legitimate ideology is passed on (Apple 1999). The textbook signifies “particular constructions of reality, particular ways of selecting and organizing that universe of possible knowledge” (Apple & Smith 1991: 3). Those in power strive to institutionalize their cultures, histories, and versions of social justice. The choice of content relates both to existing relations of domination and to efforts to adjust these relations. Hence, the representation of textbooks is the consequence of constant battles for power.

Materials presented in a given curriculum can also be viewed as projections of society and culture. They display historical, social, cultural and ideological manifestations. It is common for curriculums to be revised with rearrangements in sociocultural, economic and political contexts. Educational reform has been put to action in many nations due to the growing attention directed towards internationalization and globalization of politics and economy. Ideological changes due to the influence of globalization and international relations may be presented in textbooks and can be examined through text analysis. For this very reason, the textbook has become a major source of cultural and ideological conflict in many nations. It is of vital importance to be aware of the controversies over teaching materials, that is, whose knowledge and ideologies are included and excluded in textbooks.

### **Hemingway’s *Cat in the Rain***

Ernest Hemingway’s work is known for its lack of values, and a somewhat nihilistic sense of despair. His works illustrates the futile search for truth in a world governed by chance. This is the feeling shared by many of his contemporaries following World War I. In the face of such a world, Hemingway’s characters maintain a sense of self-control and detachment, and go about their solitary existence.

On the surface, *Cat in the Rain* is the tale of an American couple on holiday in Italy. The story revolves around the young woman obsessing over a cat stuck in the rain, which she wants to have as a pet. Her husband, on the other hand, is not in the least inclined to grant her wish. Through this story, Hemingway displays his ability to depict women with their problems, and apparently sympathize with them.

It is not long before the reader understands that this straightforward story bears deeper shades of meaning. For the experienced reader, the story is packed with symbolism. The description of the weather and constant rain indicates the somber mood of the heroine. The preoccupation of the husband with his book, and his disregard for his wife’s needs is also an indicator of the prominence of solitude. The ‘war monument’ which is mentioned three times throughout the beginning of

the text, foreshadows the conflict which lies ahead. This and many other symbols all point towards the same notion of sadness and despair, which characterizes Hemingway.

## **A cross-cultural analysis**

Despite the global appeal associated with the works of Hemingway, one cannot deny the fact that readers' understanding of the text will differ based on their culture. For instance, readers with Christian backgrounds are far more likely to detect the existence and significance of biblical references within a text, as opposed to readers from a Jewish or Islamic background. Nevertheless, there are many concepts and symbols which exist across cultures. The purpose of this study is to empirically determine the way the short story is received, interpreted and understood by Iranian learners of EFL, and ultimately decide about its appropriateness and that of other stories by Hemingway for the Iranian learning setting.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Thirty learners of English as a Foreign Language (18F and 12M) were asked to participate in this research. Participants were studying at a private language institute in the city of Mashhad, Iran. Learners' age ranged from 22 to 38. All participants were chosen from upper-intermediate levels, so as to ensure their understanding of the designated short story. In fact, one of the most important reasons for selecting *Cat in the Rain* was its relatively simple language, its short length and the short amount of time in which it can be read.

### **Procedure**

The participants were provided with the short story and given ample time to read it twice. English dictionaries were made available, and respondents were provided with definitions for unfamiliar words upon request. However, sentence translations were avoided during the elicitation sessions. The story was followed by 7 questions. An open-ended format was adopted in order to aid in critical thinking, and to avoid simple yes-no answers. This format also ensured that learners went through the reading a second time and reviewed the questions more carefully before attempting to provide a response. The task was carried out in the learners' mother tongue, with the purpose of clarifying responses and their underlying intentions. The items in the questionnaire, along with their intentions of use, have been provided below:

1. *What do you think is the main moral/message/theme in this short story?*

The first item was designed to determine what the Iranian reader would consider to be the main idea behind the short story, and whether learners were in agreement over the message conveyed by its author.

2. *Is there anything you disagree with?*

The purpose of the second item was to investigate whether the messages conveyed to the Iranian readers were in any way in contrast with their cultural, religious and/or common sense beliefs.

3. *Do you sympathize with any of the characters or were you inspired by any of them? (i.e., which character do you identify with the most?)*

This item aims to find out to what extent the characters in the story were acceptable to the readers and towards which of the characters were they the most sympathetic.

4. *In what ways does this short story differ from those of your own culture?*

This question sought to find out to what extent the story was believed to be similar to the stories Iranian readers were used to, and to identify its points of departure.

5. *How is the relationship between the two main characters of this story different or similar to husband-wife relationships in your country?*

Given the fact that the husband-wife relationship is central to this short story, the purpose of this item was to see if learners believed the depicted relationship to represent spousal relationships in their own culture.

6. *If you were asked to translate the short story for an Iranian audience, what would you change about it?*

This question gauged the respondents to reveal how the story would better appeal to the Iranian readers. It was hoped that learners would point out any other source of incongruence, should they not have been engaged in the previous questions.

## **Responses and discussion**

The responses collected from the learners were analyzed and classified into groups. Even those responses with low frequencies were still considered in the analysis. In this section, the various types of responses for each of the items and speculations as to their underlying reasons will be discussed in detail.

With regard to the first question, most Iranian respondents (17) believed the central theme of the short story to be the loneliness and isolation of the American wife. From these respondents, 8 believed this solitude to be the result of the age difference between the couple; 3 stated that it was the outcome of modern life; and one respondent claimed that it was due to decadence in the American lifestyle. Other respondents did not provide any reasons. A second group (8) was of the opinion that the central theme of the short story was the obsessive consumer culture and materialistic lifestyle of westerners in general and Americans in particular. They claimed that the American wife's unhappiness was because of her never-ending desire to possess. The least number of participants (4) held the belief that the main theme of the story was the importance of the simple things in life.

These respondents mentioned that sometimes happiness could be achieved through the most seemingly trivial things.

Upon being asked whether they disagreed with any of the author's messages, 9 respondents claimed that the American wife's feelings towards the *padrone* were immoral and unjustified to them. They maintained that having been ignored by her husband, the American wife was shown to be attracted to the *padrone*, who apparently paid attention to her needs. This subtle interpretation was reportedly in contrast with the religious and cultural norms of the respondents. In addition, a second group of participants (6) held the belief that the author's message of using worldly possessions to fill the void felt in modern life was also contrary to the Iranian and Islamic ideology. Half of the respondents did not provide an answer to this item.

The character with whom most respondents (22) were sympathetic was the American wife. From among this group, 16 said their sympathy was due to her loneliness, 4 mentioned that it was because of her inability to communicate with her spouse, and 2 referred to her obsession with possession. From the total number of participants, 6 identified themselves with the husband, who, in their opinion, had to bear the complaints of the wife. Finally, 2 participants sympathized with the *padrone* and the maid who had to stand the whims of the American wife.

The participants in this study claimed that the story was different from Iranian stories in that it lacked a tight plot and moral teachings, which was believed to be a defining characteristic of Iranian stories. However, most respondents (18) chose not to answer this item.

In response to the fifth question, which dealt with the comparison of spousal relationships in the story and those in the Iranian culture and society, 12 participants argued that the husband in the story was too cruel when not paying attention to his wife's requests. They mentioned that in their families, couples were more conscious of their spouse's needs and tried harder to fulfill them. On the other hand, 10 respondents (all female) felt that the American husband's indifference towards his wife's needs was also common among Iranian men. They added that this was apparently a universal problem. Finally, 4 respondents once again pointed out that in Iranian relationships, dependence on materialism was less than what was depicted in the short story.

The sixth item in the questionnaire elicited similar responses to those of item number 4. Once again, the majority of respondents (19) claimed that in order to make the story more presentable for an Iranian audience, they would add to the plot of the short story. Six participants recommended the addition of a moral lesson to make the story more understandable and useful for Iranian readers. The remaining 5 respondents failed to provide an answer to this item.

Having gone through the responses provided, we can generally observe two types of attitudes towards the short story. A first group of respondents apparently viewed the story as representing the materialism and consumer culture of the West and the United States in particular. Some members of this group believed that Hemingway was condoning this lifestyle and implying that

possessions, even though trivial, could fill the void which may be felt in life. These respondents also believed that the story reflected the decadence and immorality of the Western lifestyle, depicted in the cold and distant relationship between the couple and in their constant unhappiness, despite the lavish trips and luxurious hotel rooms, etc.

The second group of respondents, on the other hand, was not so critical of the story and its perceived message(s). They also identified the theme of the story as one of solitude and loneliness; however, they did not relate the theme to Western culture, but to modern man and the age of industrialization as a whole. Members of this group reported fewer points of disagreement with the author, as elicited through the second question. All in all, despite occasional disagreements, one could easily observe the two frames of mind among the participants in this study.

## **Conclusion**

The responses to the questionnaire revealed that the participants in this study, despite coming from similar cultural and religious backgrounds, held different, and often contrasting, attitudes and viewpoints towards the same text. This implies that teachers and curriculum designers should not suppose that just because a text appeals to and has been accepted by a group of learners, it should necessarily be liked by other learners coming from a similar background.

The study also implies that teachers and syllabus designers should pay careful attention while selecting passages to be included in lessons. Many learners involved in this study associated the theme of the story with the American culture and lifestyle. They somehow linked the ideas of loneliness, lack of communication and even materialism with the American way of life. This will surely have an influence on the attitudes of learners towards the target language itself, and hence, ultimately affect learner motivation. Therefore, we argue that decisions be made wisely and with careful consideration of the possible repercussions.

This does not, however, mean that stories and passages such as the one presented in this study should not be used within the language classroom at all. We suggest that such texts be accompanied by discussions on the style of the author and his/her intended message, an analysis of the literary theories and reviews and finally an introduction of the author's style and other works. It is hoped that through such awareness-raising techniques, learners will not develop a distorted view of the story and ultimately have an unrealistic image of the target language and culture, whether it be positive or negative, projected in their minds.

Finally, the most important implication of the present study is that there are multiple variables which should be considered prior to the selection of texts which are to be included in the syllabus. Hemingway's style, in addition to having literary value, is often considered to be relatively simple both in terms of grammar and lexis. For this reason, his stories are often used by teachers to introduce the target language literature and to encourage extensive reading among learners. However, it

appears that simplicity in language and ease of understanding are not the only factors which should be taken into consideration while one is attempting to select a text for the EFL/ESL classroom.

## **References**

- Apple, M. (1999). *Power, meaning and identity: Essays in critical educational studies*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Apple, M. & Christian-Smith, L. (1991). *The politics of the textbook*. London: Routledge.
- Fairclough, N. (1989). *Language and power*. London: Longman.
- Fairclough, N. (1992). *Discourse analysis and social change*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical discourse analysis*. London: Longman.
- Kress, G. (1990). Critical discourse analysis. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 11, 84-99.
- Pennycook, A. (1994). Incommensurable discourses. *Applied Linguistics*, 15(2), 115-138.
- Sleeter, C.E. & Grant, C.A. (1999). Race, class, gender, and disability. In M. Apple & L. Christian-Smith (Eds.), *The politics of the textbook* (pp. 78-110). London: Routledge.
- Widdowson, H.G. (1998). Review article: The theory and practice of critical discourse analysis. *Applied Linguistics*, 19(1), 136-151.
- Wodak, R. (2001). What CDA is about: A summary of its history, important concepts and its development. In R. Wodak & M. Meyer (Eds.), *Methods of critical discourse analysis* (pp. 1-13). London: Sage.
- Wodak, R. & Meyer, M. (2001). *Methods of critical discourse analysis*. London: Sage.