Bridges or Walls? A Study of the Hashemite University English Department Undergraduate Students' Responses to Anglo-American Literature and Culture
Kifah Al-Omari, Nazmi Al-Shalabi, Marwan M. Obeidat, The Hashemite University, Jordan

The focal purpose of this study is to examine undergraduate students' responses to the various literature and culture classes they take as part of their program of study in the Department of English at the Hashemite University, Jordan, in partial fulfillment of the B.A. degree requirements. The Department offers two programs of study for the B.A. degree: the first is English Language and Literature; the second, Literary and Cultural Studies. By surveying and studying the opinions of more than one hundred and fifty students/respondents from both concentrations, the study avails itself of answering questions such as the following: What aspect or aspects of a given class did they enjoy most? What did this class/these classes make them learn? What window or windows of experience did it/they open to the students? Students throughout the course were asked to answer these questions in essay form. There were no specific questionnaire items other than asking them to write a full length essay about their responses to Anglo-American literature and culture. By analyzing their essay-answers, the researchers will be able to know the students' opinions in isolation from those of their instructors, and thus come up with strategies for enhancing the students' positive practices and for helping them avoid the negative ones.

Before presenting our research findings, it would be a useful starting point to give a brief idea about the Hashemite University and its Department of English. The Hashemite University is the fifth biggest state university in Jordan. The Royal Decree ordaining the establishment of the Hashemite University was issued in June 1996. It is located on the outskirts of the city of Zarqa to the east (about 45 minutes drive) of the capital Amman. Al-Zarqa Governorate is the...
second most populated Governorate in the country. Teaching started at the onset of the academic year 1995/1996. Students were admitted to the three established colleges at that time: Sciences and Arts, Economics and Administrative Sciences and Educational Sciences. Presently, the University encompasses more than thirteen colleges, and that number is likely to increase in the very near future.

As mentioned above, the College of Arts at the Hashemite University is one of the first three colleges of the University that were established at the opening phase; it has been in existence since 1995. Until the end of the academic year 2004–2005, there was a combined College of Sciences and Arts, but they were separated in 2005 to give each of them more independence and improve their academic outcomes. The College has three departments: Department of Arabic Language and Literature, Department of English Language and Literature and the Department of Human and Social Sciences.

The Department of English Language and Literature was established in 1995, which is the same year the University was established. It offers two majors: English Language and Literature and Literary and Cultural Studies. Our study covers courses from both majors. The study plan for the B.A. degree in English comprises 132 credit hours that are divided as follows: twelve hours including obligatory university requirements, fifteen hours covering elective university requirements, twenty-one hours are obligatory faculty requirements, fifty-seven hours are obligatory departmental requirements, and twenty-four hours are offered as elective departmental requirements. In addition to these, the student should take three more credit hours as a free course that he/she can choose from any college. Out of these entire courses, we are mostly concerned with those offered as obligatory and elective departmental requirements. Some of the obligatory courses that belong to this category include: English Literature from the Beginnings to 1660, English Literature from 1660 to 1798, Introduction to the Novel, Introduction to Drama, American Literature and Classical Literature. On
the other hand, elective courses include (but they are not limited to) World Literature, Modern Novel, Comparative Literature and Literary Criticism.

As for the study plan for the other major offered by the department (Literary and Cultural Studies), the total number of its credit hours is similar to that of the English major. These are distributed in the same way as well. Some of the obligatory departmental requirements for this major include: Introduction to Arab Culture, Introduction to American Culture, American Literature, Introduction to Western Thought, Introduction to Third World Cultures, Cultural Globalization and English Literature. The elective courses, on the other hand, include Literature in Latin America, Comparative and Cultural Studies, African Literature, American Studies and Literary Globalization.

Because of the large number of these courses, the study will concentrate only on those courses that best reflect the students’ response to Anglo-American literature and culture in both majors. Such courses include Introduction to the Novel, American Literature, Modern Novel, Introduction to American Culture and American Studies. While these courses concentrate on different literary genres, representative authors and different periods and trends in English and American literature, they also give a general idea about Western cultures in general. So, examining the course contents and the student responses to these contents in particular is made pertinent to the core aims of this study.

In a recent article entitled "The English Department in the Arab World Re-Visited: Language, Literature, or Translation? A Student's View," Aladdin Al-Kharabsheh, Bakri Al-Azzam, and Marwan M. Obeidat define literature as "the entire writings that best describe and illustrate a specific language, time, place, people, event and culture" (970). They also remark that in studying literature, students "can have a clear image of or idea about beliefs, customs, arts and human cultural products at a particular time and place" (970). Layla Al-Maleh expresses a similar idea when she says that a literary text is assumed
to be "the reflection or example of social, historical, and ideological forces at a given time and place" (6). So, one can see the inevitable relation between literature and culture. Literature, one can say, is the kind of writing that best describes the culture of any people at any time or place. This standpoint can without a doubt be noticed in this study in the responses of many students who have expressed their opinions about the whole culture instead of restricting themselves to the questions that ask them about the academic content of the various literature courses they have studied.

One of the most important courses to be considered for the purposes of the present study is American literature. This course is an obligatory course for both English and Cultural Studies majors. It is a general survey course that aims at introducing students to the major trends and authors in American literature from the beginnings to the modern period. The primary objective of this course is to offer a comprehensive historical and critical survey of the American literary tradition and examine seminal themes, styles and techniques in American literature (including short stories, non-fictional prose, and poetry) from the first European settlement to the establishment of the U.S.A. as an independent industrialized nation in the present time. The course material is chosen in such a way as to demonstrate selected works by major authors whose writing indicates the historical and cultural place of movements, schools and regions in the development of what has come to be seen as typically "American" literature. The course also provides the student with conceptual tools for understanding the preoccupations of representative American writers as Anne Bradstreet, Jonathan Edwards, Franklin, William Cullen Bryant, Emerson, Hawthorne, Poe, Thoreau, Melville, Twain, Pound, Eliot, Faulkner—to mention just a few. And the course objectives include, as examples, the following:
1 To provide the student with a detailed outline of American culture and, therefore, literature, and to acquaint him / her with the life and time of the major figures of the American literary tradition, and with the most representative works from different periods of American literature.

2 To enhance his/her ability to read, comprehend, discuss, and analyze the assigned text(s) critically. Special emphasis is placed on the cultivation of critical thinking, writing, and conversational skills.

3 To hone his/her ability to think independently and also help him/her to develop original thoughts, ideas and themes about the texts studied in class.

4 To improve the student's language skills through reading, writing and discussion.

According to the study plan of both majors, it is the only course that deals with American literature. In their article "The Reception of American Literature in Jordan," Nazmi Al-Shalabi and Marwan M. Obeidat provide a full account of the possible reasons for the scarcity of this course in the Arab World English Department curriculum, not only at the Hashemite University, but also at most of public and private Jordanian and Arab universities. They convincingly argue that American literature has lost most of its battles to carve out a place in English departments in Jordan because of American biased policies in the Middle East region. Thus American literature has been struggling for acceptance in the region for a long time. "Unless these policies change and become balanced," Al-Shalabi and Obeidat also argue, "the place of American literature won't change for the better, and it'll continue to be as it has so far been, just a very minor part of the English department literary tradition" (1).

Some scholars carry this argument to the furthest extremes arguing against the very idea of teaching English and American literature in English departments of Arab universities. John Monroe, Mohammad Asfour, Eid Dahiyat and Muhammad Zoghul emphasize
the argument that the cultural and social values embodied in the English literary tradition are alien to the moral and social values held by Muslim Arab students. Similarly, Zoghul, in "Restructuring the English Department in Third World Universities: Alternative Approaches for the Teaching of English," argues that all English literature teems with "racist, reductionist, prejudiced and hostile views of our own" (221). He also questions the validity of incorporating the literature component in the English department of a Third World country. He adds that the language of literature deviates from natural or common language. Finally, Zoghul emphasizes in his study above that the knowledge of English language appears to be too distinct from the knowledge of Anglo-American literature.

On the other hand, other scholars stress the importance of teaching Anglo-American literature in the English departments of Arab universities. Some of the proponents of this view are Marwan M. Obeidat, M. H. Salih, R. Webster, and Layla Al-Maleh. Obeidat, for instance, argues that students should learn English language in its actual context in literature. "Without immediate acquaintance with words and idioms in their actual context of literature," he maintains, "the formal knowledge of grammar and grammatical rules alone is futile, if not worthless" (33). He as well raises the issue of exposing Arab-learners to Anglo-American literature through various forms of writing like fiction, poetry, drama and the essay. Similarly, Salih emphasizes the same view by saying that language skills seem to develop through studying literature in English (25).

Layla Al-Maleh holds a similar, though different in form, view and she emphasizes the importance of teaching English Literature to Arab/Muslim students. In her article "English Literature and Arab Students," she recommends teaching literature amorally and encouraging free interpretation in order to avoid alienating these students. She emphasizes that teaching English literature to Arab students is a highly challenging task to the teacher (269). On the one hand, she argues (Ibid) that the teacher "needs to construe the text by
positioning it within the cultural and social setting that originally produced it." She adds (Ibid), the teacher "needs to relate the students to the assigned work by creating a certain degree of referentiality within their mental and emotional constructs so as to liaise them to it and trigger identification and empathy." She also remarks that the teacher should try his/her best to reach out for a universal truth (274). By doing so, the teacher, she maintains (Ibid), "is doing more than asserting the presuppositions of a certain race, religion, or time in history; he is in fact confirming commonality and accord of human experience, an experience that transcends locality and forges recognizable frames of reference." Al-Maleh concludes by asserting that Muslim Arab students should read English Literature amorally (274).

One of the most useful distinctions to be made and considered in this study and similar studies is the distinction Al-Maleh makes between acceptance and agreement. Al-Maleh suggests that acceptance is not so tightly related to belief (274). "If an argument is right," she argues (Ibid), "then the Reader can "accept" the moral presuppositions of a work without necessarily agreeing with it." This approach will give the reader some freedom of interpretation, and thus; Muslim Arab students can "accept the text, reject it, feel suspicious about it, adopt it, or simply feel totally neutral towards it away from the hegemony of the dominant criticism which, more often than not, is western oriented" (273-274).

So, one can conclude that Arab scholars of English are strongly divided regarding the best methods of teaching Anglo-American literature to Arab students. This division is similar to that seen in the students' responses to the questions raised by this study. These responses can be divided into three groups. Some students have positive reactions towards both Anglo-American literature and culture, others have positive reactions to the literary texts they have studied, but they have negative reactions to the culture embodied in these texts, and few of them have negative reactions for both literature and culture. In general, we can say that while some students view the English
literature courses they have studied as bridges that will help them understand Anglo-American literature and culture; some others view these courses as walls that strengthen their alienation from these literatures and cultures.

Ninety-five out of the one hundred and fifty respondents belong to the first group, which is equal to 63.3% of the whole sample group of respondents. These students/respondents express their positive impression towards studying different literature courses. As the written responses revealed, these students are impressed by the windows of experience that these courses have opened to them. They think that studying different literary texts that belong to different backgrounds and cultures will open their eyes in two ways: first, it will enable them to have a better ability in reading and interpreting literary texts; second, it will expose them to different cultures, as literature is possibly the best kind of writing that reflects the culture of any nation, as mentioned earlier in this study. Here is a sample of some responses made by students from this group that includes the following:

- I liked this course because it has enabled me to look at another culture and know more about it.
- This course has given me good impression about Western culture. I am especially attracted to the technology and complexity of western countries.
- We need to strengthen our intercultural relations with the West by contacting them in several ways, especially the internet.
- I like the course so much because it has enabled me to have good background information about English and American literature, especially the different styles of the writers and the various themes they discuss.
- We need to organize more seminars in which people from the East and the West meet to discuss common concerns.
- When we study English literature, we will be more considerate of the West.
- I have learned from this class how to start dialogue with the other.
- This course (Introduction to American Culture) has helped me know more about the conflict between Whites and Blacks in America.
- This class teaches me many things about American history, economy, religion, education and many other things. It also teaches me how to be flexible and accept other views.
- There are many qualities that make the American culture the best all over the world, especially the technological advances and the strength of its economy.
- This course shows me the importance of studying other people's way of thinking, which will help us to know the best way to deal with them.
- This class has helped me become a good reader of English literature. I have learned how to think critically and how to go beyond what is common sense. The information I have learned in this course has helped me correct many negative ideas I used to have about western civilization. In fact I have learned how not to judge people by their appearances.
- This class has taught me how to think rationally and avoid being emotional in my judgments. It has also taught me how to differentiate between different meanings of similar words and how to relate the meaning to the general context of the story.
- American people are just like us, they are human beings who have emotions and feelings, they love and hate, etc.
- Literature teaches us a lot of new things about our own life, it opens our eyes on some facts we have never known about, we known before. Studying Anglo-American literature in particular has helped us put ourselves in Western people's shoes, and thus correct our misconceptions about them.
- Literature is priceless; it can change people's life. Through literature, we can live in a better world; we can realize our dreams of love and peace sharing, instead of hatred and wars.

- I find enjoyment in the indulgence of reading and searching for more information about Anglo-American literature and culture. The course content has provided me with the pleasure of enlightenment. Indeed, not only has this course opened new windows to me, but it has also whispered to me enticingly to read and know more, even to re-read what I have already read.

- Literature is a means of imitating real life.

- It is good to know the past, but what is better is to know the present where we live.

- Anything in life has no meaning independently. People themselves have no meaning if each one lives alone.

- This class has changed my ideas about literature. I used to think that literature is only related to stories, drama and poetry; but in this class, I have found that it is much more complex than including these things. When we read literature, we should always look behind the written text.

- In this class, I have realized that a single word can destroy the whole humanity if it is not used properly.

- This course has helped me be more familiar with human behavior.

- Depending on the information I have got in this course, I can now compare between Western and Eastern cultures.

- In the past, I did not respect American culture at all, but now I have a desire to read more about it and I may change my opinion about it because mass media usually presents it in a negative way. This course gives me some clues to deal with and understand other cultures.

- This course (American Literature) has taught me how to read America as a written "text."
From responses such as these, one can notice how useful it is to teach Anglo-American literature to Arab students. These students view English literature courses that they have studied in the English department as bridges that will help them understand Western culture. Many of them believe that these courses have enabled them to have a better view about this culture and its people. They used to have a negative view about this culture, but they have changed their opinions after taking these courses. They think that their negative impressions are shaped by the mass media and the internet. Some students have said that English literature courses taught them how to be flexible and to accept other views, not necessarily agree with them, as Layla Al-Maleh has indicated in her article referred to earlier in this study. Other students have emphasized that these courses helped them to know how Western people think, and thus find the best way to deal with them. One student summarizes many of these positive opinions by saying that "through literature we can live in a better world, we can realize our dreams of love sharing and peace, instead of hatred and war."

However, it is important to take into consideration that one main reason for these positive responses from students about English literature courses is the way these courses are taught to them. Many students believe that they have changed their opinion about Western culture because of the influence of some instructors who present the material objectively and intellectually and encourage critical thinking and free interpretation. As mentioned earlier in this study, Layla Al–Maleh suggests in her article, "English Literature and Arab Students," that instructors should teach English Literature amorally in order to avoid alienating students and to encourage free interpretation. By adopting this method, students can accept the moral presupposition of a certain work without necessarily agreeing with it. This attitude can be seen in many of the students’ responses from the first group. Many of them argue that some instructors strongly encourage critical thinking by asking them about their own
individual views about the different literary works they study and also asking them to analyze these works in detail to find out about their themes, characters, point of view, etc. One student puts it this way: "In many English literature classes, the instructor encourages me to THINK, not to memorize information."

The second group of students is about those who have positive reactions to the literary texts they have studied but, albeit, negative ones to the culture embodied in them. The number of these students is much less than those of the first group. This group includes thirty-eight students, which is equal to 25.3% of the whole sample group. Students in this group have found that English literature courses are good enough because they provided them with enough background information about Anglo-American literature in general and English literature in particular. However, in their responses to Western culture, it seems that these students are strongly influenced by two factors: the first is the moral presuppositions embodied in the literary texts they have studied, and the second is the Western biased policies in our region. As mentioned earlier in this paper, some scholars like Marwan M. Obeidat and Nazmi Al-Shalabi refer the scarcity of the American literature course in the English curriculum of the Arab World English Department to these biased policies. Some other scholars are even against the very idea of teaching Anglo-American literature in the English departments of Arab universities altogether. One of these scholars, who is also already mentioned earlier in this paper, is the late Mohammad Zoghul; he says that such literature is racist and prejudiced. He, in fact, maintains that it carries hostile views to our own. The researchers think that this view seems to be an overgeneralization that takes things to the furthest extremes simply because not all English literature is racist and prejudiced; may be only a small part of it. Nowadays, we live in a world that is moving towards globalization, emphasizing a dialogue between different civilizations rather than a clash between them. Since literature is a
reflection of the time in which it is written, we tend nowadays to see
more empathy than hostility in literature all over the world.

A sample of some of the students’ responses from the second
group includes, as examples:

- I no longer look at America as a dream place.
- I have learned from this class that America started as a
  religious country, but I think that nowadays it is more of a
  secular country. Also, I think that we should not be
  fascinated with their culture because it is the culture that invades
  our own and eventually destroys it. My grade in this course is
  not good enough, but I think that it is one of the best courses I
  have studied about culture because of the useful information I
  have got in it, which broadens my perspective about culture in
general and about the American culture in particular.

- I don’t like way that American people look at Arabs as being
  odd, exotic, uneducated and uncivilized people. I know this
  piece of information from this course (Introduction to American
  Culture). The course has helped me know many things about
  American customs, manners, habits and traditions.

- In spite of all the claims of freedom and equality in America,
one may find a lot of oppression and discrimination, especially
  by the Whites against the Blacks.
- Western people care only about money and materialistic
  things. They forget all about the spiritual aspects in their life.
- Western people care only about appearances.
- Most Western people don't believe in God.
- There is a lot of corruption, immorality and illegitimate sexual
  relationships among Western people.

It is clear from these responses that this group of students is
very much affected by the moral presuppositions embodied in the
literary texts they have read. They are, more or less, affected by the
Western biased policies in the Middle East. As Nazmi Al-Shalabi and Marwan M. Obeidat argue in their article entitled "The Reception of American Literature in Jordan" referred to earlier in this study, some students are affected by the American biased policies in the Middle East region, which affects their response to American literature as a whole. One can understand such expected reactions to Anglo-American literature and culture from Arab students, but it is erroneous to forget many other positive reactions as seen from the first group of students. In any culture there are some positive aspects and some other negative ones, and it is always better to concentrate on the positive aspects and try to tolerate the negative ones because tolerance is the first step to eliminate any negative practices in any society. Literature and the way to be taught might be the best starting point in this regard.

The last group constitutes seventeen students, which makes 11.4% of the whole sample group. These students/respondents have negative responses to both Anglo-American literature and culture. Some of the students' responses from this group include:

- I didn't like the course at all, neither did I like the Western culture because it is full of corruption.
- Western people care only about materialistic things.
- This course is so difficult, it requires a lot of time for reading. I have to read and analyze everything. I found that there is a lot of corruption in the Western culture.
- The course contains a lot of difficult vocabulary. I didn't like many of the stories we studied because they are also difficult.
- The instructor's method of teaching is very difficult.
- I learned from this course that American culture is not really American; it is made up from different sub-cultures because America is populated by many ethnicities and races, so there is nothing that we can really call "American culture."

By analyzing these responses, it is possible to notice that this small number of students have negative responses to Anglo-American
literature and culture because of two main reasons. First, because they find it "difficult." Second, because they consider it "full of corruption." As for the first reason, we can say that describing Anglo-American literature as "difficult" is a relative judgment that varies from one student to another. In addition, this judgment is not valid enough to come up with any conclusion because it is made only by 11.4% of the whole sample group of respondents. It seems that these students have negative responses to all subjects, not only to Anglo-American literature, because they find them "difficult." As for the second reason, these students find that Western cultures and literatures at large are "full of corruption" because they are very much driven by moral and religious presuppositions. It is true that Western cultures and literatures might have some "corruption" in them, but this "corruption" is not peculiar to these cultures only. In addition, "corruption" for these students might not be the same "corruption" that Western people think about. In order to judge Western culture more objectively, these students need to avoid any presuppositions about this culture and see any possibility of accepting it, not necessarily agreeing with it, as Layla Al-Maleh says.

To conclude, we can say that students have many conflicting responses to Anglo-American literature and culture. Most students view Anglo-American literature courses as bridges that help them understand Western culture. This reaction can be seen in the responses of the first two groups of students identified in this study. The students comprising these two groups, which constitute about 88.6% of the whole sample group, think that studying literature helps them to be flexible and accept other culture. In sum, studying Anglo-American literature, these students maintain, helps them judge "the other" rationally and objectively, rather than emotionally.
Works Cited


Zughoul, Mohammad. "The Unbalanced Programs of the English Departments in the Arab World." In *Papers from the First Conference on the Problems of Teaching English Language and Literature*...

MARWAN M. OBEIDAT is Professor of American literature at the Hashemite University, Jordan, where he teaches courses in the areas of American literature, American studies, American culture and literary American on focusing theory, cultural and community problems in America, gender relations identity, in America, Arab-American studies and the problems of criticism and theory as they relate to the practice of American and cultural studies. He has been a Visiting Scholar at the universities of George Washington (GWU), Northern Illinois (NIU), Oklahoma (OU), Western Michigan (WMU), Bridgewater State College (BSC), University of Texas at El-Paso (UTEP) and the University of Texas at Arlington (UTA) in the United States. Obeidat has written over thirty five articles all published in peer reviewed journals in the U.S., Britain, Germany, France, Finland, Korea and Canada. He is the author of American Literature and Orientalism (1998). He's the First Vice President of the Association of Professors of English & Translation at Arab Universities (APETAU). And he sits on the Editorial Board of American Studies International (ASI), The Journal of American History (JAH), Connections: American History and Culture in an International Perspective as well as Scientific Journals International (SJI) (USA)

KIFAH (MOH'D KHAIR) ALI AL UMARI earned his BA in English at The University of Jordan, Amman in 1991, his MA in English Literature from the same university in 1995, and his PhD in English Literature at The
University of Texas at Arlington in 2006. He has taught English for more than five years in different public and private schools in Jordan before he worked as a teaching assistant of English in different universities, including The University of Jordan, The Hashemite University, and The University of Texas at Arlington. He works now as an Assistant Professor of English literature at the Department of English Language and Literature in The Hashemite University, Jordan. He works also as Director of the Office of International Relations at the same university. His research interests include nineteenth- and twentieth-century American literature, detective fiction, modern theories of literary criticism, and cultural studies. Email: k.m.alumari@hu.edu.jo Kifah_omary@hotmail.com