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Misuses of literacy? An insight into the knowledge of British and American literature among students of English in Poland

The main aim of the article is to examine to what extent and how studying English philology in Poland at the beginning of the twenty first century affects one's literacy. It focuses on the results of an action research study of the reception of British and American literature among students of English in Poland. The study consisted of a quantitative part, which comprised two surveys conducted in 2003-2004 and 2018 and a qualitative part. The main aim of the surveys was to obtain an insight into the knowledge of British and American literature and culture of 514 students of English at the tertiary level in a number of educational institutions in Poland. The final aim of the research project was to gather evidence on the basis of which some evaluation of the content and ways of teaching of literature courses could be done. The results of the survey are used to propose a number of practical solutions whose implementation into the curriculum could improve students' literacy skills.

Key words: literacy, teaching literature, British literature, American literature, student knowledge and preferences, the canon

1. Introduction

Although the topic of teaching literature to students at the university level has recently been thoroughly researched (Aleksandrowicz-Pędich, 2003; Uścińska-Kostrzewa 2005; Cohen, 2011; Popławska, 2015), it is hoped that the present study sheds some new light on the problem of developing literacy through reading literary texts. The paper focuses on literacy levels among university students and its main aim is to examine to what degree and in what ways studying English philology in Poland at the beginning of the twenty first century affects one's literary and cultural preferences.

The inspiration for the title of this article comes from Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working Class Life*. Originally published in 1957, the book examined the influence of mass media on British society after the Second World War

(Hoggart, 1992). Actually the intended title for the book was *The Abuses of Literacy* because Hoggart was very critical about the types of publications that became the most popular reading matter in the 1950s (1994: 32). Since its publication, the book has been regarded as a main influence in English and media studies and as a founding text in cultural studies. Hoggart (1980) understands literacy very broadly as “the state of intellectual training at various levels of education” and he is particularly interested in “the relevance of literature to that training” (p. 74).

2. Literacy in tertiary education

After a justification of the choice of the title, however, there seems to be a need for a more specific defining of the concept of literacy, which in its basic dictionary meaning is “the state of being able to read and write” (Longman, 2009: 1021). Keefe and Copeland (2011: 93) show how the meaning of the concept changed in the second half of the twentieth century, from a 1957 UNESCO statement that “a person is literate who can with understanding both read and write a short simple statement on his (her) everyday life” to a definition of Reading Literacy as “an individual’s capacity to understand, use and reflect on written texts, in order to achieve one’s goals, to develop one’s knowledge and potential and to participate in society”, which was formulated by The Program for International Student Assessment in 2006. Thus, literacy is not only a basic human right but also a means to develop oneself and fulfil one’s aspirations as well as to function in a particular community.

Swaffar and Arens (2005), on the other hand, focus on literacy in the area of tertiary education. They see literacy as the main mission of the humanities and foreign language programs, claiming that it “empowers individuals to enter societies; to derive, generate, communicate, and validate knowledge and experience; to exercise expressive capacities to engage others in shared cognitive, social and moral projects; and to exercise such agency with an identity that is recognized by others in the community” (Swaffar and Arens, 2005: 2). What is of even greater interest to foreign language teachers, they postulate a holistic approach integrating the study of literature and culture into every level of the curriculum, claiming that “literacy comprises more than the language forms, canonical works, and the everyday life experienced in that language’s world” (Swaffar and Arens, 2005: 4). Indeed, what Swaffar and Arens (2005: 6) demand is that foreign language students should possess cultural literacy which is not merely “the mastery of a mass of facts about a culture” but first and foremost “a complex understanding of the communication, knowledge, and authority frameworks of a culture”. It is suggested that by studying multiple genres, both popular and elite, students can learn to understand numerous communicative frameworks and thus develop various genre literacies or “multiliteracies appropriate for advanced knowledge” (Swaffar and Arens, 2005: 8).

3. The literary canon

Another issue that needs to be addressed in the context of literacy and literary studies is the canon, which could be defined as “a body of privileged and prescribed texts which are assumed to be of “classic” status and therefore automatically worthy of study” (Pope, 2003: 186). Easthope (2005: 166) claims that, having joined the canon of the high cultural tradition, individual works are treated by literary scholars like monuments “within the greater unity of the intersubjective canon”. These texts enjoy privileged status as prototypes, setting norms for the readers and writers to follow or react against (Swaffar and Arens, 2005:157).

In practical terms, the canon of English literature is constituted by set texts on courses taught in schools, colleges and universities at the English Departments. Although in the past these texts tended to have been written by “Dead White European Males” or “Dead White European Middle-to-Upper Class Males”, recently there has been a shift towards plural or open canons, in which classical books representing high culture are complemented by more contemporary texts, usually associated with popular culture, and texts written by decentred subjects, i. e. authors previously marginalized because of gender, social class, and ethnicity (Pope, 2003: 188). Easthope (2005: 167) warns that there is a real danger in not accepting contemporary publications into the canon as it may result in “the frozen syllabus”, where the past is represented as an ideal order and, consequently, the students may feel totally unable to position themselves in identification with the authors or characters or to relate to the themes and topics.

If Swaffar and Arens (2005) are right in claiming that “literacy comprises more than [...] canonical works” (p. 4), it could be argued that the preferences for non-canonical works in the students’ perceptions of British and American literatures cannot be regarded as misuses of their literacy. On the contrary, Polish students’ knowledge of texts from outside of the frozen syllabus of Anglo-American literature could be regarded as evidence of their mastering multiple literacies in English.

4. Materials and methods

The article presents and discusses the results of an action research study into the reception of British and American literature among students of English in Poland. The research consisted of a quantitative part, which comprised two surveys conducted in 2003-2004 and 2018, in which the questionnaire “Preferences in the reception of literature among students of English Philology” was used (see Appendix 1) and a qualitative part conducted in 2018. The main aim of the surveys was to obtain an insight into the knowledge of British and American literature and culture among students of English at the tertiary level in a number of educational institutions in Poland (see Michoński, 2007). The questionnaires were constructed in such a way as to reveal students’ literary and cultural preferences and establish a correlation between the preferences and the knowledge. Nonprobability sampling was used as all the students of the selected educational institutions who were present on the particular dates were examined. Because of the potential bias of the

sampling technique, the collected samples may not represent the whole population of the students of English in Poland. However, it is hoped that inferences about the sample make it possible to gain an understanding of certain trends due to the principle of “analytical generalization” (see Yin, 2014).

The first survey was conducted between 23 September 2003 and 26 May 2004, when the questionnaire was completed by 440 first and third year students of English from the following institutions: Marie Curie University, University of Warsaw, Teacher Training College in Warsaw, Teacher Training College in Chełm, Teacher Training College in Zamość, College of Foreign Languages in Poznań, University of Białystok and Pope John Paul II State School of Higher Education in Biała Podlaska. The second survey took place between 6 and 20 April 2018 when 74 first, second and third year students of English studying at the Department of Neophilology in Pope John Paul II State School of Higher Education in Biała Podlaska were examined.

The qualitative part, which was conducted in April 2018, consisted of a set of semi-structured interviews with second and third year students of English about their literary preferences and about the evaluation of the courses of literature taught at Pope John Paul II State School of Higher Education in Biała Podlaska (see Appendix 2). The final aim of the research project was to gather evidence on the basis of which some evaluation of the content and ways of teaching of literature courses in the Department of Neophilology in Pope John Paul II State School of Higher Education in Biała Podlaska could be done. Hopefully, the results of the survey could also help propose a number of practical solutions whose implementation into the curriculum could improve students’ literacy.

5. Results

5.1 Results of the 2003-2004 survey

Generally, the responses to Question 1, which was about the favourite book, suggest that the students were rather keen readers. The respondents found this point easy as they presented 403 responses (91.5%) with as many as 228 types of responses. Of these 37.5% referred to American literature, 23.4% to British literature, 12.2% to Polish literature and 25.5% to other European literatures. However diversified, the choices had little in common with the canon of either British or American literature. Instead, the student preferences reflected their taste in popular literature, which is evident from the most frequently mentioned titles: J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* (5.5%), Paulo Coelho’s *The Alchemist* (3.7%) and Mikhail Bulgakov’s *Master and Margarita* (3.2%). This fascination with the popular is perhaps even more evident in the student references to Polish literature, where no more than 10 out of 38 titles could be regarded as belonging to the canon and the most frequently mentioned author was the fantasy writer Andrzej Sapkowski (2.2% of the valid responses). On the other hand, although references to American literature constituted the biggest group of the responses, the most widely read author of foreign fiction proved to be Paulo Coelho (8.2%),

followed by J. R. R. Tolkien (6.2%). However, it was William Wharton (4.7%) who had the highest number of titles mentioned as 8 of his novels were named, most notably *Birdy* (1.5%).

As far as the level of proficiency is concerned, not even a fifth of the respondents claimed to have reached fluency in English, while almost a third admitted to representing the intermediate level. More than a half of the respondents regarded their linguistic competence in English as advanced and merely 83 students (18.8%) considered themselves fluent in English.

In response to Question 3, the respondents claimed that they most frequently listened to songs in English (96.1%), watched films in the original (78.3%), visited websites in English (74.5%), used English in conversation (58.7%), watched English language programmes on TV (55.5%) and read popular literature (46.4%). They less frequently read the press (37.3%), translated into and from English (29.4%) or listened to the radio in English (25.8%). On the other hand, the respondents spent the least of their free time corresponding with pen friends (25.2%).

The answers to Question 4, where the respondents were to tick the areas of life that interested them the most, are presented in the table below.

Table 1. Students' general interests according to the answers to Question 4 in the years 2003-2004

Area of interest	History	Geography	Politics	Religion	Law	Economy	Education	Tourism	Mass media	Literature	Art	Music	Film	Sport	Youth culture	Science and technology	Everyday life	International relations
%	32	32	18	22	6	5	23	44	41	56	33	75	75	23	35	12	52	23

The most popular choices are connected with entertainment (film, music and literature) and everyday life of people living in English-speaking countries (everyday life, tourism and mass media). The least popular areas are science and technology, politics, law, and economy.

Question 5 revealed student preferences regarding British and American literature. It appears that the respondents preferred British literature as 38.9% claimed that they considered it to be more interesting while only 13.2% thought the same about American literature. However, more than a third of the respondents (38.6%) considered both literatures equally interesting.

In response to Question 6A, the respondents were to provide the titles of the most remarkable British literary texts. 215 students gave valid answers, which constitutes a response rate of 48.8%. The most frequently mentioned texts were considered to have been written by William Shakespeare, whose name was mentioned 32 times, and J. R. R. Tolkien, who was mentioned twice. Each of the

remaining was referred to once: Jane Austen, John Keats, William Wordsworth, Charles Dickens, James Joyce, George Orwell, Terry Pratchett and David Lodge. Altogether a variety of 57 titles of texts from different periods of British literature gives a fair picture of what the students considered the most valuable in and outside of the canon of English literature. The most popular choices are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Top 12 British literary texts according to the answers to Question 6A in 2003-2004

Title	Count	Valid percent
1. Hamlet	25	11.6
2. Romeo and Juliet	15	7.0
3. The Lord of the Rings	15	7.0
4. Macbeth	14	6.5
5. The Wuthering Heights	11	5.1
6. Beowulf	9	4.2
7. 1984	8	3.7
8. Waiting for Godot	6	2.8
9. Paradise Lost	4	1.9
10. Pride and Prejudice	4	1.9
11. The Picture of Dorian Gray	4	1.9
12. The Harry Potter series	4	1.9

An analysis of the remaining responses to the point about British literary texts indicates that the students mainly chose classic positions from the English literature canon, clearly favouring the works by William Shakespeare. Indeed, if all the references to Shakespeare and his literary output were added, including those to his name as well as to the two more titles of his plays, *Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Much Ado About Nothing*, the frequency would rise to 41%. The other canonical figures, whose several texts were mentioned, included: Jane Austen, William Blake, John Keats, William Wordsworth, Charles Dickens, George Orwell and perhaps John Fowles. On the other hand, the literary texts that are not often regarded as the canon of British literature were referred to in 35 responses (16%). They included mainly contemporary popular literature that the students probably read for pleasure in their free time. Here Tolkien's literary output was the most frequently mentioned (8%), followed by the *Harry Potter* series by Joanne K. Rowling (4%) and two novels by Douglas Adams. The remaining were single references to a variety of contemporary texts ranging in their level of complexity from Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones Dairy* to Sarah Kane's *4.48 Psychosis* or Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body*.

The responses to Question 6B about American literary texts were less numerous (148 out of 440, which is 33.6%) but more diversified than those about British texts. The number of responses that gave names of writers instead of titles of their works – 16 types of answers constituting almost 20% of valid responses – was higher than in the case of British literature. However, apart from

those responses that were not strictly to the point, the students referred to more titles of particular texts than in the case of British literature. The authors most frequently mentioned were Ernest Hemingway (5) and Stephen King (4), while the names of Emily Dickinson, Mark Twain, T. S. Eliot and F. Scott Fitzgerald and Philip K. Dick were each given twice. The remaining, i.e. Ralph Waldo Emerson, Edgar Allan Poe, Walt Whitman, William Faulkner, Robert Frost, John Steinbeck, and John Updike as well as the collective names of Puritans and Beatniks, were referred to by single respondents. It is noteworthy that, apart from the references to Stephen King, Philip K. Dick and John Updike, the above results seem to reflect a long-term interest of Polish students of English in certain American writers (see Aleksandrowicz-Pędich, 2003: 42).

Similarly, a strong correspondence between student preferences and the canon of American literature taught at English Departments in Poland could be noticed. As it can be seen in the following table, the majority of the most frequent responses refer to the classic texts in the history of American literature.

Table 3. Top 12 American literary texts according to the answers to Question 6B in 2003-2004

Title	Count	Valid percent
1. The Great Gatsby	8	5.4
2. Moby Dick	7	4.7
3. Declaration of Independence	6	4.1
4. A Streetcar Named Desire	5	3.4
5. Constitution	5	3.4
6. Leaves of Grass	4	2.7
7. The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn	4	2.7
8. The Catcher in the Rye	4	2.7
9. Birdy	4	2.7
10. Tales of Mystery and Imagination	3	2.0
11. Catch 22	3	2.0
12. Gone with the Wind	3	2.0

It is noteworthy that, apart from the American classics like *Moby Dick* or *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the table above includes two texts which could be considered primarily political rather than literary, i.e. the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. However, as Lucyna Aleksandrowicz-Pędich (2003: 223) observes, the Declaration of Independence is the most basic American text and the respondents clearly expressed their awareness of the role of the two key documents defining American identity. On the other hand, the absence of the more contemporary reading matter, apart from *Birdy*, or the more popular, except for *Gone with the Wind*, could suggest that the students did not read much American literature apart from the obligatory reading lists for their courses. However, an analysis of all the answers to the question on the most remarkable literary text reveals that around a quarter refer to texts from outside the canon. The non-

canonical answers were usually single student responses, extremely diversified as they ranged from the gonzo journalism of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* by Hunter S. Thompson to the comic book series *The Crow* by James O'Barr.

According to the results of the survey, the most important novelists in the history of British literature were Charles Dickens (13.6%), J. R. R. Tolkien (12.8%), Jane Austen (9.4%), George Orwell (8.5%), Oscar Wilde (6.8%) and Emily Bronte (4.7%). The results are hardly surprising. The popularity of J. R. R. Tolkien could be linked to the success of the film adaptation by Peter Jackson and the remaining authors are classic novelists in British literature. Moreover, such a hierarchy is consistent with the results achieved in Question 6. However, the next position on the list of the most remarkable British novelists might come as a shock, for it is occupied by two authors, each of whom was mentioned by 9 (3.8%) respondents: Agatha Christie and William Shakespeare. While the former could be interpreted as an indication of the novels the students read in their free time, the latter may only be treated as evidence of a lack of basic knowledge of the theory and history of literature. Other examples of "novelists" that never wrote novels are T. S. Eliot, Tom Stoppard, John Milton and George Herbert. The other problems with categorization pertained to the nationality of novelists and resulted in references to the following as British: Lucy Maud Montgomery, William Wharton, Kurt Vonnegut, Stephen King, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Erich Segall and Margaret Mitchell.

As far as American novelists are concerned, the survey revealed a number of problems with categorization. Firstly, the American writers Ralph Waldo Emerson and Tennessee Williams were thought to have written novels. Secondly, the British novelists Virginia Woolf, Graham Greene, Charles Dickens, Agatha Christie, Bram Stoker and J. R. R. Tolkien were considered American, as well as Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Karl May. It should be stressed, however, that the majority of the valid responses did include references to prominent American novelists. The most frequent answers mentioned Ernest Hemingway (13.3%), Stephen King (9.5%), Mark Twain (8.6%), William Wharton (7.6%), Edgar Allan Poe (6.7%) and Francis Scott Fitzgerald (4.3%). Again, there is a high degree of consistency with the results obtained in Question 6 because, apart from Wharton and Poe, the remaining writers were referred to as the authors of the most remarkable literary texts. Moreover, it should be stressed that almost one third of all the responses about favourite American novelists included references to authors rarely considered to belong to the canon, like the already mentioned Stephen King and William Wharton, but also Jonathan Carroll, John Grisham, Anne Rice, Roger Zelazny or Charles Bukowski. Thus, it may be concluded that the students were rather interested in American literature, which they perceived mainly through the novel.

The names of the 27 British and 18 American poets mentioned by the respondents belong to the canon and are consistent with the answers given in response to the question about the most remarkable literary text. In British literature the names of Shakespeare, Keats and Wordsworth recur in both points, whereas in American writing Dickinson, Whitman, Poe and Eliot are regarded as both greatest poets and authors of very important literary texts. However, in both cases there are also authors especially appreciated for their poems, for instance

William Blake and George Gordon Byron or Ezra Pound and Sylvia Plath, as it is presented in the table below.

Table 4. Most popular Anglo-American poets according to the answers to Question 7 in 2003-2004

Ranking position	British poets	Valid percent	American poets	Valid percent
1.	W. Shakespeare	23.4	E. Dickinson	31.2
2.	W. Blake	13.0	W. Whitman	12.1
3.	W. Wordsworth, T. S. Eliot	Each 8.4	E. A. Poe	7.8
4.	J. Keats	6.5	T. S. Eliot	7.1
5.	G. Byron	4.5	R. Frost, E. Pound	Each 6.4
6.	J. Donne, W. B. Yeats, S. Heaney	Each 3.2	S. Plath	5.0
7.	G. Chaucer, W. H. Auden	Each 2.6	R. W. Emerson, D. Thomas	Each 3.5
8.	S. Coleridge, O. Wilde, W. Whitman	Each 1.9	W. C. Williams	2.8

In response to the point about the most remarkable playwrights 200 respondents mentioned 10 British dramatists, while 47 students were able to name 7 American ones. As it could be predicted, the British category was dominated by William Shakespeare (80.5%), followed by two Irishmen, Samuel Beckett (8.0%) and George Bernard Shaw (3.5%), and the more contemporary Harold Pinter (2.0%). The other references (Christopher Marlowe, Oscar Wilde, T. S. Eliot, Tom Stoppard, Noel Coward and Sarah Kane) could be considered marginal, as each of them was given by one or two students (0.5-1.0%). Only one response about British dramatists was classified as erroneous (John Milton), whereas in the case of American drama errors constituted almost 15% of the responses and included British dramatists (William Shakespeare, Samuel Beckett and Tom Stoppard), American novelists (John Steinbeck, Francis Scott Fitzgerald and Toni Morrison) and Woody Allen. Further, evidence for the marginality of the category of drama in the student perceptions of American literature is the fact that the dramatists or the titles of their plays were hardly mentioned in response to the previous questions on the most remarkable writer or literary text. However, an analysis of the responses made it possible to identify a clear preference for the plays of Tennessee Williams, whose name appeared in almost half of the valid responses. The other popular American dramatists were Arthur Miller (14.9%), Eugene O'Neill (8.5%), T. S. Eliot, Edward Albee (each 4.3%), Sam Shephard and Imamu Amiri Baraka (each 2.1%).

5.2 Results of the 2018 survey

The results of the 2018 survey reveal that the students read literature in their free time, although not necessarily in the original as the majority of titles, even of British and American books, were given in Polish. Altogether 69 students (93.2%)

provided titles of their favourite books, which is a slightly higher percentage than in the first part of the survey. Also the relative variety of the answers was greater, as 59 types of responses were identified. Again American literature was the most popular choice (48.8%), followed by British (15.1%) and Polish (12.1%) literatures. The rest of the responses referred to other European (15.1%) and non-European (9%) writers, some of whom represent English-speaking countries, e.g. Canada, Australia and Ireland. As far as the canon is concerned, the only book that could compete with non-canonical titles was *Mrs Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf, scoring 6% of choices, exactly the same as Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* and Andrzej Sapkowski's *Wiedźmin*. The runners-up were *Master and Margarita* and *Game of Thrones* with 3% of responses each. Two other popular authors turned out to be Stephen King and Nicholas Sparks, both of whom were represented by two different titles (3%). What needs to be stressed is that, in spite of a great diversity of titles and authors, the books represented a rather coherent non-canonical set of literary genres, consisting of fantasy (23.1%), romance (13%), crime novel (11.5%), young adult novel (8.6%), non-fiction (7.2%) and science fiction (5.7%). Books representing the canon in British, American and Polish literature were regarded as their favourites by 13% of the respondents.

In 2018, the majority of the respondents considered themselves either intermediate (29 – 44.6%) or advanced (31 – 47.6%) users of English. Only 6 students assessed themselves as fluent, which represented 9.2% of the valid responses. Most of the respondents spent their free time listening to songs in English (94.5%), using the internet (87.8%) or watching films (77%). On the other hand, some of them claimed never to have corresponded with pen friends (27.6%), listened to an English-speaking radio station (23%) or watched TV in English (20%). As far as reading in English is concerned, the results are more difficult to interpret. While a relatively high number of students claim to frequently read literature (24.6%) and the press (40%), others admit to never reading literature (15.3%) or the press (20%) in English.

The answers to Question 4, where the respondents were to tick the areas of life that interested them the most, are presented in the table below.

Table 5. Students' general interests according to the answers to Question 4 in 2018

Area of interest	History	Geography	Politics	Religion	Law	Economy	Education	Tourism	Mass media	Literature	Art	Music	Film	Sport	Youth culture	Science and technology	Everyday life	International relations
%	38	18	11	11	12	5	12	23	43	28	35	77	74	27	22	28	50	12

As shown in the table, the most popular choices are connected with entertainment (film and music) and everyday life of people living in English-speaking countries. The least popular areas are economy, politics, religion, law, and international relations.

The responses to Question 5 revealed that in 2018 there was hardly any preference for either of the literatures as the majority of the respondents (54.1%) claimed to find them both equally interesting and a small minority (2.7%) considered them equally uninteresting. Still British literature was marginally more popular (16.2%) than American literature (14.9%).

In 2018 the response rate to the British part of Question 6 was 48.6% as 36 out of 74 students provided meaningful answers. The respondents also mainly followed the canon in their choice of the most remarkable literary texts, but there were a number of striking differences in comparison to the results from the survey conducted in 2003-2004. They remembered very well the classic texts written by the "Dead White European Males": William Shakespeare, Joseph Conrad and J. R. R. Tolkien. However, rather surprisingly, the most students chose J. K. Rowling with her *Harry Potter* books and Charlotte Bronte's *The Wuthering Heights* was also a popular choice as it is shown in the following table.

Table 6. Top 7 British literary texts according to the answers to Question 6A in 2018

Title	Count	Valid percent
1. The Harry Potter series	5	13.8
2. Romeo and Juliet	5	13.8
3. Hamlet	4	11.1
4. Heart of Darkness	3	8.3
5. The Wuthering Heights	2	5.5
6. The Lord of the Rings	2	5.5
7. Game of Thrones	2	5.5

Moreover, each of the following titles was mentioned by one respondent: *1984*, *The Picture of Dorian Grey*, *The Dubliners*, *Endgame*, *The Hobbit*, and *The Wanting Seed* by Anthony Burgess. The rather limited range of the answers could suggest that the students remembered *Harry Potter*, a global bestseller, much better than the classic books on the reading lists of their courses in British literature. What is perhaps of greater interest is the fact that the last position in the above table, the fantasy *Game of Thrones*, was written by an American, G. R. R. Martin.

On the other hand, the response rate for Question 6 as far as American literature is concerned was 35.1% because 26 students out of 74 provided valid responses, which included titles associated with the canon of American literature: *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, *The Great Gatsby* and *Moby Dick*. Each of them represented 7.6% of the valid responses. However, the majority of the responses were single titles of books not usually associated with the American canon of literature: such as popular fiction used as inspiration for blockbuster films (*The Godfather*, *Hunger Games*, *Twilight*), fantasy (*A Game of Thrones*, *The*

Painted Man, *The Lord of the Rings* [sic!]), autobiographical writing (*Factotum* by Charles Bukowski, *The Notebook* by Nicholas Sparks) or even “the lyrics of pop songs from the 1970s”.

In the 2018 survey Agatha Christie and William Shakespeare were still regarded as outstanding British novelists, together with the American G. R. R. Martin, who represents the increasingly popular genre of fantasy. In fact the genre is so popular that the two top positions on the student ranking list of novelists were taken by fantasy authors: J. K. Rowling (23.6%) and J. R. R. Tolkien (13.1%) and there were two other writers associated with the genre C. S. Lewis and Dan Abnett (2.6% each). The next group of responses represented the canon: John Milton (5.2%), Charles Dickens (7.8%), Jane Austen and Joseph Conrad (10.5% each). The remaining answers were single instances of novelists, predominantly associated with the canon: Daniel Defoe, Emily Bronte, George Orwell, Virginia Woolf and Anthony Burgess, with the only exception of Jojo Moyes, a contemporary romance novelist and screenwriter.

The results of the 2018 survey provide evidence for the popularity of American fiction among students of English as there was a far greater variety of authors and genres including numerous references to non-canonical writers. The most popular novelist was Stephen King (13.8%), an author of horror, supernatural fiction, suspense, science fiction and fantasy. He was followed by Suzanne Collins (11.1%), the author of *The Hunger Games* trilogy, which is a young adult dystopia. The third place on the ranking list of the most popular non-canonical writers was shared between Stephenie Meyer, best known for her vampire romance series *Twilight* and G. R. R. Martin, the author of the *Game of Thrones* series (5.5% each). It is noteworthy that the remaining popular fiction writers that single students regarded as the most remarkable American novelists were predominantly female: Margaret Mitchell, Tess Gerritsen, Regina Brett, Victoria Aveyard, Ann Brashares, Cassandra Clare, and Margaret Stiefvater. The canon, on the other hand, was represented by men: Mark Twain (8.3%), Francis Scott Fitzgerald (5.5%) and Jack London (2.7%). The other male writers who might or might not be regarded as canonical in American literature included the following: H. P. Lovecraft, Jerome Salinger, Charles Bukowski, Jack Kerouac, Philip K. Dick, and William Gibson. Each of them was mentioned once so, they represent 2.7% of the valid responses. There were also some problems with categorization here, as Rudyard Kipling, Alfred Hitchcock, Virginia Woolf, J. R. R. Tolkien and Daniel Defoe were regarded as American. Nevertheless, it could be argued that students of English in 2018 preferred American novels, which they read in their free time as none of the non-canonical writers was included in the syllabus of American literature.

Moreover, the names of 15 British and 12 American poets were mentioned by respectively 30 and 18 students, which further proves the claim that poetry is not very popular among students of English. The majority of the answers constituted references to canonical writers, for example William Shakespeare (26.6%), T. S. Eliot (13.3%), John Donne (6.6%), and William Wordsworth (6.6%), including the War poets (Wilfred Owen, Isaac Rosenberg, and Siegfried Sassoon). The only poets not belonging to the canon were Anne Clark (6.6%) and John Armstrong (3.3%).

American poetry, on the other hand, was represented by Emily Dickinson (33.3%), Edgar Allan Poe (16.6%) and Michael Madsen (16.6%), who is an actor, producer, director, writer, poet and photographer. There were also single references to Walt Whitman, Jim Morrison, the leader of The Doors, and Larry Fagin, a member of the New York School.

In the survey a marginalization of American drama could be noticed. Only 4 students provided valid responses to the question and the answers contained the famous Anglo-American writer T. S. Eliot, mentioned also as a British playwright by 4 students, as well as three non-canonical dramatists: Zoe Akins, George Francis Abbott and Neil Simon. British drama, on the other hand, was clearly dominated by William Shakespeare whose name was given in 71% of valid responses. The other dramatists regarded as remarkable in British literature were G. B. Shaw, Ben Travers, George Gordon Byron, and, surprisingly, the famous Scottish poet Robert Burns and Joseph Conrad, a Polish-born novelist.

5.3 Results of the 2018 interviews

On the whole, the students were relatively satisfied with the courses, claiming that they found them interesting and stimulating because the teachers were very well prepared for the classes and lectures. However, the respondents were also critical about a number of issues. First of all, they objected to the heavy work load that they had to cope with during their studies, which very often resulted in not having enough time to read the set texts. As a matter of fact, it turned out that very few students read the set texts in the original, or even their translations into the mother tongue. Not infrequently did they read the summaries of novels widely available at *CliffsNotes*, *SparkNotes*, *Shmoop* or other “cheat-sheet” websites. Sometimes instead of reading a novel they watched its film adaptation. They claimed that, apart from the lack of time, their survival strategies were caused by the length and the level of linguistic difficulty of the set texts. Some of the interviewees also raised objections to the frozen syllabus and the chronological order in which the texts were introduced, causing a hiatus between the subject matter of e.g. medieval romances and the students’ life experiences.

On the positive side, the students claimed to enjoy reading in their free time; however, usually not the type of literature discussed during British and American literature classes or presented in lectures. In fact numerous students would like to discuss more contemporary bestsellers in class and to introduce more correlation of the set texts in literature classes with their favourite books and literary genres, like detective fiction, fantasy, romance, thrillers, horrors, science-fiction and non-fiction, including auto/biography. The more ambitious ones would like to read and discuss “cultural texts about life and death, philosophical texts that make you think” and poetry, which “doesn’t take much time and makes you sensitive”. Some would very much like to watch film adaptations of novels in class or even productions of theatrical performances.

6. Discussion

6.1 The survey results

The introductory point in the questionnaire asked the respondents to provide one title of their favourite books. The main aim of this question was to find out what kind of publications students read in their free time and to what extent these represented the canon of literature in English. The responses to Question 1 revealed a high preference among students of English for popular literature and non-canonical authors and genres. It could be claimed that as far as reading books is concerned, the students represented rather high levels of literacy. It should be remembered, though, that in the majority of cases Question 1 tested their literacy in their native language, not in English.

In contrast, it was the students' perceived competence in the English language that Question 2 was focused on. It asked the respondents to assess their level of linguistic competence. The results obtained in Question 2 seem to support the claim that the linguistic competence of the respondents needed to be the priority as it seems to be a prerequisite for developing their literacy in English.

The main aim of Question 3 was to examine if a pillar of the identity of students of English could be created around the ways in which the respondents used the English language outside the classroom. Another aim was to examine their literacy in the English language. The results seem to suggest that the majority of respondents did treat English as a way of life rather than an academic field of study. Practicing literacy skills, i.e. reading literature and the press in the original as well as corresponding with English-speaking pen friends, is not as popular among students of English as less demanding free time activities like surfing the internet, watching films or listening to music. Hence it seems that, although the respondents seemed to share a certain identity connected with recreational consumption of products of Anglo-American culture, only a minority of them could be seen to involve themselves in more specialist activities. It is noteworthy that while the percentage of students in 2018 claiming to read the press remains similar to the 2003-2004 sample, reading literature in English is significantly less popular in the 2018 group (24.6% as compared to 46.4%).

The main aim of survey Question 4 was to examine the students' general interests and to determine their levels of interest in literature. A comparison of the results from the two surveys reveals a number of similarities over the years as far as the most and the least popular areas of interest are concerned. In both cases the students seem to be much more interested in entertainment and everyday life, the top choices being music and film, rather than academic disciplines, especially economy. These findings could be treated as evidence for the claim that English Departments are increasingly being chosen by candidates without specific academic interests. What is more, as far as literacy is concerned, it could be alarming that the place of literature on the ranking list of student interests in 2018, number 7, with exactly the same result as that attributed to science and

technology (28.3%), is much lower than in 2003-2004, when it occupied the third position with the score of 55.9%.

It is very likely that the results reflecting the students' general interests were to a large extent based not only on their hobbies and interests but also on their tertiary school education, where both British literature and American literature courses are offered. In order to examine student sympathies and preferences for these two cultures, Question 5 was included in the surveys. The respondents were required to decide whether in the field of literature one culture was more interesting than the other or if both cultures were equally interesting or equally uninteresting. Whereas in the first survey there could be seen a clear preference for British over American literature, in the second part that preference almost disappeared. In the year 2018 the majority of the respondents considered both literatures to be equally interesting, which is a reassuring result. However, there is also a marked increase, from 9.3% to 14.8%, in the answers in the "negative" columns ("Both are equally uninteresting", "It is hard to say" and "No answer"), which must cause concern.

The knowledge of Anglo-American literature was examined through statistical analysis of the responses to Questions 6 and 7. As the students worked under time pressure completing the questionnaires, it is hoped that the results reveal only the best remembered, i.e. most essential pieces of information.

Question 6 was aimed at establishing the links between student opinions about their academic interests, which were expressed in Question 4, and their knowledge of British and American cultures in the areas examined. The first point in Question 6, designed to test literary knowledge and preferences, asked the respondents to name the most remarkable literary texts in British and American literatures. The knowledge of literature among students of English was further tested in Question 7, where the respondents were asked to provide names of British and American novelists, poets and dramatists that they value the most. It seems that the students found the points about poets and dramatists more difficult to complete, for much fewer responses were given than in the case of novelists. On the other hand, poetry seems to be much less popular among students of English, judging by the low response rates and a very limited variety of answers to the point about the most remarkable British and American poets. The answers to the last literary point in Question 7, which asked about the most remarkable playwrights, suggest that drama, especially American, is also less popular than the novel.

The knowledge of literature among the students of English is to a much higher degree a result of their academic education rather than mere personal interest. It could be argued that the low response rate to Question 6B about the most remarkable American literary texts in the 2018 survey was probably caused by the fact that a course of American literature at the Department of Neophilology in Pope John Paul II State School of Higher Education in Biała Podlaska was offered only in the third year of studies. Consequently, first and second year students could only rely on their personal knowledge and preferences, providing the most remarkable titles of American literature.

However, it does not necessarily mean that even after completing the obligatory literature courses the students' knowledge and understanding of Anglo-American literature judged by the results obtained in Questions 6 and 7 in 2003-2004 and 2018 is profound and specialized. However, it does seem that while the literary preferences of the majority of the students examined were reflections of the reading lists and the canons of British and American literatures, a small but significant proportion did not rely heavily on the canon in choosing their favourite authors but developed their literacy reading texts from outside of the canon. Both of these options seem acceptable in comparison with the third, where the respondents exhibited serious problems with the categorization according to the nationality or literary genre.

6.2 The interview results

The opinions expressed by second and third year students of the Department of Neophilology in Pope John Paul II State School of Higher Education in Biała Podlaska during the semi-structured interviews to a large extent support the results obtained in the surveys. The third year students were interviewed during two Practical English Integrated Skills classes on 13th and 20th of April 2018. Having completed both the British Literature and the American Literature survey courses, they were able to provide in-depth answers to all the questions asked. On the other hand, the second year students, who were interviewed during a class of British Literature on 17th April 2018, could not evaluate the American Literature course as it was scheduled for the 5th semester.

7. Conclusions

First of all, it is apparent that the encyclopaedic knowledge of British and American literature among students of English as revealed by the study is far from comprehensive and thorough as the relatively low response rates and numerous erroneous categorizations in student answers suggest. Secondly, the knowledge, or rather the professed awareness of some canonical works in Anglo-American literature, does not automatically make them students' favourites since, as the research suggests, student literary preferences have little to do with the canon. In fact, it could be argued that a too ambitiously designed and conducted review course of British or American literature can even intimidate weaker students, discouraging them from attempting to read literature in the original. Thus, instead of increasing student literacy, it can practically stifle it.

On the other hand, it could be claimed that the root of the problem lies in the fact that in the twenty first century literacy in general, be it in the form of reading for pleasure or interest in literature, is on the decrease, especially among young people. Fortunately, the research results do not completely support this claim. On the one hand, it is true that over the years between 2003/2004 and 2018 there was a marked decrease from 55.9% to 28.3% in student interest in literature and a slightly smaller decrease from 46.4% to 24.6% in reading literature in English

outside of classes. However, on the other hand, the responses to Question 1 seem to suggest that students of English do read extensively, although not necessarily in English. Is there a solution to this problem? Is it possible to make students of English read extensively in English for pleasure in their free time?

The solution following from this study would have to take into consideration not only student command of English but also their literary and cultural preferences and incorporate them into a thematical rather than survey course of British or American literature, in which intense or close reading of excerpts of canonical texts would be followed by an analysis of non-canonical texts, also non-literary ones like films and popular music, using the methods of both Literary Studies and Cultural Studies. It is hoped that by comparing and contrasting a variety of texts and literary genres, including popular ones like fantasy or young adult fiction, in their cultural contexts, the students would not only learn to appreciate the canonical and non-canonical texts, but also develop critical literacy enabling them to question the values proposed by set texts rather than blindly accept them. Perhaps then even Richard Hoggart might be satisfied with the way students of English in Poland use their literacy.

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Appendices

Appendix 1.

Questionnaire “Preferences in the reception of literature among students of English Philology”

1. What is your favourite book? (title + author)

2. How do you rate your level of English proficiency?

- A) beginner B) intermediate
 C) advanced D) proficient

3. What do you use English for? Please tick your answer by inserting X in the appropriate places in the table.

Excluding classes at the university, I use English to...	Often	Rarely	Never
A read literature			
B read the press			
C listen to the radio			
D listen to songs			
E watch TV			
F watch films			
G surf the Internet			
H correspond with friends			
I talk			
J translate			

4. Which of the following areas interest you most?

- | | | |
|---|---------------------------------------|---|
| A) History <input type="checkbox"/> | B) Geography <input type="checkbox"/> | C) Politics <input type="checkbox"/> |
| D) Religion <input type="checkbox"/> | E) Law <input type="checkbox"/> | F) Economy <input type="checkbox"/> |
| G) Education <input type="checkbox"/> | H) Tourism <input type="checkbox"/> | I) Mass media <input type="checkbox"/> |
| J) Literature <input type="checkbox"/> | K) Art <input type="checkbox"/> | L) Music <input type="checkbox"/> |
| M) Film <input type="checkbox"/> | N) Sport <input type="checkbox"/> | O) Youth culture <input type="checkbox"/> |
| P) Science and technology <input type="checkbox"/> | | Q) Everyday life <input type="checkbox"/> |
| R) International relations <input type="checkbox"/> | | |

5. Which culture is, according to you, more interesting when it comes to literature?
Please tick one box.

I think that British culture is more interesting	I think that American culture is more interesting	I think both cultures are equally interesting	I think both cultures are equally uninteresting	It is hard to say

6. What, in your opinion, is the most remarkable literary text in

A) British literature?

B) American literature?

7. From among the British and American writers that you know, please choose the figures that you value most. At each point, please provide only one name.

	British	American
novelist		
poet		
playwright		

Appendix 2.

Interview questions

1. What kind of books do you read in your free time?
2. What literary genres are your favourite?
3. What particular books would you like to read for your British literature classes?
4. What particular books would you like to read for your American literature classes?
5. What literary genres would you like to discuss in your British literature classes?
6. What literary genres would you like to discuss in your American literature classes?
7. What did you like/dislike about your literature classes?

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