

**Cultural Productions and
the Teaching of English:
West Side Story as Text in
American Studies**

**Dr. Bendjeddou Med Yazid
Research Laboratory
LECUCRA/ Department of
English, Badji Mokhtar-
Annaba , Algeria.**

Abstract

*The article aims to discuss the use of cultural productions in the teaching of Foreign Languages, mainly English. I attempt to demonstrate that such a musical as **West Side Story** may be used as 'text' in order to help the students of English to investigate various aspects of American literature and civilisation, as well as the specificities of American English. My discussion of this topic is set against the background of the recent studies in Cultural Theory and Mikhail Bakhtin's view that any cultural production grounded in language may be considered as 'text'.*

Résumé

*L'article se propose d'étudier les contributions des productions culturelles dans l'enseignement des langues étrangères, notamment l'anglais. A travers l'analyse de **West Side Story** nous essayerons de démontrer que cette œuvre musicale peut-être d'un grand apport pour les étudiants afin de les initier à certains aspects de la littérature et civilisation américaines. L'étude utilise comme références théoriques la « Cultural Theory » et certains concepts de Mikhail Bakhtin.*

The purpose of this essay is to show the contributions of cultural productions in the teaching of English. Since language cannot be dissociated from its socio-cultural context, the use of cultural works may expose the student to real life situations and make the learning of English easier and more efficient. Moreover, the contributions of cultural productions in the teaching of English may be of greater importance, especially in such English departments and sections in

Algeria where the curriculum does not only focus on the teaching of language, but also consists of certain modules dealing with the literature and civilization of Anglo-Saxon countries. Hence, a film, a painting, a song or a journalistic piece of writing, may give to the students deeper insights into the history and culture of the United States and Great Britain.

However, I would like to mention that my aim, when dealing with this topic, is not to provide a recipe of techniques of how a cultural production is to be used in the curriculum of English teaching. Rather, through the analysis of *West Side Story*, I shall refer to some specific socio-cultural constructs and social practices that are reflected in this musical, which, if given greater attention such courses as American literature and civilization, and perhaps linguistics, may help give the student the means to comprehend the socio-cultural phenomena that shape the language he is dealing with.

The approach I have adopted in my analysis of *West Side Story* follows Mikhail Bakhtin's view that all cultural productions "rooted in language" may be referred to as text and that this view "has the salutary effect of breaking down the walls, not only between popular and elite culture, but also between text and context". Moreover, for Bakhtin the distinction between text and context is "an artificial one, for in fact there is an easy flow of permeability between the two". Text, as he also argues, "is at every point inflicted by history and shaped by events". (Stam 116)

As for my choice of something as popular as *West Side Story* as the subject of my analysis, it is somehow determined by the development of Cultural theory and its impact in the field of American Studies. In an essay entitled, "Listening to Learn and Learning to Listen: Popular Culture, Cultural Theory, and American Studies," George Lipsitz has indeed dealt extensively with the importance of contemporary Cultural Theory and its adoption by American Scholars. According to him, this concern with the relationship between cultural texts and social practices has drawn the interests of some scholars, mainly those belonging to the "Myth-and-Symbol School". Yet, as George Lipsitz also argues:

For all their attention to the role of language in shaping and reflecting social practice, the myth-and-symbol scholars still tended to make sweeping generalizations about society based upon images in relatively few elite literary texts, and they never adequately theorized the relationship between the cultural texts and social action(623).

Hence, in order to overcome these shortcomings some American scholars, like Bruce Kuklick and Gene Wise have “argued for a new American Studies, one that would be self-reflexive, pluralistic, and focused on the particular and concrete practices of American everyday life, while at the same time remaining comparative and cross-cultural.”(Lipsitz 623) George Lipsitz concludes his argument by suggesting that Cultural theory seems to achieve Wise’s goals because, as he states,

Contemporary Cultural Theory’s location of language within larger social and discursive contexts inevitably leads it toward cultural practices beyond literature, especially to popular culture. In recent years, many of the most effective applications of European Cultural Theory within American Studies have been presented within analyses of popular culture(623).

As Bernstein relates, the idea of staging a musical on a modern version of *Romeo and Juliet* set in the slums of New York, originated in 1949. After various postpones, exciting discussions, hard work and long rehearsals, the opening performance of *West Side Story* was finally held in August 1957. Although the work was initially received with mixed criticism, it was to become later one of the most popular artistic achievements in the United States and deeply ingrained in the cultural consciousness of Americans. Various reasons lie behind the success of *West Side Story*. Artistically, Bernstein’s musical appears as the first work to have “fulfilled Broadway’s long-standing desire for an integrated expression of drama, music and dance”.(*West Side Story* 2) In other words, it has managed to merge popular style with ‘high’ cultural expressions such as , ballet dancing, opera , and theatre. In addition, thanks to its themes and socio-historical references, *West Side Story* emerges as an epic that glorifies America

and celebrates its ideals. But, like some of the outstanding American artistic works, although this musical stresses the greatness of the New Nation, it also reflects, as the tragic ending of the story suggests, the uneasiness that characterizes America and its shaky foundations. Finally, *West Side Story* seems to have appealed to its various audiences because of its romantic plot and its universal themes such as, love versus hatred and love and death.

Briefly, *West Side Story*, deals with the rival tensions between two teenage gangs, the 'Jets' a self-styled *American* gang, and the 'Sharks' a group of young Puerto Ricans. Each gang strives to drive the other off the streets. Later, at the insistence of Tony, an agreement is reached between the Sharks and the Jets to have a fair bare-handed fight. On the appointed day, the gangs meet for the fight in a deserted area under a highway. After an exchange of harsh talk switch-blade knives appear and Riff, the leader of the Jets, and Bernardo, the leader of the Sharks, begin to fight. As a consequence, Riff is killed and Tony, grabbing his weapon, in turn knifes Bernardo. Losing control, the gangs join battle until they are interrupted by a police whistle. They flee leaving behind the bodies of Riff and Bernardo.

However, this sad conflict serves only as a background to a more tragic story: the romance between Tony, a 'Jet' and closest friend of Riff; and Maria, Bernardo's sister. Maria, newly arrived from Puerto Rico to marry her brother's friend, Chino, attends the dance at the Gym and meets Tony who, in spite of the hatred, between the gangs, falls in love with her. Later, when Tony pays a visit to Maria in the bridal shop where she works, Maria makes him promise to stop the fight between his gang and her brother's. But in spite of his efforts, Tony is unable to put an end to the conflict. On the contrary, during the fight between Riff and Bernardo, seeing that the latter has knifed his friend, Tony in turn kills Maria's brother.

Maria is unaware of what has happened and is gaily preparing to meet Tony until Chino bursts in her room and tells her that her brother has been killed by her lover. In spite of her grief, Maria is unable to send Tony away when he comes to see her. Later, Maria comes to know that Chino has seized a gun and has rushed out in search of Tony. Thus, she decides to go and warn Tony against Chino. At Midnight, Tony runs into her but their moment is brief. Chino appears from behind a building and shoots

Tony dead. Drawn together by the tragedy, the stunned gangs lift up the body of Tony and carry him off. (*West Side Story*, p.3)

As the above summary reflects, and as its authors conceived it, *West Side Story* is a modern version of *Romeo and Juliet*. Indeed, one can draw many parallels between Bernstein's work and Shakespeare's play. The 'modernity' of the musical is mainly related to its fresh and contemporary setting as well as to its protagonists. Hence, while the action of *Romeo and Juliet* takes place in the 16th century Italian city, Verona, *West Side Story* is set in the New York slums of the 1950's. And instead of the noble families of the Montagues and the Capulets, the rival protagonists in *West Side Story* are two teenage gangs. These features are the major differences. But however important they cannot overshadow the apparent similarities between *West Side Story* and *Romeo and Juliet*. For example, as is the case with Romeo and Juliet, Tony and Maria meet and fall in love with each other during a danced event. Moreover, like Romeo who kills Tybalt, Juliet's cousin, it is Tony who causes the death of Bernardo, Maria's brother. I would suggest, however, that one of the most striking similarities between the two works is embodied in the 'balcony scenes' of *West Side Story* and Shakespeare's play. It is indeed in these two important scenes that Tony and Maria, and Romeo and Juliet seal their love, respectively. Finally, it is worth mentioning that each of these two love stories develops in a hostile environment that ultimately causes its tragic ending.

West Side Story also reminds us of some of the great American novels such as, *The Great Gatsby* and *A Farewell to Arms*. Like Fitzgerald's masterpiece and the work of Ernest Hemingway, *West Side Story* also deals with love and death, yearning and frustration. One would suggest, for example, that because of their tragic fate Gatsby, and Tony shared a certain belief in American values and a conception of love which do not only make them appear "great", but also the "last of the romantics". Unlike lieutenant Henry and Catherine (*A Farewell to Arms*) who manage to preserve their love by running away from the warring front to the Swiss mountains, Maria and Tony could not escape their hostile environment. However, as the song 'Somewhere' reflects, like Henry and Catherine, also dream of a place where they can be free from prejudice and be happy. It is possible to carry on

the comparison further, but suffice it to say here that both *A Farewell to Arms* and *West Side Story* also seem to suggest that the restlessness of their respective characters and the failure of their love is the result of certain socio-historical and cultural tensions.

Half way through *West Side Story*, the sharks perform a song entitled "America". What emerges from the lyrics of this song is a celebration of America and of the American way of life. Thus, America is seen as a place of attraction for the deprived Puerto Rican immigrants who, like their predecessors of different nationalities, come to this "promised land" to get rich and fulfil their dreams. In the same song there is an emphasis on certain objects of desire, like the automobile, T.V., and the washing machine, because they imply freedom, comfort, and the enjoyment of a decent social status. The focus on these consumer goods, among others, seems to symbolize the technological progress of the United States, and the celebration of American capitalism. Even Rosalia, the homesick Puerto Rican girl, is fascinated by the material prosperity of America. Her purpose when coming to the United States, is clear. Not only does she want to enjoy the American prosperity and have its own share of it, but she is also determined to make her own relatives back home profit from the material wealth of America. As she claims, "I'll drive a Buick through San Juan (and) I'll give my cousins a free ride". Or, as she also adds, "I'll bring a TV to San Juan (and) I'll give them a washing machine" (16).

America also emerges as a dreamland, especially when it is contrasted with the poor Puerto Rico which remains, in spite of Rosalia's efforts to advertise the merits of her homeland, a place of poverty and depravity. This is clearly shown in the exchange of arguments between Rosalia and the seemingly assimilated Anita. When Rosalia expresses her admiration and attachment to Puerto Rico, Anita mockingly, and somehow cruelly, destroys her arguments by laying bare the crying misery of Puerto Rico. The first two stanzas from the song illustrate this exchange of arguments.

Rosalia:

Puerto Rico

You lovely Island

Island of tropical breezes

Always the pineapples growing

Always the coffee blossoms blowing

Anita (mockingly):

Puerto Rico

You ugly Island

Island of topic diseases

Always the hurricane blowing

Always the population growing

And the money owing,

And the babies crying

And the bullets flying

I like the island of Manhattan

Smoke on your pipe and put that in (16).

Anita's longer reply and her telling arguments leave no doubt the sharp contrast between Puerto Rico and the Island of Manhattan.

Artistically, the refrains of the song and the light and joyful atmosphere characterizing the musical also contribute to the celebration of the greatness and prosperity of America. Except for Rosalia who apparently finds it difficult to get over her homesickness or betray her attachment to her homeland, all the other Puerto Ricans join in expressing their faith in America and their happiness to enjoy its wealth:

Others (Except Rosalia)

I like to be in America!

Okay by me in America!

Everything free in America,

For a small fee in America.

All (except Rosalia)

Immigrant goes to America!

Many hellos in America!

Nobody knows in America,

Puerto Rico's in America.

All (except Rosalia)

All (except Rosalia)

Automobile in America !

I like the shores of America!

Chromium steel in America!

Comfort is yours in America!

Wire-spoke wheel in America,

Knobs on the doors in America,

Very big deal in America.

Wall-to-wall floors in America.(p.16)

The repetition of the word America at the end of each verse is an index of the Puerto Ricans' fascination with this country. Moreover, the celebration of America by these apparently assimilated immigrants would seem to suggest the success of the 'Melting Pot' symbol.

The image of the Melting Pot came to be used first in 1908 when a Jewish American writer, Izrael Zangwill, produced a play entitled, *The Melting Pot* in New York. In it, he conceived of America as a "pot" in which the mass of immigrants are mixed together and are changed through an assimilation process into Americans. Thus, immigrants, and black people for that matter, would have to use Fanon's words, "only one destiny and it is white". However, in the face of the difficulties endured by immigrants in America, and as the conflict between the Jets and the Sharks reflects, the Melting Pot symbol proved a dubious one. To some extent, the limited success, if not the failure of the Melting Pot idea was both the result of a nativistic attitude toward foreigners and the immigrant's reluctance to be assimilated as well as his desire to cling to his own cultural background—a fact that led the members of each ethnic group to gather together. *West Side Story* also illustrates this argument. Indeed, it reveals on the one hand the nativistic behaviour of the Jets, and, on the other hand, a certain cultural resistance of some of the Puerto Ricans.

At the beginning of *West Side Story*, after the danced prologue which stresses the growing rivalry between the two teenage gangs, the Jets perform what is called "The Jet Song". A close look at the lyrics of this song would show an unlimited praise and glorification of the Jets. The latter appear as a unified and solid group, proud and determined to defend their interests. As Riff, the leader of the Jets, states,

<i>When you're a Jet, You're a Jet all the way From your first cigarette To your last dying day. When you're a Jet If the spirit hits the fan, You got brothers around, You're a family man! You're never alone, You're never disconnected!</i>	<i>You're home with your own: When company's expected, You're well protected Then you are set With a capital J. Which you'll never forget Till they cart you away. When you're a Jet You stay A Jet. (12)</i>
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The Jets also appear as a powerful gang with the necessary means to strike down the 'enemy'. One is even reminded of the 'Rambo' type of fighters. Moreover, the "Jet Song" may be also perceived as a typical nativistic song which stresses the superiority and greatness of the Jets, and turns into ridicule the Sharks, ("The Sharks' ll steer clear/ 'Cause ev'ry Puerto Rican/ 'S a lousy chicken!"). Perhaps what makes the Jets appear so powerful and so conceited is the fact that in the text of *West Side Story* there is no "Shark Song" to praise the merits of the Sharks, or at least to oppose the mocking statements of the Jets.

This is not to say that the young Puerto Ricans remain passive. On the contrary, not only are they determined to preserve their identity, but they also seem to challenge, in the words of the multiculturalists, "the conceptual centre of whiteness". Indeed, the first and obvious sign of their (cultural) resistance is the gathering of these Puerto Ricans in a street gang with a very telling name. Racial survival in a hostile environment and the preservation of cultural identity would appear as the reasons behind Maria's coming to America. As it emerges from the story, Maria leaves her native Puerto Rico in order to marry Chino, her brother's friend. And during the fight between the two gangs when Tony tries to interfere, Bernardo reacts violently against him because he was enraged that Tony has been making advances to his sister. Later, after the death of Bernardo, his girlfriend Anita expresses the same feelings of hatred toward Tony. In a passage entitled, "A Boy Like That", Anita is filled with repulsion in front of Maria's attachment to Tony and scolds her for her attitude, especially after the killing of her brother.

*A boy like that who 'd kill your brother,
Forget that by and find another,
One of your own kind
Stick to your own kind (24).*

Finally, an instance that illustrates the lack of assimilation in *West Side Story* is when Maria and her parents address each other in Spanish (their native language). In the “Balcony Scene” which features Maria and Tony pledging their love to each other, and seeing that her daughter is spending a long time on the fire escape, Maria’s mother decides to call her. Maria answers by saying, “Momentito Mama”. But since this ‘momentito’ seems to last forever, the father decides to call in his turn, “Maruca” (a Spanish pet name for Maria) who is quick to reply, “Si, ya vengo, papa” (15).

The preservation of the linguistic identity, as shown through Maria and her parents, reminds us of Bakhtin’s view that cultural struggle and the battle for political power are fought out on “the terrain of language”. As Robert Stam also suggests in his essay, “Mikhail Bakhtin and Left Cultural Critique,” Bakhtin “locates ideological struggle at the pulsating heart of all discourse, whether in the form of political rhetoric, artistic practice, or everyday language exchange”.(Stam,123) Indeed, we have seen earlier how such songs as, “America” and the “Jet Song” are loaded with ideological manifestations. This is also the case of another song entitled, “Gee, Officer Krupke”. In this song the Jets enact a parody of some of America’s social institutions and the American establishment. The parody also reflects the non-conformist way of life the young generations and a certain resistance to the kind of “oppression (that) often ‘passes’ in the more subtle forms of face-to-face discursive interaction : the cop’s subtly or not so subtly language...TheWelfare bureaucrat’s patronizing of the welfare recipient” (Stam123) .

To conclude with, I would like to quote a story that George Lipsitz relates at the beginning of his essay, “Listening to Learn and Learning to Listen”. As he put it,

According to story often told among Jazz musicians, when trumpet player Clark Terry first joined the Duke Ellington Orchestra in 1951, he rehearsed in his mind every complicated technical manoeuvre that might be expected of him. The young musician waited anxiously for instructions from the legendary band leader, but all his new boss asked was “to listen”. When Terry complained that anyone could just sit and listen, the ever enigmatic Ellington informed him that “there’s listening and there’s listening, but what I want from you is to listen” (15).

Following Clark Terry’s example, we are tempted to say that anyone could just sit and listen to *West Side Story*, but the teacher of as well the student of English are required, as Duke Ellington put it, to *listen*. One may also add that not only do they have to listen to learn, but also learn to listen.

Works Cited

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