New Approaches to Holocaust Teaching

Christine Berberich[1]

Abstract

The Holocaust is one of the most harrowing events of the twentieth century. Over 70 years after the liberation of the Concentration Camps, the Holocaust has become common cultural property: it is taught and commemorated all over the world; it is represented in art, in literature, in visual media. A welcome development for some – the more commemoration, and the more diverse, the better – it is hotly debated by others who warn of inappropriate forms of representation. This paper focuses on the education aspect of Holocaust Commemoration: in the UK, teaching the Holocaust is part of the national curriculum, but it is not specified in which subject context and how long this topic has to be covered. As a result, Holocaust education is patchy and, in many cases, very basic, relying on pupils reading The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas *instead of having detailed history lessons on the theme. As a literary academic, I have been teaching the Holocaust in a literature context for over fifteen years and have had to develop special techniques to, in the first instance, respond to my students' diverse background knowledge and, secondly, to engage them in different ways of Holocaust commemoration. I want to share my practice of offering classes that assess historical sources, critically read literature from and about the period, discuss representations of the Holocaust in art and media. In addition to writing traditional academic essays my students are encouraged to produce creative responses to widen their own horizons and test various approaches to Holocaust studies in a meaningful context.*

Keywords*: Holocaust; Commemoration; Uses of Memory; Class-room techniques;*

1. Introduction

The Holocaust is one of the most harrowing events of the twentieth century. 73 years on from the liberation of the notorious extermination camps, the Holocaust is commemorated, taught, debated and researched all over the world – and probably more so now than ever. And this is important. In the process, though, the Holocaust has become what can be termed common cultural property – everybody feels entitled to talk about it, to make films or write books about it, to contribute to the commemoration debate. Potentially, this is also good – the more debate, the more commemoration, the better. However, this has led to debate and criticism about who has the right to write or talk about the Holocaust, and about which form commemoration and cultural representation should take.

Away from the academic and cultural debate is the educational one. In 2005, the United Nations decreed January 27th of each year a designated Holocaust Memorial Day. On that day, every year, there are commemorative services, speeches, special exhibitions and events in schools, targeting ever-new generations to learn about and engage with the legacy of the Holocaust. Most European countries have incorporated Holocaust history into their national curricula. This is also the case in Britain: Holocaust teaching is compulsory at secondary-school level. In fact, the government maintains that "every young person should be taught the history of the Holocaust and the lessons it teaches today" [1]. So far, so good. But, as Andy Pearce states, "The history of teaching and learning about the Holocaust in the United Kingdom over the past generation is a story of success, achievement, and change [but] also a [one of] failure, shortcomings, and inhibiting continuities" [2]. These failings have to do with the general freedom schools enjoy when it comes to applying the National Curriculum. Schools can decide in which subjects they teach the Holocaust – in History, English, or Religious Education – and how long for. This leads to an imbalance: in some schools, teachers have a genuine interest in the Holocaust and teach it at length and across subject areas. In many other schools, though, the predominant Holocaust education for 13-14-year-olds consists of making pupils read John Boyne's controversial novel *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* – without providing in-depth historical context.

2. Teaching Holocaust Literatures at University Level

As a Literary Academic, I have been teaching Holocaust literatures as an optional module at third-year undergraduate level for many years. The module has always attracted particularly high numbers of students – because, as students say, they 'love the Holocaust'. What this rather poor choice of words wants to say is that they are keen to find out more about the Holocaust as they realize that their school education has, generally, ill-equipped them when it comes to historical facts. The main aim for me in

[1] University of Portsmouth, United Kingdom

this module is then to both acquaint students with historical events surrounding the Holocaust, and then to move towards cultural representations of the Holocaust.
The main thing I aim to convey to my students is already represented in the module title: Holocaust Literatures, in the plural. This aims to show them that there is no such thing as a straight-forward canon of just one sort of Holocaust literature. Instead, there are many different approaches when it comes to writing about the Shoah – and we consequently look at survivor accounts (which is what most of my students expect when they start the unit – texts by Elie Wiesel or Primo Levi, for instance) but we also read second-generation accounts (texts written by, for instance, the children or grandchildren of Holocaust survivors), perpetrator accounts (writing from the 'other side', so to speak) and pure Holocaust fiction. The focus of our debate throughout is on the ethics of representation: how should the Holocaust be represented? Is it ethical to write Holocaust fiction? And, if so, how should fiction approach the Holocaust? Are there any unspoken rules, or thresholds that should not be crossed? We link these discussions to academic thinking – the trauma theories by Cathy Caruth, Dominic LaCapra or Saul Friedlander, for instance – but also to cultural debates surrounding the Holocaust, for instance the anti-Holocaust-representation stance held by Berel Lang, contrasting with the pro-Holocaust-representation-through-narrative stance by scholars such as Hayden White [3].
It is important for me to really engage students in the debates – and particularly so when it comes to their assessments. As English students they are generally required to produce long essays. But in this module, they have to produce a creative portfolio about an additional text that they have to work on in small groups of three to four students. They have free reign as to *how* they present this portfolio but are reminded to consider their work within the debates surrounding ethics of representation. As final-year students, they are generally very concerned about this aspect of their assessment – it takes them away from what they are used to and, as such, makes them uncomfortable. Nevertheless, this is generally where they produce their best work: the creative component makes them come out of their comfort zone and engage with a text in a much deeper and more emotive manner than they would do in straight-forward, traditional literary analysis.
As a theoretical framework I encourage the students to engage with the budding area of Affect Theory, pioneered by the American anthropologist Kathleen Stewart [4]. Basically, affect refers to emotional responses, "highlighting something that moves, that triggers predominantly personal reactions" [5]. I want the students to self-reflectively engage with their emotional responses to the diverse Holocaust texts that they have read: sorrow, pity, anger, puzzlement, confusion, disorientation. They need to discuss this in their group presentation. But the creative portfolio can take any form or shape they choose: some submit their work inside little suitcases, reflecting on the deportation experience; others present scrap books bringing together quotations from the book with their own emotive responses. The results are affective in turn: they showcase the students' deep emotional engagement with the particular text.

3. Portfolio Case Studies

I would briefly like to outline two particularly successful portfolio examples, submitted by student groups during the academic year 2017/18. Group 1 had to cover Primo Levi's seminal survivor account *Se questo è un uomo.* They chose to present their portfolio in the form of a spiral bound scrap book: they found newspaper clippings about the treatment of Jews in Italy in the run up to the war, as well as images of Levi both before and after his internment in a concentration camp; they recreated Levi's passport and included a copy of his degree certificate; they even stuck in a small, cracked hand-held mirror and surrounded it with a quote from Levi's text: "There is nowhere to look in a mirror, but our appearance stands in front of us reflected in a hundred livid faces" [6]. The students explained that the book moved them so much that they felt the only way to express themselves was through art work, through trying to recreate glimpses of Levi's life.
Group 2, by contrast, worked on a very different text: W.G. Sebald's *The Emigrants*, a novel in four parts, charting the lives of four very different Germans, all somehow deeply affected by the Holocaust and its aftermath. It does not actually mention the word 'Holocaust' much and does not, at first glimpse, seem to be a straightforward Holocaust text. Instead, it works with silences, with narrative gaps that are left for the discerning reader to fill. Throughout the work, Sebald laments the death of Jewish culture that had once been thriving in Germany, and coins the phrase 'conspiracy of silence' for the post-war German attitude towards the crimes of the Shoah. The students thus presented their portfolio inside a small coffin which, for them, represented the 'burial' of Jewish culture, but also the death of open dialogue. They particularly cleverly linked this to contemporary events, by creating a poster of Sebald, buried in the coffin, showing the author with his eyes blacked out, and surrounding him with slogans that seem to deny his right to talk about the Holocaust: "your father was a Fascist",

"you have no right to speak". They also, interestingly, included the slogan "#Germandeathcamps" that links to contemporary events in Poland trying to deny any Polish involvement in the Holocaust but also, simultaneously, shutting down debate. The students thus clearly demonstrated their understanding that silence, self-inflicted or enforced, risks that the truth about the past is being buried again and again.

This form of Holocaust engagement might seem dubious, even gimmicky to some; I myself was doubtful about its success to start with. But, every year, at the end of the semester, the students agree that the creative work in particular had allowed them unprecedented engagement with their text and that this would ensure that this particular text would stay in their minds for a long time. Despite their initial trepidation about the creative work, the affective engagement with it during their group work had created a much deeper and more meaningful understanding of the text and the related historical events for them. In their module feedback they always highlight that this creative part of the assessment had to remain an intrinsic part of the module. Holocaust teaching thus needs to, in my opinion, offer pupils and students the opportunity to learn about historical events, to look at a variety of perspectives but also to allow them space to react and respond affectively and creatively to ensure a lasting effect.

References

[1] Department for Education. "Written Evidence Submitted by the Department for Education." Education Committee Inquiry into Holocaust Education, HOL0053. http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/education-committee/inquiries/parliament-2015/holocaust-education-15-16/publications/.

[2] Pearce, A. "The Holocaust in the National Curricul after 25 Years", Holocaust Studies 23.3 (2017): 231.

[3] For a discussion of the ethical implications of literary representations of the Holocaust see, for instance, Berberich, C. "'Writing Fiction, Making History: Historical Narrative and the Process of Creating History', in Julian Wolfreys (ed.), *New Critical Thinking: Criticisms to Come* (Edinburgh: EUP, 2017), pp. 123 – 39.

[4] See Stewart, K. *Ordinary Affects.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007.

[5] Berberich, C., Campbell N. & Hudson, R., "Introduction: Affective Landscapes", in *Affective Landscapes in Literature, Art and Everyday Life*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2015, p. 1.

[6] Levi, P. *If this is a Man*. London, Abacus, 1991 [1959], p. 32.