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ABSTRACT

A review of historically and sociologically significant cultural interrelations between Italy and its language and the world commences with a historical sketch from the Roman period. The author examines reasons for the rebirth of interest in Italian culture and suggests that the best approach to developing an appreciation of the culture is the study of the language. Concluding remarks present an outline for a study unit on Italian culture including: (1) pre-Roman period; (2) Rome; (3) Middle Ages; (4) Renaissance; (5) Baroque, Neoclassical, and Romantic periods; (6) Italians in the United States of America; (7) twentieth century influences; and (8) contrastive linguistic study of English and Italian. A bibliography is included. (RL)

Languages and Intercultural Relations: Considerations for a Unit on

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Our Italian Heritage

by

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The rebirth of interest in Italian culture is due in part to the impressions brought back by several millions of Americans who saw Italy for the first time during World War II, to the achievements of the Italian cinema, to the fundamental innovations in the theater by Pirandello and Betti, to the scientific contributions of Fermi, Pontecorvo, and Natta, and to the fact that not since the Renaissance has so much Italian literature been translated into English and many other languages. But Italy's role in Western Civilization is far greater than that revealed by these recent contributions.

It was Rome that in the highly sophisticated Italian Peninsula civilized the Western World and developed law, government, industry, scientific progress, warfare, art, literature, and every aspect of life into a balanced dynamic culture which still remains at the base of our environment. We cannot assume that students will learn these facts in their Latin or history classes, for only a few study enough Latin and history.

During the Middle Ages Rome remained the capital of the Christian world, exercising great influence on the administration of religious and political activities. Its language, Latin, remained the universal tongue and eventually evolved into Italian and several modern languages, shaping the structure and vocabulary of most <sup>other</sup> European languages. The English-speaking

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student should know that close to 70% of English words come from Latin and are therefore very similar to Italian.

In the eleventh century Italy slowly resumed its leadership in the economy and intellectual development of Europe which culminated in Humanism and the Renaissance, a period during which Italy influenced every aspect of European life. This is Italy's greatest contribution to the modern world.

In the last four centuries since the Renaissance, Italy has significantly spurred the development of art, music, historiography, scholarship, and other forms of modern thought and literature by her own achievements in these fields. It is impossible to understand Western culture and ourselves without understanding Italy's place. Nicholas Murray Butler said:

The place of Italy in civilization is best shown by trying to subtract that place from world history. Take away her scientific accomplishments, her statesmanship, her leadership of the world for many centuries, and what have we left? The world looks decapitated. You can subtract Italian culture from civilization only by destroying that civilization.

But how many children in our public schools realize the above facts? How many know the full story of Italian immigrants in the U.S.A.? A great number of important facts are not mentioned in the texts.

I believe that the best way to love a people is to know it, and the best way to know it is through its language. For a language is not an artificial means of communication like the

telegraph code or Esperanto, but a natural and very complex social phenomenon. It is the most essential characteristic of a people --the one which brings us closest to them. It is for this reason that we must study those languages which represent people who contributed most to our culture. Since intercultural relationships are a most important object of language study they should be clearly and constantly stressed with the aid of interesting materials, discussion, and linguistic analysis. Such relationships are effective means for mutual understanding among people in any community and for lending dignity to minority groups. A thorough awareness of the similarities and differences in basic assumptions about life that foreign cultures make promotes social harmony, not only between ethnic groups but also within them. Education when worthy of the name always aims to preserve and spread the cultural heritage of ethnic groups by stressing the study of their language, customs, and history. Until now our schools have done the exact opposite, wrongly believing that such a policy would produce better Americans. They have not seemed to know and hence have failed to stress that American culture is mainly European, and that our makeup reflects not only the heritage of England, France, Germany and Spain, but of Italy and other important areas like it.

Moreover, there has been a complete indifference to the need of bilingualism in many communities where children can not communicate well with their parents, grandparents, relatives,

and neighbors because they never learned or because they have forgotten the language of their elders. There are schools with children who have recently arrived from Italy or other foreign countries who need teachers that can communicate with them in the language the students know, so that the student can capitalize <sup>on</sup> the knowledge he has, not only to learn more quickly the English language but American culture as well. In other words everything should be done to show that the gap between the old country and the new country is much smaller than it seems, that the newcomer is not inferior, that American students know something about the immigran 's country, that some even study its language and feel indebted to it.

To put it in simple terms, the first thing to impress upon the students is the fact that there is no American civilization, interpreted in the narrow sense of the U.S.A., that the U.S.A. has not civilized the world, and that the culture of our country does not begin with the arrival of the Pilgrims, but that it is a continuation of Western Civilization; the people, their language, their clothes, their customs and institutions were European. This is the reason why the influx of people from other civilizations who came here later did not make any fundamental changes in our ways of thinking and in our customs.

In view of the above considerations, the unit on Italy should cover the following topics and show their historical

relation to our present environment:

1. The pre-Roman period stressing the most advanced peoples of Italy: Etruria, Latium, Magna Graecia, etc.
2. Rome: the Republic; the Empire; its fall.
3. The Middle Ages: Italy's role in the evolution of modern languages; the significance of Dante's De vulgari eloquentia; Italy and the Church; the rise of the Italian communes as the first form of democratic government in the Middle Ages; the Divine Comedy, influence of early Italian literature.
4. Italy's role during the Renaissance: Petrarca, Boccaccio, and other important figures which show a departure from Medieval thought and express a modern view of life; the significance of the revived interest in the Roman and Greek cultures; Italy's campaign for the vernacular.
5. Italy's role during the Baroque, Neoclassical, and Romantic periods: Galileo and modern science--Galvani, Torricelli, Redi, Spallanzani,

Volta, Malpighi, Eustachio; criminology and politics--Beccaria, Cavour; literature, criticism, scholarship, and philosophy--Parini, Alfieri, Foscolo, Manzoni, Leopardi, Carducci, Verga, De Sanctis, Muratori, Tiraboschi, Vico. Italy's political independence--Garibaldi and freedom.

6. Italians in the U.S.A.: Verrazzano, Vigo, Da Ponte, Gatti--Casazza, Toscanini, Caruso, and many others; other cultural influences imported through Italians in the U.S.A. and through business and cultural relations; reciprocal linguistic borrowings; adjustment problems of Italian immigrants; Americans in Italy and tourists; American military bases in Italy.
7. Twentieth century influences: Croce, Pareto, D'Annunzio; Mussolini and Fascism, its influence in the U.S.A. and abroad; reciprocal influences between Italian and American writers; the neo-realist movement; the cinema; architecture; fashion.
8. Nature of the Italian language; comparison with English.

It is obvious that the material outlined above could take years to learn, and it should. However, when condensed into one course only the most fundamental facts of the topics listed can be learned. Let us hope that in time the teaching of our ethnic heritage will begin in the first grade and go on through graduate studies.



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Italian Culture Council, Inc., 1140 Edgewood Parkway, Union, N.J. 07083

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