

## Teaching Cultural Identity: Stuart McLean's *Vinyl Cafe*

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This paper provides practical tips on using Stuart McLean's *Vinyl Cafe* stories in advanced English for academic purposes (EAP) reading courses. By choosing a story with immigrant characters and strong cultural references, the author shares activities for developing students' understanding of literary concepts of point of view, irony, symbolism and others. Additionally, a number of activities are discussed, including ones where students manipulate the story, filtering it through their own cultures and values (Oster, 1989, p. 85).

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Teaching the concept of culture and cultural identity to students is essential, considering the contemporary globalization of the world. Educating students on issues of culture and cultural identity requires instructors to equip students with an intercultural lens on a multicultural society, which helps them to gain cultural sensitivity as they explore cultural identities not only of others but also their own. I agree with Galante (2014) that an English as an additional language (EAL) classroom is a perfect environment for promoting intercultural discussions and “negotiating identities,” (p. 3) which “can be particularly beneficial in multicultural classrooms where students can voice and expand on beliefs, values, and issues from a cultural standpoint” (p. 5).

Advanced reading classes, where we teach multicultural fiction from different parts of the world, provide a necessary context for such cultural exploration. As Khatib, Rezaei, and Derakhshan (2011) argued, literature brings a “motivating drive... not readily found in any other text” (p. 207); learners gain “access to a rich sample of input of various discourse styles, and to historical, geographical, cultural, and linguistic information,” which contributes to learners’ language proficiency and their cultural awareness (Barrette, Paesani, & Vinall, 2010, p. 217).

Moreover, as Scott (1964) pointed out, culturally rich literature—when appropriately selected and productively used—provokes “thoughtful and deeply felt” reflection (p. 267). Stuart McLean’s work is a great example of such literature; his stories are full of culturally diverse characters, most of whom are Canadians whose parents or grandparents immigrated to Canada from different parts of the world. In addition, his stories are spiced with fine humour, irony and cultural symbolism and engage learners on multiple levels, providing necessary material for developing both learners’ language proficiency and cultural awareness. McLean’s work is a rich source for studying literature and literary concepts as well as developing analytical and critical thinking skills along with cultural understanding. This paper provides practical tips on using Stuart McLean’s *Vinyl Cafe* stories, and this approach may be adapted for a variety of short stories in advanced English for academic purposes (EAP) reading courses.

### **About Stuart McLean**

A best-selling author, host of CBC Radio program the *Vinyl Cafe*, and award-winning journalist Stuart McLean is well-known in Canada, the United States and other English speaking countries. More than 1 million copies of his ten *Vinyl Cafe* books have sold since the first publication of the *Stories from the Vinyl Cafe* in 1995. McLean is a three-time winner of the Stephen Leacock Memorial Medal for Humour for *Home from the Vinyl Cafe*, *Vinyl Cafe Unplugged* and *Secrets from the Vinyl Cafe*. In 2004, for his *Vinyl Cafe Diaries*, he was awarded the Canadian Authors’ Association Jubilee Award. The *Vinyl Cafe* books have also been published in the US, the UK, Australia and New Zealand (CBC/Radio-Canada, n.d.).

### **The Story**

The most suitable *Vinyl Cafe* stories for ESAL (English as a second or additional language) students, I believe, are “Rendi” and “Kenny Wong’s Practical Jokes” (McLean, 2006). Both stories are about father–son relationships in the context of cultural heritage, and both illustrate the value of cultural identity and the meaning of belonging—to a specific culture or to a culturally diverse society such as Canada.

Although in this paper I will focus only on “Rendi,” the activities designed for it can be easily adapted for “Kenny Wong’s Practical Jokes” and indeed, the approach can be adapted for

short stories by other authors. Even though “Rendi” like many other McLean’s stories is humorous—according to the author, many times while reading people will find themselves laughing—the story is “brushed by longings, loneliness and a certain melancholy” (McLean, 2006, p. 73). After the first reading, teachers can expect that their students, rather than seeing or understanding the humour, will find the tone in the story sad. A brief summary of the story is below:

“Rendi” is about an elderly Canadian couple of Italian background, Eugene and Maria Conte. Eugene is a gardener; he grows grapes and makes wine. Their son Tony moved to London, England, and began calling himself Thomas, which both parents cannot understand or accept. Eugene is originally from a village in Calabria called Rendi in Fiori. Sam, the neighbor’s 12-year-old son, comes to Eugene’s house every Sunday with his laptop to read Tony’s emails to Eugene and Maria and to send Eugene’s emails to Tony.

When Eugene tells Tony to go to Italy to his home village, Tony does not want to as he has been to Italy five times already. “Tell Tony that it is my dying wish,” (p. 76) says Eugene to Sam. But it wasn’t Eugene’s first dying wish. He calls his parental requests, such as find a wife, have a baby, have another baby, and so on “my dying wish” (p. 76). Tony reluctantly agrees, trying to fulfill one of his father’s numerous dying wishes.

So Tony goes first to Rome, then to Napoli, from Napoli to Cosenza, and eventually, with his limited Italian and certain difficulty, he finds the mountain village. Ironically, he goes to a wrong Rendi: it turns out there are a few of them. People, however, treat him as if they know his father. Tony takes pictures as evidence and rushes back to England the next morning. He sends the pictures to Eugene and calls Italy “so backward” (p. 81), just like Canada. He has no doubt that it is the right village as he doesn’t understand or believe that people would treat a stranger like a family member. Eugene’s explanation is simple: that is the Italian way, and he sends his son back to the right village. He is persistent in imposing his “dying wishes” and especially his most important “dying wish” upon his son.

Tony goes back, to the right village this time, where he meets his uncle’s wife, Michelina, and stays at her house for a while. According to McLean, “the events of the [second] visit were almost identical to those of the first trip. But that is not how it felt to Thomas” (p. 84). His second trip is similar to the first one in many ways, especially in the beginning, but is, however, completely different in its importance and significance to Tony’s cultural self. Here comes the culmination of the story: Tony meets a man on a narrow street who reminds him of himself, and he gets that “unsettling feeling, a feeling of the world shifting—becoming both larger and smaller at the same time” (p. 85). He tries to express and explain the feeling to his father and his wife but he does not succeed. This is the beginning of Tony’s journey to his cultural roots. McLean does not overwhelm his reader with cultural references, but the ones he uses create the rich imagery of the culture, which finally becomes meaningful for Tony. The stone floor and wooden shuttered window of his auntie’s house, the valley of olive trees and old stone arches, can all be considered as stereotypical descriptions of any Italian village. Not by Tony, though, not at this time when he finds himself in connection with the place and people who—

although being so different from him and almost complete strangers just a short while ago—ironically become so close and meaningful that the world is shifting for him, opening a door for his new–old cultural identity.

The time Tony spends in his ancestors' village has a significant influence on his cultural identity. He eventually moves back to Canada where he was born and grew up.

### **The Course**

I have adopted this story for a 12-week advanced academic reading skills course which is based on literature and designed to prepare students for reading college level material. The course introduces specific approaches to reading for both factual and fictional writing where emphasis is on the short story. The educational outcomes of the course include the ability of students to interpret, analyze, and respond to fictional prose independently through discussion and in writing. Students also increase their background knowledge of culture, human nature and motivation (Fawkes, 2013).

The tasks presented below are designed based on such educational objectives as recognition and evaluation of the major literary components of fiction, including plot, character, symbolism, and point of view (see Figure 1). Students learn to read critically and formulate independent comparisons and judgments of the reading.

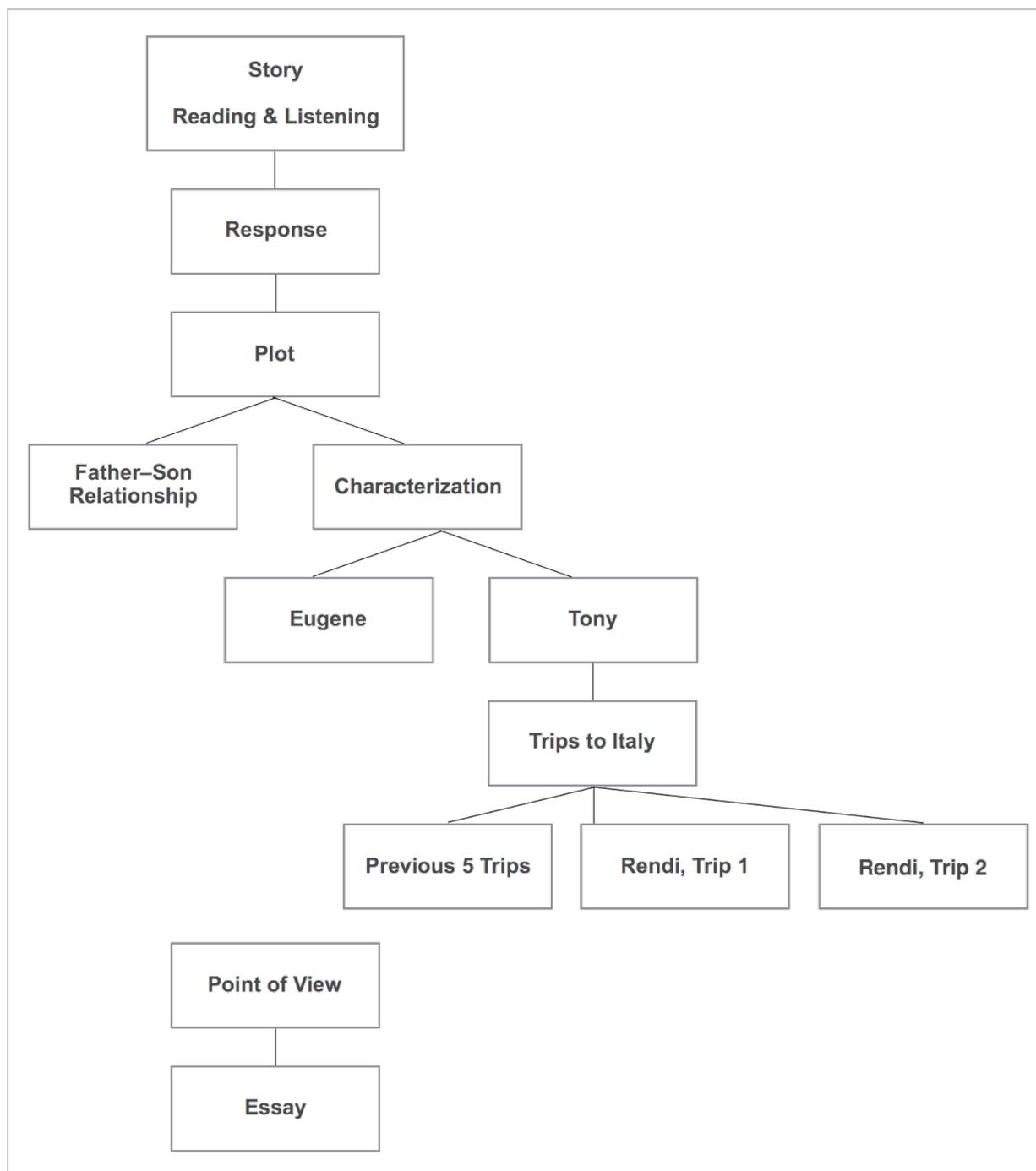


Figure 1. The tasks.

### Task 1: Response

To introduce the story to students in class, the teacher plays the audio recording on the CD *Out & About* (McLean, 2010). Then students read the story at home and write a journal entry as a response to the story. Journal writing can be substituted by forum discussion on Moodle or any other similar teaching and learning platform. Simultaneous listening and reading

can be done in class, too. This way, the students practice reading and listening skills. Also, McLean's artistic performance may contribute to the students' better comprehension of the story. The following questions can be given to students to guide them with their response writing:

1. Did you like or dislike the story? What did you like or dislike about it? Explain.
2. What is the story about? What is the main idea of the story?
3. Why do you think Tony changes his name?
4. Why do you think Eugene calls his wishes "dying wishes"?
5. What do you think Eugene's most important "dying wish" is? Explain.
6. Why do you think Tony moves back to Canada?

### Task 2: Plot Diagram

The analysis of the story begins with creating a plot map or diagram. By using a template provided by the teacher, students in small groups draw a plot map or a diagram to examine the following parts of the plot: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution (see Figure 2).

After sharing and discussing their diagrams with the class, students begin working on characterization.

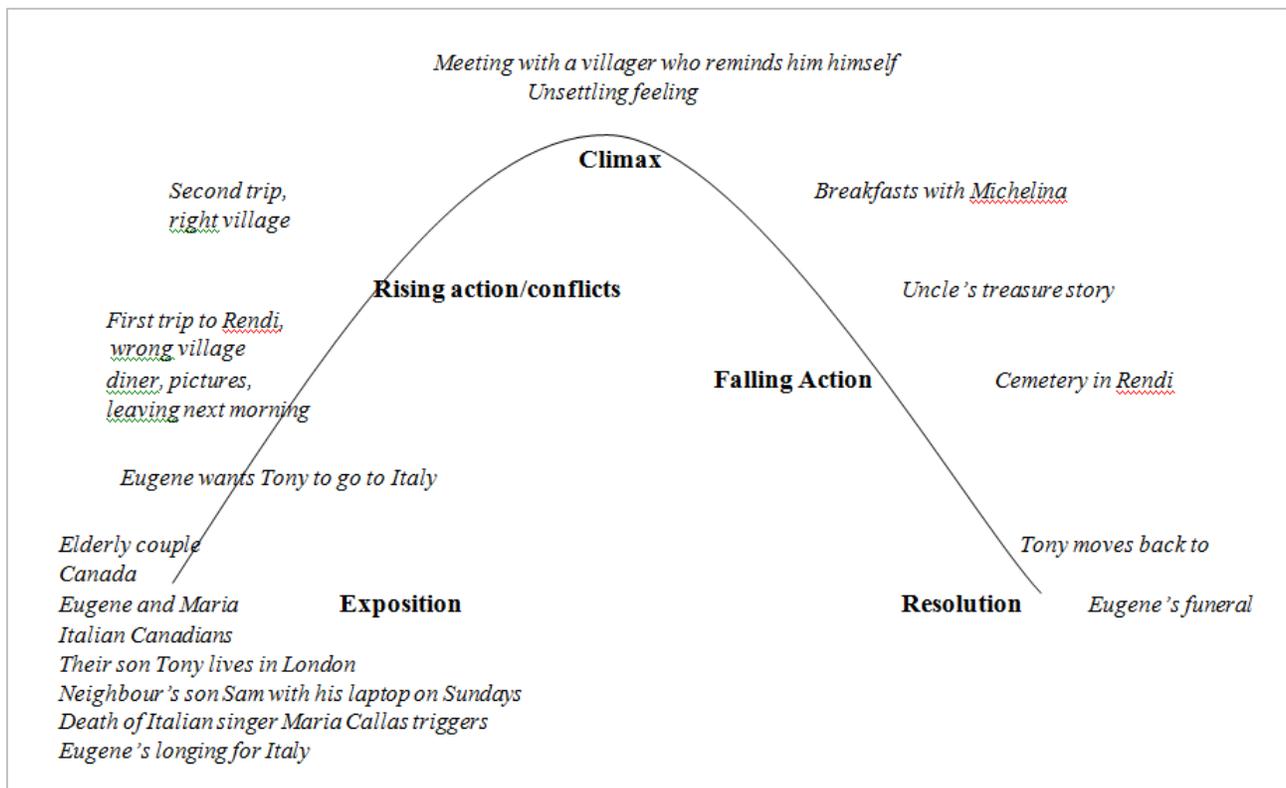


Figure 2. Example of a plot diagram.

**Task 3: Characterization – Cultural Portraits**

McLean uses many cultural references which symbolize the cultural identities of the two main characters: the father, Eugene, and the son, Tony. Eugene, an Italian Canadian who moved to Canada after WW2 and never left, has a very strong connection with his home country, Italy. Tony’s cultural identity is much more complex: he was born in Canada, he speaks some Italian, and he moved to England for school and stayed there after graduation. He also changed his name from Tony to Thomas. Canada and Italy are “so backwards” (p. 81) for him.

Working in small groups, students make a list of cultural references for Eugene and Tony. This activity teaches students to recognize and interpret such a challenging literary concept as symbolism in relation to cultural identity.

To debrief, the students compare their lists with the one provided by the teacher (see Table 1).

Table 1. List of Cultural References for Eugene and Tony

Eugene	Tony/Thomas
Garden	Move from Canada to England
Sweet peppers and string beans	Name change
Beloved fig tree	Italian language “far from perfect”
Grapes and homemade wine	Some French language
Little Italian cigars	Trips to Italy
Italian Opera singers: Renata Tebaldi and Maria Callas	Meeting with a man on a narrow street; unsettled feeling
His home village in Rendi, Italy	Breakfasts with aunty Michelina
	Laughing at his uncle’s treasure story
	Cemetery visit in Rendi
	Move back to Canada

**Task 3: Extension**

This optional homework assignment can be done through a discussion forum such as on a learning management system (e.g., Moodle, Blackboard) or a journal entry. Students create their own and their parents’ cultural portraits by making a list of characteristics of their cultural identity. Such a task provides more room for developing students’ critical thinking skills as well as their ability to draw comparisons and characterize personalities from a cultural point of view.

**Task 4: Tony’s Trips to Italy**

In small groups, students first discuss the similarities and differences in all of Tony’s trips—especially the ones to Rendi—and then, in point form, they note the important events within each trip and finally, answer the follow-up questions. A list of possible points that the students might create and the questions that would follow are below:

Previous five trips to Italy:

- Grand Prix in Milano twice
- friend's villa in Tuscany twice
- skiing trip in the Alps once

First trip to Rendi:

- dinner with villagers
- taking pictures as evidence for his father
- leaving the next morning

Second trip to Rendi:

- a man on a narrow street
- unsettled feeling
- staying at his aunty Michelina's
- listening to his uncle's dream about buried treasure while laughing and laughing
- not leaving the next morning
- breakfasts with Michelina remind him of breakfasts with his mother when he was a child
- visiting graveyard with Michelina and the priest

Follow-up questions:

1. What is the purpose of the trip to Rendi for Eugene?
2. What is the purpose of the trip to Rendi for Tony?
3. How do the trips influence Tony's cultural identity?

By analyzing Tony's trips to Italy, students learn to recognize and understand such literary concepts as irony, foreshadowing, symbolism, and imagery in relation to culture. They discuss these concepts in groups, make a list, and compare it with the one provided by the teacher. A sample of the teacher's list below is:

- irony: dying wishes, wrong Rendi, family-like friendliness of strangers, feeling of belonging in the right Rendi, where strangers are treated like family
- foreshadowing: the second trip being "almost identical" (almost, but not quite the same), meeting with a man on the street and the unsettled feeling of the "world shifting," not leaving the next morning
- symbolism: the unsettled feeling, breakfasts with Michelina, the cemetery, and everything else happening in the right Rendi symbolize awakening of Tony's cultural identity
- imagery: stone floor, wooden shuttered window, valley of olive trees and old stone arches.

### **Task 5: Father and Son Relationship**

The next activity guides students in an exploration of cultural differences in child–parent relationships. Eugene, being an immigrant himself, does not tell Tony directly to move back home to Canada or to keep his name. At the same time, he gently guides his son's journey

through life and search for cultural identity, and does it indirectly, “in his own way” (p. 87). Ultimately, the son honours his father’s “dying wishes.” Tony moves back home to Canada where he was born and grew up.

How would Chinese, Arab or Latin American parents, for instance, implore their children to listen and follow their parental wishes? In a multicultural classroom, the students’ task for this activity is to imagine themselves and their parents in a similar situation, when after spending a few years in Canada they have become distant from their own culture. What would their parents do to save their children’s cultural identity? How similar or different from Eugene’s would their actions be? In this activity, not only do students compare their own and their parents’ relationship with that of Eugene and Tony’s, but they also hear their classmates’ versions of the situation and become aware of intriguing cultural differences in different parts of the world. The group discussion question and extension assignment are shown below:

Group discussion question:

- Imagine yourself and your parents in a similar situation. How would it be similar or different?

Extension or homework assignment:

- Change the cultural background of the characters and write a new plot.

### **Task 6. Point of View**

The story is narrated in the third-person. By changing the point of view to the first person and taking the position of one of the characters, students make the narration more personal to themselves and learn to understand the difference between the third-person and first-person narration. This task contributes to the comprehension of a challenging literary concept, point of view, while it also invites better overall understanding of the story. The progression of this task is shown below:

1. In small groups or with a partner, students choose one of the characters (Sam, Maria, Tony, or Eugene) and tell the beginning of the story from that character’s point of view.
2. Next, students analyze the changes in the characters’ behavior and the dynamics of the events seen or told from a different point of view.
3. In class or as a homework assignment, students individually rewrite the beginning of the story from a point of view of their chosen character. As an additional challenge, students can be required to place the characters in a different cultural environment.

### **Task 7. The Essay**

After reviewing all of the literary elements in the story, the students are ready to produce an essay. It can be a compare and contrast, cause and effect, or an argumentative essay, depending on the course objectives. The story provides more than enough material for a number of types of essays; however, if the students are familiar with other literary work on cultural identity, a compare and contrast essay may be a good choice. Comparing and contrasting the work on the same topic of different authors contributes to a better understanding of the topic itself, as well as development of students’ ability to understand literature in general. Moreover, since the cultural and historical settings are different in every story, it creates extra challenges for students, including extra opportunities for them to develop their critical thinking

skills as well as their cultural understanding. An example of an essay question for this task is shown below:

Essay question:

Choose any literary element or elements and write a compare and contrast essay, comparing "Rendi" with another story about cultural identity such as "Kenny Wong's Practical Jokes" by Stuart McLean or "The Americanization of Shadrach Cohen" by Bruno Lessing.

### **Learning Outcomes**

Through the approach detailed in this paper, students gain a number of relevant and important skills. In addition to developing such language skills as academic reading and writing, students also expand their critical thinking skills and cultural awareness. They learn to understand complex literary concepts, to analyze literature in relation to culture, and they also learn a great deal about cultural identity and its importance.

Furthermore, students learn that for some people, such as Tony, cultural identity can be lost, especially if one is young and lives in a multicultural environment. They learn that cultural identity can give a person a feeling of belonging; creates a deeper connection with ancestors, family and parents; and that one's own culture and cultural identity is not something to be ashamed of; on the contrary, it is something to be proud of. This may be the most important concept they can learn when they are young. When they travel overseas, often students try to blend into the new culture. During this time they can often feel confused and lost as they struggle with homesickness and cultural differences. As educators, I believe we all have a responsibility to teach our students how to keep and cherish their cultural identity and not to get lost in the modern globalized context.

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