Globalizing Literature in the English Language Arts Classroom

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Teachers always search for new ways to challenge students and expand their understandings of themselves and the world. Even though the classics serve as a foundation in literature classrooms, teachers recognize the need for broader cultural perspectives that reflect the diversity of the global society in which teens live. They recognize that classics often reflect biases against women and people of color and include dated language and confusing writing styles due to obscure expressions and unfamiliar sentence constructions. They also know that few classics have teens as main characters, but they struggle to make major changes in the curriculum since these canonical texts are usually mandated reading. One way for teachers to increase relevancy and globalize reading is to pair the required classics with young adult global literature. The pairings shared in this column bring more diverse literature into the curriculum and, at the same time, create a context for understanding the classic work and its relevance for teens.

Global literature provides an opportunity for students to go beyond a tourist perspective of gaining only surface-level information about a culture. Because literature expands students’ life spaces, they travel outside the boundaries of their lives to other places, times, and ways of living in the world. They immerse themselves in story worlds to gain insights about how people around the world live, feel, and think—and so develop empathy as well as knowledge. Through global literature, students are challenged to understand those who differ from themselves, breaking cycles of oppression and prejudice. As they read books from global cultures, students reflect in new ways on their own cultures as well as the world beyond themselves. Students see how people of the world view themselves, not just how we view them.

To explore the possibilities of pairing global YA literature with classic books, a group of us at Worlds of Words took the complexity exemplar lists of fiction and nonfiction from the Common
Core and searched for global literature with similar complexity and themes/plots. We selected the Common Core exemplar lists since these have been widely referenced as a core reading list and include many well-known classics. In addition to the pairings, we located other strong global young adult books and so created additional recommended global lists. These extensive fiction and non-fiction lists, along with complexity information and plot descriptions, are available at wowlit.org.

We are exploring a range of ways to integrate these paired books into classrooms. Here are a few ideas.

- Pair a classic text with a global book—students can read the YA novel first as an entry to the classic or read the classic first to use the YA novel as a connection to students’ lives. Or half the class can read the classic and half the global novel, with each group discussing its book and then meeting in pairs to make comparisons across the books.
- Pair F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* with Mirjam Pressler’s *Let Sleeping Dogs Lie*, a contemporary novel about a German teen who learns that her family’s successful business was stolen by the Nazis from a Jewish family. Or pair it with Alaya Dawn Johnson’s *The Summer Prince*, set in a futuristic Brazil ruled by technology and tradition, where oppression lies beneath the city’s glitter.

- *The Odyssey* by Homer can be paired with Samhita Arni’s *Sita’s Ramayana*, a graphic novel retelling of an ancient legend from India in which Rama forces his wife Sita to undergo an ordeal by fire to prove herself. This pairing connects well-known Greek mythology with Hindu mythology and invites comparisons across cultures.

- Another type of pairing is an informational book, such as *Hitler Youth* by Susan Campbell Bartoletti, about the youth organizations Hitler used to meet his sociopolitical goals, with a novel on the Holocaust to provide an informational context. Or pair *What the World Eats* by Peter Menzel and Faith D’Aluisio, which contains photos of twenty-five families in twenty-one countries to show what they eat in one day, with a novel on economic disparity, such as *The Grapes of Wrath*.

- Read a classic text and then invite students to select from thematically related global books to form small groups for discussions.
- After reading *A Farewell to Arms* by Ernest Hemingway, offer YA novels about the consequences of war, such as Ruta Sepety’s *Salt to the Sea*, set at the end of World War II as refugees flee the advancing Soviet army; Geert Spillebeen’s *Kipling’s Choice*, a fictionalized biogra-
classic. After reading Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*, students could read from science fiction, such as L. J. Adlington’s *The Diary of Pelly D*, historical fiction about fascism, such as Sepetys’s *Between Shades of Gray*, or about book banning, such as Markus Zusak’s *The Book Thief*, or novels on identity, such as Tara Sullivan’s *Golden Boy*.

Another possibility is to change the curriculum and replace several canonical texts with YA global literature. Bringing global literature into our classrooms opens students’ minds to difference as a rich resource, not a problem, while inviting critical engagement. Literature provides a safe place to explore cultural diversity and to develop empathy, instead of negatively judging people whose values or ways of living differ from our own. Through global literature, students come to understand their current lives and imagine beyond themselves.

**WORKS CITED**


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