

International Literature Resources for the High School English Classroom

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Introduction

In my experience, both as a high school student and a Intermediate-Senior teacher candidate, I rarely interacted with international literature. With Shakespeare as the cornerstone, I read a number of Canadian, American and British authors but it was not until my final year of high school that I encountered a non-Western perspective. As part of an independent study, I read Alan Paton's Cry, the Beloved Country which tremendously impacted my world view at that time. This literary experience and others underlie my belief that it is essential to introduce a broad spectrum of writers in the English Literature classroom.

As a student in the Educators Abroad class, I chose to spend my 3-week alternative practicum searching for excellent pieces of international literature which could be meaningfully integrated into the high school classroom. While I mention a large number of authors and works, this study should not be seen as an exhaustive list, but a springboard for teachers to introduce international literature into their established curriculum.

In order to facilitate ease of use, I organized the literature into four major geographical areas: Africa, Asia, Caribbean and Middle East. For each area, I selected one major piece of literature, and provide a synopsis and outline of the major themes. The "Activities and Assignments" section provides a number of different ideas to involve your students, before, during or after reading. The final section outlines a number of additional print, audio-visual and online resources to complement the selected texts. While the audio-visual and online suggestions mainly supplement the primary work, the print resources provide alternative choices for study as a class.

While the chosen pieces of literature will not fit every classroom, I believe they will be excellent selections for some. More importantly, I hope this small contribution will encourage more teachers to open their students' eyes by exploring the world through a broader scope of literature.

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Benefits and Considerations

The benefits of introducing International Literature into the high school classroom are endless but they include:

- Experiencing a society that they may not have been exposed to before and may never have the opportunity to physically visit
- A better understanding of other people groups, nations, cultures, religions, paradigms, etc.
- A medium for discussing a wide range of topics including: current and historical events
- Encourages a proactive approach to addressing stereotypes

While the benefits for including International Literature are numerous, the classroom teacher should be aware of the sensitive nature of some topics. Here are a few guidelines for teachers to consider when embarking on this new stage.

- Discourage students from making vast generalizations regarding a society or people group based upon one novel or poem
- Provide a context for the work by researching the setting, including political situation, history, language, lifestyle, etc.
- Discuss different stereotypes within pieces of literature
- Connect topics in the literature with current global issues like: poverty, race, power, exploitation, colonialism and post-colonialism, etc.

General Resources

While each section contains a list of additional resources, there are a few websites that contain useful information, regardless of the specific area or literary work.

Online

<http://www.brick.net/~classact/F-worldfiction.htm>

If you are looking for a comprehensive list of international literature, the “Fiction Around the World” website will be an invaluable resource.

<http://www.sparknotes.com/lit>

For many of the novels, “Spark Notes” provides a general overview, including: plot, characters, themes, chapter summaries and questions

<http://www.imdb.com>

This site is a great tool for finding information on almost any movie to supplement your International Literature study.

Africa

Nervous Conditions ~ Tsitsi Dangarembga (Rhodesia)

Synopsis

The story of Tambudzai, a young girl growing up in colonial Rhodesia in the 1960s. This novel would provide a terrific introduction to African literature, as students could relate to Tambudzai's school experiences, her struggles with family and friends, and her growing independence. Dangarembga writes in a language that would be accessible to most high school students, but deals with themes that would challenge even the strongest.

Themes

- Race relations
- Progress
- Male/female and parent/child relationships
- Poverty
- Education
- Relationship between the colonizer and the colonized
- Interaction and adaptation of different cultures

Activities and Assignments

Before Reading

1. Show students clips from a movie shot in Africa (ie. Out of Africa) to provide them with a geographical context.
2. Introduce students to some of the new vocabulary by playing Balderdash with words from the story they may not know. In groups, students create a definition for each word and then as a class guess which definition is correct.
3. Ask students to find one interesting fact about Rhodesia and as a class create a mural of facts.

During Reading

1. Students act as newspaper reporters, and select a character and situation in the novel to write a news report about. Students should

- look in the story for the Who? What? Where? When? Why? and How? Students could find or create a picture or graphic to complement their report.
2. Use a double-entry diary, where students select important quotes and respond to them.
 3. Choose a literary or artistic form and respond to your favourite chapter so far in the novel.

After Reading

1. Compare Nervous Conditions with another coming of age story, from Africa or another part of the world.
2. Ask students to choose on situation from the novel and compare it to their own experience (ie. A wedding, school, rejected by friends, etc.)
3. Select one of the established themes and pick out 5 quotes which relate to the topic. Write short paragraphs explaining the meaning and significance of each quote.

Additional Resources

Print

A Girl Named Disaster ~ Nancy Farmer (Mozambique/Zimbabwe)

This novel would be an excellent choice for readers with a less developed vocabulary. The work discusses Nhamo's struggle with the death of her mother and then an arranged marriage with an older, already married man. When Nhamo runs away, the novel keeps the reader engaged with adventures on every page.

Cry, The Beloved Country ~ Alan Paton (South Africa)

Paton writes a powerful story dealing with the heart of racial issues in South Africa in the 1940s. In the novel, Reverend Stephen Kumalo, an elderly Zulu priest, travels from his village to Johannesburg in search of his son. Though Kumalo finds his son, the heartbreak continues with his son's involvement in a high-profile murder of Arthur Jarvis, a white man striving for racial justice. Kumalo and Jarvis' father eventually meet, and share their devastation over the destroyed lives of both of their sons. Paton's novel would be an excellent choice for the high school classroom, as it shows the devastation of racial injustice from both sides.

Singing Away the Hunger ~ Mpho 'M'Atsepo Nthunya (Southern Africa)

In this autobiography, Mpho tells her story of an often-impoverished wife and mother in Lesotho and South Africa. She vividly describes

the economic and racial segregation of society. Her story brings to light many important debates including: traditional African vs. Western medicine, formal schooling vs. life education. Classes should discuss the role of the editor, K. Limakatso Kendall, in transcribing the story and the non-linear nature of the book.

Things Fall Apart ~ Chinua Achebe (Nigeria)

Achebe's novel, set in the 1890s, addresses the conflict between the Nigerian government and the indigenous Igbo society. The story mainly deals with the demise of Okonkwo, a powerful Umuofia warrior, and his village, with the white man's influence. The novel undermines colonial European literature which portrayed African society as uncivilized and ripe for exploitation. A university-bound class may enjoy a comparison of the portrayal of Africans in Things Fall Apart and Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness.

Audio-visual

Cry, The Beloved Country (video)

Out of Africa (video)

Online

<http://www.ncsu.edu/globalbookclub/disaster.html>

A great resource for activities for Nancy Farmer's A Girl Named Disaster.

Asia

A Daughter of Han ~ Ida Pruitt (China)

Synopsis

A Daughter of Han tells Ning Lao T'ai-t'ai's personal story, translated and edited by Ida Pruitt. Ning describes her impoverished existence as a woman living in China at the beginning of the 20th century. The work contains vivid descriptions of both daily life and special celebrations, including weddings, births and funerals. While the story emphasizes Ning's everyday life, it also mentions China's political situation and major social problems, such as opium abuse.

Themes

- Male/female relationships
- Traditions and customs
- Political issues and conflicts
- Poverty

Activities and Assignments

Before Reading

1. In order to teach students about the process of recording and editing oral stories by an outside source, students should select an important story from their own lives. In partners, Student A shares stories and Student B records. Students then switch roles. After both stories are recorded, Student A edits her written record of Student B's story and vice versa. Allow students to switch, so they can see how their partner edited their story. Discuss how students selected what to keep and create a list of possible problems and solutions to recording oral histories.
2. Provide students with a general knowledge of Chinese history during the late 1800s to early 1900s. Break students up into small groups and have them select a time period to research using the divisions outlined in the book's "Contents". Students could use general

During Reading

1. Using a chart, students record cultural differences that occur throughout the book. The chart could categorize them into gender roles, marriage, family, etc. The chart can later be used for discussions or as evidence for an argumentative essay.
2. Ask students to brainstorm 5 questions they would ask Mrs. Ning regarding her life.

After Reading

1. Students conduct an interview with someone who grew up in a different culture, country or time period. As a class, brainstorm what type of questions you might ask, the problems of recalling the past, etc
2. Create a children's book based on the information provided in the biography.

Additional Resources

Print

Chopsticks ~ Jon Berkeley (China)

A beautifully illustrated children's book of a small mouse that lives in Hong Kong, which accurately depicts the magnificent landscape and intriguing traditions. The light subject matter, colourful pictures and interesting characters makes Chopsticks a great book for an introduction to Asian culture.

I Live in Tokyo ~ Mari Takabayashi (Japan)

A terrific, informational addition to any study of Asian literature. While the book follows a narrative, it includes: Japanese vocabulary, maps, traditions, foods, holidays and a pronunciation guide. While the story or illustrations may not appeal strongly to the high school student, the wealth of information will likely intrigue them. This book could be used as an example assignment, asking students to create a similar style book for another country.

Audio-visual

Joy Luck Club (video)

Set in the United States of America, this movie looks at the relationship of traditional Chinese women and their modern daughters. While it will provide some shots of China, it could also be used as a comparison with similar themes explored in A Daughter of Han.

Online

<http://www.persimmon-mag.com/>

This magazine looks at all different aspects of art and literature in Asian countries, and posts a number of articles online. The magazine also reviews books each month, which would be a great place to find other pieces of Asian literature.

Caribbean

Wide Sargasso Sea ~ Jean Rhys (Jamaica)

Synopsis

In this novel, inspired by Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre, Jean Rhys writes a prequel to the classic. Set in Jamaica in the 1830s, Jean Rhys describes Antoinette Cosway's (Brontë's Mrs. Rochester) traumatic childhood as the daughter of previous slave owners. Rhys describes the dire situation of the Cosway's, after the Emancipation Act which freed their slaves and left them as outcasts in their own homes. Rhys successfully argues against Rochester's view of his wife as simply crazed. While an understanding of Jane Eyre definitely adds to the reader's enjoyment of Rhys' novel, Wide Sargasso Sea provides a strong enough plot and character development to stand on its own.

Themes/Enduring Questions

- Colonialism
- Marriage, sex, adultery
- Slavery, emancipation, power
- Race and identity
- Caribbean vs. Europe
- Womanhood and madness
- Religion and magic
- Parent-child relationships
- Language

Activities and Assignments

Before Reading

1. Ask students to research biographical information on Jean Rhys using print and online sources
2. Using different travel magazines and websites, create a collage of Jamaica (or a different Caribbean island)
3. Divide class into expert groups to research topics covered in "General Notes" at back of book, and then create a Carousel so all students understand material

4. Show students clips from Wide Sargasso Sea video to establish setting
5. Show students Jane Eyre video and discuss portrayal of Mrs. Rochester (you may choose to show movie after reading book)
6. Discuss the history of slavery and emancipation within the Caribbean

During Reading

1. Teach a short lesson on using endnotes and encourage students to read them throughout novel
2. Using journals, ask students to respond to recurring themes or to imagine they are one of the characters in the novel

After Reading

1. Show students Jane Eyre video and discuss portrayal of Mrs. Rochester
2. Research and discuss the treatment of the mentally ill in history
3. Ask students to select an important quote from the novel and explain it

Additional Resources

Print

Jane Eyre ~ Charlotte Bronte (England)

Though based in England, this classic novel should be at least discussed in order to create the context for Wide Sargasso Sea. Another idea would be to read excerpts or watch certain scenes of the movie, to help the class understand Bronte's portrayal of Mrs. Rochester.

At the Bottom of the River ~ Jamaica Kincaid (Antigua)

In her first work, celebrated Caribbean author, Jamaica Kincaid presents a collection of short stories centering on a young girl. Since the stories are relatively short and independently complete, a teacher could select a few as an introduction to Caribbean culture and family life or read one to begin each day of the unit. A class could also create their own collection on a different topic.

Audio-visual

Jane Eyre (video)

Wide Sargasso Sea (video)

Online

<http://www.welcometothecaribbean.com/>

An interactive site, full of pictures and easy-to-read text, to introduce students to many aspects of the Caribbean.

<http://www.scholars.nus.edu.sg/landow/post/caribbean/caribov.html>

A great overview of Caribbean literature, including themes, authors, literary history and post-colonial theory. For a student conducting an independent study, this would be a great resource for initial research.

Middle East

In the Name of Sorrow and Hope ~ Noa Ben Artzi-Pelossof (Israel)

Synopsis

In her work, Noa Ben Artzi-Pelossof presents a touching memoir of her grandfather, Yitzhak Rabin. Noa Ben describes not only her grandfather's important role as an Israeli Prime Minister, but his enduring commitment to his family and their grief over his untimely death. Since Noa Ben writes from a teenage perspective, her work deals with a number of social issues which will appeal to high schoolers including: education, fashion, entertainment and mandatory military service. While students can draw many similarities between their life and hers, the striking differences will likely promote dynamic discussions.

Themes

- Political and ethical issues including: autonomy, justice, sovereignty, land rights, peace and violence
- Family
- Teenage relationships
- Israeli culture and history

Activities and Assignments

Before Reading

1. The week before starting the book, ask students to bring in a newspaper clipping or article from an internet site on the Israel-Palestine situation.
2. Show students recent news clippings which cover some of the issues.
3. In small groups or as a class, brainstorm everything students believe is correct about the area and the people.
4. Facilitate a class discussion, asking students what they first think of when they hear "Israel" or "Palestine".
5. Provide each student with a blank map of Israel and its surrounding countries and list of key places to list. Students may fill in some of the places as the memoir progresses.

During Reading

1. Select one of the photographs from the novel, and describe it in a detailed paragraph. Use your descriptive paragraph as a starting point for a newspaper article, featuring the photograph.
2. In journal form, respond to one chapter in the memoir. Discuss the major issues presented, or how you might have responded in similar situations.
3. Listen to the audio-version of certain parts of the text and discuss how it influences your impression of the author and her story.

After Reading

1. Choose a member of their own family or a close friend (deceased or alive) and write a memoir.
2. Write an alternative memoir of Yitzhak Rabin from another perspective (his wife, his daughter, a rival)
3. Research the differences between orthodox and secular Jews.
4. Compare Noa's memoir of her grandfather to different media outlets' portrayal of him

Additional Resources

Print

Drinking the Sea at Gaza ~ Amira Hass (Israel/Palestine)

Written at a fairly academic level, this work would be suitable for a Gr. 12 English course. Hass, a journalist living in the Gaza strip, presents the Middle East conflict from the perspective of her daily encounters with Palestinians. While emphasizing the personal stories, Hass includes maps, charts and graphs which provide the reader with a better understanding of the complicated context surrounding her work. While many students would find this work difficult, it would suit students interested in the Middle East, with a fairly basic understanding of the issues.

Audio-visual

In the Name of Sorrow and Hope (Audio version read by Noa Ben Artzi-Pelossof)

Palestine Is Still the Issue (video)

John Pilger's documentary, while controversial, may be well-suited to a teacher looking to encourage debate and critical thinking on the issues surrounding the Middle East.

Online

<http://www.pusd.info/pusdmchs/Library/midestbi.htm>

A comprehensive list of Middle East fiction, non-fiction and biographies.

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/background/middleeast/index.html>

A great place to start if you are looking for basic information on the Middle East conflict, from a Canadian perspective.

<http://www.history.ucsb.edu/projects/ccws/conflicts/plans/israelpalestine.html>

This website provides complete lesson plans, which could be used to introduce Middle East literature.