

Introduction

Never has an introduction to the vast literary heritage of the world beyond Anglo-American culture been more important. Students are exposed now to the people of Europe and Asia in ways impossible to imagine even a generation ago. Experience with the literature and culture of those who share this planet with us is vital to our understanding of others and our ability to interact intelligently and generously with them.

National epics reveal the earliest dreams of a people. Their poetry, music, and stories express the experiences of history and the blunt realities of the present. To see even briefly through the eyes of others is to know ourselves more deeply and to listen more perceptively. American students need to learn as much as possible about the world they are entering and how its complexities and diversity can shape their own sense of space and time.

The materials for teachers and students presented in this text do not attempt either a chronology of literary development or a nationalistic approach. The reasons for this are multiple: First, the scope of world literature prohibits a chronological approach. Anyone familiar with the difficulty of synthesizing a chronology of American literature, with its limited history, will recognize the obstacles in that approach to world literature. Organization by national traditions, however, cultivates a false sense of separatism in literary history.

Because of the quantity of worthy literary works available, any selection of specific works is necessarily arbitrary. Russia, Spain, France, Germany, Israel, Scandinavia, Greece, Asia—the list could go on and on—all have extensive and impressive bodies of literature, each worthy in its own right of years of study. However, time is limited. It may not matter too much whether a high school student reads Tolstoy or Dostoevsky, but contact with the great Russian literary tradition is essential.

Finally, world literature broadens the reader's perspective, creating a sense of world citizenship. Esteem for other cultures grows along with a new sense of the human condition, with its strengths and limitations. A false sense of literary nationalism evaporates when great American and English writers are seen in the company of their European counterparts.

The materials also reflect some assumptions about high school students of world literature. First, they can appreciate and enjoy literature from foreign cultures; however, they sometimes need help “getting into” the works. Second, they respond best to works that reflect universal themes relevant to the students' own lives. It is also assumed that previous instruction in basic literary tools has been provided, as well as opportunities for studies of American and English literary traditions, which are not included in this unit.

The materials in this unit are designed to help teachers provide a varied and stimulating approach to the study of world literature. The unit has the following general objectives:

1. To present a variety of literary works from diverse cultural backgrounds
2. To compare and contrast heroic figures from diverse cultures

3. To analyze comic, satiric, and ironic perspectives
4. To analyze the universal literary concern of oppressed versus oppressor
5. To consider literary expressions of the human being as one who takes risks and struggles to achieve
6. To read and analyze selected major world writers
7. To appreciate both great literary traditions and emerging literatures
8. To examine the role and responsibility of the translator
9. To stimulate analysis, synthesis, and creativity in the study of literature