

Introduction

Stories, songs, and poetry are the principal means of understanding one's own culture and entering sympathetically into the culture of others. What more important responsibility of educators in a world drawn into ever closer economic and political relationships than to open the minds and hearts of students to the perspectives of their global neighbors.

In this new millennium greater multicultural awareness is urgent. Technology has globalized both businesses and daily life. Although books, plays, and music have never really been limited to national borders, now the exchange of these cultural expressions has become a pervasive, almost universal phenomenon.

American students especially, who live in the most powerful nation in the world, need to appreciate the wisdom and beauty of other traditions and to be open to what can be learned from the texts of a different time and place.

The following materials for teachers and students reflect a thematic approach to the study of world literature. They are based on several assumptions.

First, the scope of world literature precludes 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 has the further disadvantage of cultivating 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.

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, students respond best to works that reflect universal themes relevant to their 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. This unit has the following general objectives:

1. To present a variety of literary works from diverse cultural backgrounds
2. To see literary expression as a search for meaning
3. To examine how literature reveals problems of personal relationship and social responsibility
4. To understand how literary form is shaped by political and cultural convictions