Using the NEA as a Gateway to World Literature (emagplus 89)

English teacher and literary translator Gabi Reigh encourages you to read literature in translation by recommending some great texts to compare with those you might be studying for your NEA.

I lead a double life – by day, I teach A Level English at a sixth form college, by night (at least until I fall asleep on the sofa over my laptop) I am a literary translator. I have been an English teacher for many years, but have only recently started translating from my mother tongue, Romanian. However, my new involvement in literary translation has opened my eyes to the opportunities that A Level English Literature or English Language and Literature could offer in terms of broadening students' understanding of other cultures and leading them to discover great writers from different parts of the world. Some exam boards already include texts in translation such as A Doll's House by Henrik Ibsen and All Quiet on the Western Front by Erich Maria Remarque as part of their modules, recognising their literary value and the way they have influenced anglophone writers. Although not all the exam boards allow students to choose translated texts for their NEA, I would argue that this component offers the ideal opportunity to engage with world literature. The premise of the NEA is that it should be an independent research project and potentially this could be an opportunity for some students to discover texts connected to their own cultural heritage – for example, I imagine myself as an A level student twenty years ago, having just emigrated from Romania, exploring Romantic tropes in the poetry of John Keats and Lucian Blaga. The NEA is also a project that involves comparing texts in the light of their different contexts, and by studying translated literature this context would be extended to the exploration of different places and cultures, thereby enriching students' understanding of the world.

Coming-of-Age Novels as World Literature

Some students might choose to focus on coming-of-age novels for their NEA, examining the search for identity of characters of a similar age to themselves. Popular choices of texts for such an investigation are The Go-Between, Jane Eyre and The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, but arguably they all owe a debt to the first bildungsroman, Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship by Johann Wolfgang Goethe written in German, in 1795-96. Many consider Thomas Carlyle's translation of this novel in 1824 to have been very influential in the development of the English coming-of-age novel. There has always been an interplay, therefore, between coming-of-age novels written in English and those written in other languages. A student interested in analysing what it means to 'come of age' in different parts of the world might wish to pair one of the familiar texts already mentioned with a text in translation that would lead to illuminating contextual comparisons.

> *The Go-Between, by L.P. Hartley*

'A combination of knowing and not-knowing is this novel's driving force',[1] Ali Smith wrote about this evocation of late 19th century society from the perspective of an inexperienced schoolboy. The adult narrator bitterly recalls the part he unwittingly played, as a child, in enabling and then destroying a forbidden romance between an upper class woman and a farmer. Like Leo Coston, Vladimir Petrovich, the protagonist of Ivan Turgenev's novella First Love also becomes entangled in an illicit affair without fully understanding it:

> *'It was a strange, feverish time, a kind of chaos, in which the most contradictory feelings, thoughts, suspicions, hopes, joys and sufferings were all whirled about together. I was terrified of what was going on inside me, if indeed a sixteen-year-old boy can look inside himself at all. I was terrified of being aware of everything.'*

Similarly to Leo's devotion to Marian, his friend's sister, Vladimir's love for Zinaida allows him to become easily manipulated and blinds him to the fact that she is romantically involved with his father. Like Leo, the young Vladimir is denied the opportunity of love and remains a mere observer, 'alone, [as if he had] walked past someone else's happiness'. But in both works the lovers' happiness is short lived, divided as they are by class and social conventions. The young narrators learn that

> *'love, for all its power to move and transform, cannot in the end outlast the brevity of human life, nor can it alter the fact that the individual human spirit is menaced by a surrounding darkness of nature.' [2]*

Sense and Sensibility by Jane Austen

As I was translating The Town with Acacia Trees, by Mihail Sebastian, I was continually struck by the parallels between its teenage heroine, Adriana, and the character of Marianne in Sense and Sensibility, a text I had taught for many years. While Sense and Sensibility focuses on the Dashwood sisters' quest for love in Regency England, The Town with Acacia Trees tells the story of a relationship between two young people living in a provincial town in 1930s Romania. The narrative switches between the point of view of the young girl and her boyfriend, Gelu, allowing us to see how their feelings develop as they mature and find their place in society. Both Sebastian and Austen use free indirect style to convey the self-absorption of their heroines as well as their romantic delusions. We are introduced to Adriana just as she enters puberty, her heightened feelings forming a clear parallel to Marianne's 'sensibility'. Adriana's grandiose image of herself as

> *'a tragic infanta, in her finest gown, withering with tuberculosis and loneliness in an echoing palace'*

or the descriptions of her 'collapsing in tears on the corner of the open piano' echo Austen's characterisation of Marianne, whose unrestrained emotions verge on the ridiculous. However, both Austen and Sebastian do not only satirise their passionate heroines, but also critique the rigid social

structures that limit their freedom, such as their financial dependency and pressure to enter a suitable marriage.

The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, by James Joyce

In 1911, disappointed by the poor public reception of his work, James Joyce threw the manuscript of his semi-autobiographical novel onto the fire, and it is only due to his family's valiant efforts to save it that it survived. Joyce's alter ego, Stephen Dedalus – a nod to the mythological craftsman, Daedalus – defines his identity as an artist after casting off the religious and social influences that shaped his early life in nineteenth century Ireland. Published in 1916, the book can be compared to another Künstlerroman (story about the formation of an artist), Thomas Mann's Tonio Kröger (1903). The artist in this case is born into a bourgeois German family and, like Dedalus, also sees himself as an outsider in conventional society, symbolised when he is mistaken for a criminal in his hometown. Just as Dedalus' creative spirit, 'the call of life to his soul', triumphs over 'the dull gross voice of the world of duties and despair', Kröger learns that 'to be an artist, one must die to everyday life.'

Jane Eyre, by Charlotte Bronte

For those studying A Level English Language and Literature, a comparison between Jane Eyre and the graphic novel Persepolis, by Marjane Satrapi could lead to an interesting exploration of two spirited young women trying to hold on to their independence. The orphan Jane Eyre experiences the brutality of Victorian society at the hands of her extended family and then at a charity school. Young Marjane, too, lives in fear of violence and her freedom is also limited, in this case by the theocratic government established in Iran after the 1979 revolution. In both books, we see how religion is used by some as a means of control and we see two rebellious young women challenging authority, such as when Marjane exposes her teacher's hypocrisy in an art class or when she buys heavy metal music tapes on the black market and is caught by the 'morality police'. There is also a motif of journeys in both texts; Jane's wanderings through England, from her aunt's house, to Lowood school, to Thornfield Hall, to the Rivers' home, parallel Marjane's alienating travels as an immigrant in Europe. These journeys highlight the women's loneliness and feelings of displacement, but also provide them with opportunities to mature and develop emotionally.

Conclusion

These coming-of-age novels from around the world give an insight into the experiences of young people separated by distance and time, but who often share common concerns. They present the confusion of first love, young women caught between passion and duty, the challenges of creating art, feelings of alienation and displacement. These are universal themes, and whilst their treatment might be different in relation to the culture that has produced these literary works, they also remind us of the similarities between the experiences of people from different countries and the challenges they all have to face as they 'come-of-age'.

Reading list

The Go-Between, by L. P. Hartley (Penguin Modern Classics)

First Love and Other Stories, by Ivan Turgenev, translated by Richard Freeborn (Oxford World's Classics)

Sense and Sensibility, by Jane Austen (Oxford World's Classics)

The Town with Acacia Trees, by Mihail Sebastian, translated by Gabi Reigh (Aurora Metro)

The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, by James Joyce (Penguin Modern Classics)

Tonio Kröger in Death in Venice and Other Stories by Thomas Mann, translated by David Luke (Vintage Classics)

Jane Eyre by Charlotte Bronte (Wordsworth Classics)

Persepolis by Marjane Satrapi, translated by Anjali Singh (Vintage)

Notes

[1] Ali Smith, Re-reading: The Go-Between by L. P. Hartley (The Guardian, 2011)

[2] Richard Freeborn, First Love and Other Stories (Oxford University Press, 2008), the introduction.

Article Written By: Gabi Reigh is the Curriculum Manager for English Language and Literature at The Sixth Form College Farnborough.

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