

Should the subject of English Literature be replaced by Global Literatures?

To discuss replacing a subject we must first distinguish its purpose, why do we - in Eaglestone's words - "do" English? As early as 1922, Professor George Stuart Gordon,¹ contended that "England is sick and English Literature must save it²," accusing the churches³ of "having failed,"⁴ and insisting that the subject must "save our Souls and heal the State."⁵ Gordon suggested that the moral foundations of Literature were, in some capacity, the anchor which prevented people from 'drifting' off a moral path. The geographical restriction of "England," in Gordon's explanation allows for the ostensibly axiomatic contention that British Literature provided ample material to fulfill this intention. Our social needs and, consequently, our purpose of studying literature, have changed since then. Anchors are and have been a symbol of rootedness but ironically they were invented to enable travel, like literature, they allow for exploration and discoveries which help us evolve as a society. In examining the contemporary purposes of studying literature we can uncover a potential which, by the Cambridge definition of global, "covers and affects the whole world."⁶ In a transcultural and interconnected reality, facilitated by a medium that is delightfully malleable and capacious, it appears inevitable that the syllabus evolves so as to provide "maps of the mind to supplement and interpret our maps of the globe."⁷

We study literature to understand our world.

Writers convey stories that help us give substance to human experiences, for "literature can train, and exercise, our ability to weep for those who are not us or ours."⁸ The English literary canon was limited to advocating the experiences of those who wrote in English and had the means to be published. A diversity

¹ an early professor of English Literature at Oxford University

² Gordon, G.S. (1922) Inaugural lecture for a Merton College professorship. Inaugural lecture for a Merton College professorship, Oxford.

³ Gordon, 1922

⁴ Gordon, 1922

⁵ Gordon, 1922

⁶ Definition taken from the Cambridge English Dictionary

⁷ *World Literature: An Anthology of Human Experience*, Christy, Arthur E., Wells, Henry W., 1947

⁸ Sontag, Susan. "Literature as Freedom." *Irish Pages* 2, no. 1 (2003): 175–85. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30057274>.

in voice allows us to draw veridical conclusions about the times, people and places which we may not be acquainted with. More than this, it embodies a universal experience that has the potential to bind together various cultures and contexts. The past is not limited to anglophone experiences and historical narratives such as those of the Holocaust need to be understood by people universally. Anne Frank's "The Diary of a Young Girl," ostensibly the most famous and impactful rendition of the Jewish experience, was originally written in Dutch. Survivor Margot Friedländer immortalized her experience in words, but her autobiography "Versuche, dein Leben du Machen,"⁹ like countless others, was written originally in German. We must not efface these voices: without translation their stories would be unavailable to anglophone readers, and without a place in school and university syllabi, they will be neglected. Literature is personal and emotional, it delineates experiences which shape our understanding of prejudice and transcends our experience of universal obstacles. In throwing an anchor and losing ourselves in a novel we risk the discomfort of an unknown reality but can embrace the satisfaction of a nuanced understanding.

The fear of meaning getting "lost" in translation somewhat jeopardizes the concept of Global Literature being taught. Translation is criticized as deceitful if it is not readily evident that it is derivative but, when overly submissive to the foreign form, condemned "guilty of misfeasance rather than malfeasance"¹⁰ because the original's organic intention has not been preserved. Whilst this viewpoint outlines translation as a 'threat' which dilutes cultural and lexical potency, a second recognises that the roots of "close reading" originate in the exegetical traditions of sacred texts and the philological strategies applied to the Homeric epics or Chinese (Shijing) poetry. Critic Stefan Collini claims that "Anyone seriously engaged with literature ... practices close reading,¹¹" but in silencing Global Literatures, we are hindering our ability to do so. In schools, the International Baccalaureate requires the study of "works in translation"¹²,

⁹ Translated as "Try to Make Your Life" in English

¹⁰ Rabassa, Gregory. "If This Be Treason: Translation and Its Possibilities." *The American Scholar* 44, no. 1 (1974): 29–39. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41207264>.

¹¹ "The Close Reader" by Stefan Collini, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/close-reader/>, accessed on 20th December

¹² English Literature for the IB Diploma, Nic Amy and David James, Cambridge University Press, 2011

to “enrich your appreciation of writers and the context they work in,” focusing on “international mindedness.” Semantic inaccuracies are a small price to pay for accessibility because ultimately, “the translator can be adventurous, but he cannot be an adventurer as the original writer can.”¹³ Translation should be appreciated as a ‘maritime zone,’ where language is separated by name and access but its purpose is fluid yet constant.

We study literature to explain our world.

Anchored in our personal realities, we are limited to only a glimpse of a horizon but writing allows us to receive the lessons learned from someone's experience and transmit messages to those who will, one day, sail our path. Studying English Literature teaches you to articulate your thoughts, a skill which can “combat (the) cliches of our separateness.¹⁴” As literature transmits “not only myths but countermyths,¹⁵” just as reality presents contradictory experiences that challenge your preconceived notions. In explaining our world we are broadening someone else's, while also combating the threat of an insular cultural echo chamber.

English Literature might be described as ‘enough’ to teach us how to articulate ourselves ‘well,’ despite the ambiguity of evaluating what is ‘well-written.’ How can stories about worlds which have no place in your consciousness enhance your ability to communicate your reality? We may look to English Literature, to analyze the way that literary techniques are applied, but “Global Literature” exposes us to content which increases our scope of inspiration. T.S Eliot argues that, “the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past,” explaining that poets must be conscious of ideas that have carried through history, learning that “art never improves, but that the material of art is never quite the same.¹⁶” We must acknowledge traces of European influence on canonical authors who wrote in English:

¹³ Rabassa, 1974

¹⁴ Sontag, 2003

¹⁵ Sontag, 2003

¹⁶ Eliot, T. S. “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” *Perspecta* 19 (1982): 36–42. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1567048>.

the Grand Tour was not limited to England; Romanticism emerged as a response to the French Revolution. Shakespeare, revered as the greatest writer of all time, is not exempt from the 'foreign' and translated 'influence' on his sonnets. During the Elizabethan age, "English poets" were said to have "had two guides...the French, [and] the Italian," allegedly taking "advantage of both."¹⁷ Currents of thought and artistic movements do not take place in a vacuum.

We read literature to escape our world.

Sontag describes access to Global Literatures as "the passport to enter a larger life."¹⁸ A way of opening our minds beyond the quotidian structure of our daily lives, to the "times and spaces we have never known." The sphere of anglophone literature was once limited but the reverberations of colonialism see 67 countries recognize English as their official language, indicating that even when excluding translations, Global Literatures transcend the scope of courses which are currently titled "English Literature." It appears inevitable that the content taught will cover and portray "the whole world,"¹⁹ thereby allowing us to study global perspectives whilst maintaining a quality of literature which is retained when studying a text in its original language. Global anglophone literature allows readers to deconstruct and dispel western narratives of 'the east,' as well as increase the variety of influences on content which is produced. In a post-colonial world, studying literature that was originally written in English no longer hinders our ability to 'travel.'

If translated works are being examined in English Literature courses and work which qualifies as "covering or affecting the whole world" is sometimes anglophone, then we might ask ourselves if it is possible to impose these categories. Is it the content or the author's origin which makes something global? *Heart of Darkness* is considered part of the English literary canon but its author is Polish-British and the

¹⁷ Foreign Influence on Shakespeare's Sonnets Author(s): David Klein Source: The Sewanee Review, Oct., 1905, Vol. 13, No. 4 (Oct., 1905), pp. 454-474 Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

¹⁸ Sontag, 2003

¹⁹ As defined by the Cambridge English Dictionary

novella is set in the Congo. Irish author Samuel Beckett wrote in French but translated his own work into English, his *oeuvre* is taught on both English and MFL courses. How and why do we categorize culturally hybrid work, how do we meaningfully distinguish between literature and comparative literature? Studying Global and English Literature should not be mutually exclusive. The idea of 'replace,' is one with negative connotations but changing the title of the subject acknowledges the roots of literature already taught and increases the variety of novels which are selected as opposed to altering the subject's purpose. Ultimately there is an overlap which suggests it might be better to dismantle the two hypernyms and instead embrace the "chance [to] read across...cultural differences."²⁰ Fundamentally, we study literature to find our world by untangling thoughts through discussion and interpretation. Literature is, professedly, "the history of human responsiveness to what is alive and what is moribund."²¹ This cannot be constricted by hypernyms. In some capacity, this search for nationalistic identity allows us a fleeting moment of commonality. Thousands of ships have explored the same waters, laying and weighing anchors in turn. They may not have all sailed past each other but they wrote chapters of their lives which unconsciously create an overlap in their individual reality.

Literature is our shared experience. We study literature not only to understand how language shapes meaning but also how meaning shapes the mind and our world. Our study of literature is a reflection of the role of literature "in liberating us from our immediate limitations by anchoring us to a larger reality."²²

²⁰ Butler, 2013

²¹ Sontag, 2003

²² Sontag, 2003