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Should the subject English Literature be replaced by Global Literatures?

Just under two weeks ago, Rishi Sunak announced that the study of maths in the UK would be compulsory until the age of 18. A constituent of the consequent backlash entailed the question of whether the subject English should also be included within our Prime Minister's ambitious designs. The justification for maths appears obvious: Sunak states that we "live in a world where data is everywhere and statistics underpin every job" - a world that may encounter inevitable conflict with the 8 million adults in the UK that have the numeracy skills of primary school children. Yet an argument illustrating the importance of English proves a more elusive creature; one that requires a little more diligence in the pursuit of its rationale. Thus before treating the question of replacing English Literature with a global corollary, I feel it necessary to outline why we study the subject in the first place.

An American literary critic offers a possible solution. Norman Holland, a pioneer of reader-response criticism, reduces the problem of the importance of English to a psychoanalytic theory of identity. He proposes that individuals use literature as a way of understanding and defining themselves, as a method of constructing a sense of self. Holland maintains Heinz Lichenstein's view of a "primary identity", deriving from the imprint of a mother-figure, which is irreversible but capable of infinite variation. Our sense of self is not fixed but constantly changing and evolving, and it does so through interactions with the literary. Holland asserts that "interpretation is a function of identity" - readers shape the texts they read to fit their identity theme; they arrive at the meaning of a text in a way that is characteristic to them, and "identity re-creates itself'. Each literary text functions as a 'mirror' that reflects the reader's own unconscious desires and fears, and the reader uses this reflection to reshape, to build upon, their sense of self. As Holland states, "we use the literary work to symbolise and finally to replicate ourselves". The work is internalised; it is absorbed and materialised into our own psychic economy. Ultimately the study of literature, the very feat of reading itself, becomes experiential. We project ourselves onto the text we read, and the work becomes an extension of us. It is this process that reveals the importance of literature. The act of reading holds within it a formidable power, the power to shape and inform the formation of one's identity.

Having touched on the broad importance of literary study, I would now like to address its specific components, beginning with the realm of English Literature itself. Some argue that to focus on the particular subsection of literature written by English authors allows for a deeper understanding of the culture, history, and social context of England. For example, reading works by Jane Austen can provide an understanding of the social norms and customs of 19th century England, and how they affected the lives of people, particularly women, in that society. Similarly, the study of William Shakespeare's plays can provide an understanding of the cultural and political climate of Elizabethan England, and informs issues such as power struggles, gender roles, and class divisions. Studying Global Literature could sacrifice the level of deeper contextual understanding that a sole focus on one singular area of literary study provides.

Firstly, this deeper understanding might appeal to the practice of sociological criticism, where a text is evaluated based on its relation to a particular society. Critics of this perspective view art as a

manifestation of society, as the work contains metaphors and references directly applicable to society at the time of creation. Thus, a thorough understanding of the culture and history of a text would be invaluable to a sociological critic's interpretation of literature. Secondly, the practice of authorial intentionalism within traditional literary criticism posits that the author's intent and biographical context are crucial for understanding and interpreting a text. This approach also necessitates an in-depth examination of the historical and cultural context in which the work was created, which can be more effectively attained through a concentrated examination of a specific literary tradition. Thirdly, Marxist critics may support a focus on cultural context, as they view literature as a reflection of the ideologies of the author's time, thus requiring a socio-historical understanding of the era in which a text was written. Ultimately, the study of English authors can facilitate a deeper cultural understanding by offering a window into the culture, history, and society of England and the broader English-speaking world. This insight is not only beneficial in its own right, but is also indirectly supported, if not necessary, in various approaches to literary criticism.

While the examination of a particular subset of literature undoubtedly yields valuable insights, it is important to consider the potential benefits of a comprehensive analysis of global literature as a whole. It can be argued that a more diverse range of literature from around the world is necessary in order to provide a more comprehensive and inclusive education. On the one hand, reading literature written by English authors can provide insight into the universal human experience and the commonality of the human condition. For example, works by Charles Dickens can provide an understanding of the social and economic issues faced by the lower classes in 19th century England, but it also can give a broader understanding of poverty and class inequality in general. However, this limited perspective is incommensurable with the comprehensive understanding that can be attained through the examination of a diverse array of global literary works. A study of Tolstoy's works, such as 'War and Peace' and 'Anna Karenina' provides insight on the panoramic scope and the exploration of the lives of the upper and middle classes of Russian society, with a focus on the moral and ethical dilemmas faced by his characters. Dostoyevsky illustrates through 'Crime and Punishment' and 'The Brothers Karamazov' the darker aspects of human nature and the lives of the lower classes, with a focus on the intense psychological and philosophical explorations of the human mind. Both authors depict a society that is in the midst of rapid change, deeply divided along class lines, and explore the spiritual and existential struggles of their characters in a way that is different from the practical and realistic approach of English literature during the 19th Century. By studying literature from a variety of cultures, students will gain a better understanding of the human experience and be better equipped to navigate an increasingly interconnected world.

One of the challenges encountered in the examination of global literature is the problem of translation; an issue that can result in the alteration or loss of meaning, cultural specificity, and literary style. Principally, each language is a world unto itself. Certain aspects may overlap and entwine, but it is not, nor ever can be, identical to another. In her introduction to the 'Dictionary of Untranslatables', Emily Apter outlines how "Nothing is exactly the same in one language as in the other, so the failure of translation is always necessary and absolute". In some cases the act of transferring a text from one tongue to another can be detrimental to the intended meaning of the work. For example, the translation of "One Hundred Years of Solitude" can fail to capture the sense of magical realism, a literary style that blurs the lines between reality and fantasy. Similarly, Dante's epic poem "The Divine Comedy" lost part of its complex allegory

and symbolism through the inexact translation of certain words that originally convey a religious or spiritual meaning. The reasoning for this loss of meaning lies not only in the discrepancies of language, but in the treachery of the words themselves. The medium of 'words' retains a precarious variability that can lead them to take on multiple meanings. They may harbour contradictory definitions (such as 'peer' and 'oversight'), cause confusion via homophones, and even become subject to the personal associations that people accrue to words over the course of their lives - the foundation of Normand Holland, Stanley Fish and David Bleich's subjective literary criticism.

Additionally, it must be acknowledged that translation inherently entails interpretation. A translated text, while similar to its source material, is distinct in that it is filtered through the lens of the translator's individual linguistic capabilities, personal perspective, and cultural background. New Critics and Formalists object to this intrinsic level of interpretation, stating that translators should be transparent and not impose their own perceptions onto the text. However this does not account for the unconscious cognitive biases and experiences that may influence the recreation of the text. Contrarily, Roland Barthes suggests a more forgiving approach to translation. He believed that the meaning of a text is not fixed, but rather it is created through the interactions between the text, the author, the reader, and the culture in which it was produced ("The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture"). From this perspective, the translator is not just a passive conduit for the original author's meaning but an active participant in the meaning-making process. Ultimately, when studying global literature, it must be acknowledged that a translated version is in essence an interpretation, rendering it divergent from the original work. This raises the question: whose work is one truly engaging with when examining the translated version?

In conclusion, while the study of global literature has the potential to offer a better understanding of the human experience, the limitations on contextual perceptions and the potential for inaccuracies in meaning and style, call into question the efficacy of this approach as the sole focus of literary education. An alternative approach would be to integrate more global literature into the curriculum in conjunction with the study of English literature. This would provide students with a more comprehensive and holistic educational experience, enabling them to gain a deeper understanding of the world and its cultures.

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