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Graphic Novels in the Pedagogical Literary Landscape: *Persepolis* & “The Cannon”

By Nimisha Patel

When I was assigned to teach a high school Justice Seminar as a second-year teacher in the greater Princeton area, I had all kinds of unrealistic expectations about the canonized works of literature I would teach my students: *Absalom Absalom*, *Crime & Punishment*, *Of Mice & Men*—amongst others. Much to my dismay, I had little choice in the scheduling of my classes, the learning teams I would be working in, and the curriculum I would be teaching, due to my lack of seniority. The school board had deemed it appropriate to abandon the autonomy of educators in order to ensure an identical learning experience for all of the students enrolled in every section of a given course. Ironically, *that* resulted in what now appears to be an individuated professional learning experience, specifically tailored for *me*.

My collaborative learning team that semester had insisted on teaching Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* as a closing piece for the Justice seminar—and so I reluctantly acquiesced as I added the title to my syllabus. I had qualms about the pedagogical value of a graphic novel (which at the time sounded merely like a sophisticated comic book); I was unable to fathom the possibility of exploring something as complex as the Iranian Revolution and Islamophobia with a series of colorless panels and basic speech bubbles. While drafting my lesson plans, I could not help but feel guilty about proffering a “picture-book” to my students—was I robbing them of cultural capital quintessential to academic success? I framed the final unit within a semester long curriculum focused on genre studies and the formal features of classifying literature.

I unremittingly supplemented every lesson with literary excerpts (poems, non-fiction articles, and even literary criticism). To ensure a sincere academic treatment of the text, I even introduced the novel with genre specific vocabulary such as *panel, frame, gutter, bleed, foreground* etc. Much to my surprise, most of my students were not only enthused about the pairing of images to text, they were excited about the reality of examining such an easily comprehensible novel in the same course that they had plodded through an excerpt of *The Brothers Karamazov*. The accessibility of *Persepolis* enabled students to readily juxtapose it with corresponding readings, allowing them to successfully explore intertextual nuances and draw deeper conclusions than they would have if the primary text itself had demanded more engagement for understanding. Because the novel was easily intelligible, students were able to scrutinize the implications of Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development in Marji's life; they were able to independently evaluate the effects of gendered roles across societal barriers; they were able to study the deconstruction of western notions of Middle Eastern identity—quite frankly, they were able to do so much more than just learn Marji's story because of the readability of the novel.

The culminating assignment was a Seminar Series in which students delivered a “TED-Talk” relaying the findings of a multi-step research project on a current social injustice (Appendix). The project entailed viewing a foreign film of choice from which students identified a current global injustice related—however loosely—to Satrapi's novel. Next, students perused through academic journals and catalogs to examine and identify relevant research material with which they composed an informed opinion on the subject, as well as an annotated bibliography to authenticate their thought-process. Students were then tasked to construct and deliver a 7-8 minute “TED-Talk” in order to relay their findings and convey their opinions on their respective research. *They were amazing!*

Even the unlikeliest of students delivered well researched and engaging presentations, which demonstrated knowledge coupled with empathy for the social injustices occurring across the globe. I

particularly remember a timely presentation given by Victoria on child soldiers in which she revealed that she had read *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*—willingly! She composed an intricate argument using *Persepolis*, *Beasts of No Nation* and *A Long Way Gone* about the threats of ignoring child refugees in the current Syrian Refugee Crisis. In her “TED Talk,” she argued that war unforgivably robs children, civilians and combatants of their innocence, hope, and, most importantly, their childhood. War, she claimed, affects children the way it affects adults, but it also affects them in additional ways—it denies opportunities, dismantles futures, and necessarily displaces identity, consequently coercing children into maturation. She concluded her speech by imploring her peers to consider the effects of war on child refugee.

Another student, Shei, took a more assertive stance in which he studied the judicial milieu of political instability in Iran and Zimbabwe. Shei viewed Camilla Nielsson’s documentary *Democrats*; he specifically focused on the necessity of a bipartisan political system in order to ensure just advocacy for all citizens. Some students presented a reflective study of past events, like Leela who focused on Iranian female independence and identity in the late 20th century; she compared Satrapi’s protagonist with Azar Nafisi’s narrator, with a concluding remark on the western veil through which we often view Iranian, and Islamic women at large. Leela, like many of my other students, had made an unbelievably significant argument without even realizing that she was partaking in serious literary analysis. One student even created and shared a graphic-novella about the Lebanese Civil War.

The discussions that these student-led seminars fostered have made it apparent to me that as educators we must evaluate the literary merit of a graphic novel within a different framework than we have in the past. The very quality that often makes educators like myself hesitant to incorporate graphic novels into

our classrooms has now proven to be pedagogically instrumental to student success—the “pictures” garnered student engagement beyond the boundaries of sheer plot comprehension.

Graphic novels definitively hold a unique literary space within the English classroom: the pairing of text with images enables students to empathize and take interest in complex (and uncomfortable) social issues, evidently making it easier for them to be conscious global citizens.

Works Cited

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Nimisha Patel, formally an English teacher in the greater Princeton Area, currently teaches at North Brunswick High School. She is also an adjunct at Rutgers University. Her academic interests include genre studies and literary theory. She acknowledges that being a teacher necessarily means being a student first as she aspires to share the beauty of literature with all of her students.

Appendix: TED-Talk / TEDucate Assignment.



TEDucate^{Patel}

As we conclude our study of the graphic novel genre—and our [In]Justice seminar at-large, I implore you to critically evaluate the global literary landscape in its entirety. As a culminating project for this seminar, you will deliver a “TED Talk” as part of a student led seminar series for your peers.

Your Assignment:

- 📌 You will choose a foreign film which depicts an injustice within the culture of the movie’s origin/or intended audience which parallels one of the themes presented in Marjane Satrapi’s graphic novel, *Persepolis*.
- 📌 Identify, research, and evaluate the particular form of injustice portrayed in the film. You will have to compose an annotated bibliography.
- 📌 Form a distinct opinion on the subject matter after you have critically evaluated the nuances of the issue at hand. Compose an original “project” of your choice.
- 📌 Compose a 7-8 minute speech, with corresponding visuals, to inform your peers about your research and evaluation; furthermore, you must persuade your audience to align themselves with your point-of-view!
- 📌 Be creative and have fun!

Suggested Films:

Disclaimer: some of these films contain mature material. If you feel sensitive to certain issues, please ask for some guidance before you select from this list. You may select any other film of choice as long as you see me for approval.

- | | |
|---|---|
| 📌 <i>War Witch</i> (Sub-Saharan, Africa) | 📌 <i>The Act of Killing</i> (Indonesia) |
| 📌 <i>No</i> (Chile) | 📌 <i>The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie</i> (France) |
| 📌 <i>Asad</i> (Somalia) | 📌 <i>Living on a Dollar</i> (Guatemala) |
| 📌 <i>5 Broken Cameras</i> (Palestine) | 📌 <i>Lagaan</i> (England/India) |
| 📌 <i>The Death of Mr. Lazarescu</i> (Romania) | 📌 <i>Passage to India</i> (India/England) |
| 📌 <i>Shun Li and the Poet</i> (Italy) | 📌 <i>Ratnam's Trilogy of Terror Films</i> (Kashmir) |
| 📌 <i>Banco di Cinema</i> (Iran) | 📌 <i>Grave of the Fireflies</i> (Japan WWII) |
| 📌 <i>About Elly</i> (Iran) | 📌 <i>City of God</i> (Brazil) |
| 📌 <i>A Touch of Sin</i> (China) | 📌 <i>Blood Diamond</i> (South Africa) |
| 📌 <i>Maalik</i> (Pakistan) | 📌 <i>Jonestown: The Life and Death of Peoples Temple</i> (Guyana) |
| 📌 <i>Grbavica</i> (Sarajevo) | 📌 <i>Miracle at Midnight</i> (Denmark) |
| 📌 <i>Beasts of No Nation</i> (Ghana) | 📌 <i>O Jerusalem</i> (Israel/Palestine) |
| 📌 <i>The Last King of Scotland</i> (Uganda) | 📌 <i>Adanggaman</i> (West Africa) |
| 📌 <i>Hotel Rwanda</i> (Rwanda) | 📌 <i>When the Wind Blows</i> (Soviet Union) |
| 📌 <i>Sometime in April</i> (Rwanda) | |

Please make sure you have parental consent to view your film.

While Viewing Your Film

- ✍ Take notes on plot events, characters, and cinematic techniques employed throughout the film.
- ✍ Consider how the film is related to *Persepolis*.

Tips for Evaluating your Research:

Subsequent to viewing a foreign film on a particular form of justice, you may want to consider one of the

following prompts to form a “distinct” opinion on the subject.

1. Should definitions of justice be universal?
2. How does a lack of cultural knowledge influence judgment of what is just/unjust?
3. How does the media promote or hinder global injustice?
4. Can socially accepted values destroy humanity or the humanity of a culture?
5. How does culture inform certain bias?
6. How does global intervention impact justice/injustice?
7. How does justice or an understanding of justice evolve over time?
8. Is our current understanding of justice valid or at its best?
9. How do Western standards impact a global sense of justice? Is this *acceptable*?
10. You can also come up with a topic of your choice.

The TED Talk:

*The final phase of this project requires you to deliver a 7-8 minute “TED Talk” in which you share details about your film, the injustice you discovered and what you learned. Share your insight. Your presentation must include a nuanced argument about your research, the film you viewed and *Persepolis*.*

While presenting, refer to your presentation guide and public speaking “tips and tricks” packet—and practice!

Visit the following link to see how the pro’s deliver their talks: <https://www.ted.com>

Notes: _____

Deliverables & Grades

Please keep this sheet handy and have it available for all your conferences and submission reviews.

<p>Research Days: _____ You will have some class time devoted to research in the Media Center or in Classroom Workshops with the laptops. However, a significant amount of the work will be done outside of class on your own time.</p> <p>You are advised to use your Media Center / Workshop time wisely.</p>	/5
<p>The Proposal: _____ You are required to submit a typed proposal (in MLA format) of three topic proposals for approval. No duplicate topics will be allowed--this means every student must have a distinct research topic.</p>	/5
<p>The Annotated Bibliography: _____ Submit an Annotated Bibliography to show your research effort. A draft of your thesis statement needs to be included (at the top of the Annotated Bibliography below the title) You must have a minimum of 4 authoritative sources of merit researched on your topic.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ You may choose to use printed, web, databases, etc. – but they must be reliable and reputable. ○ 3 of those sources <u>must</u> be peer evaluated. <p>After your citation, include the quotes, paraphrases, statistics, or expert evidence which you might use in your presentation. Your entries must be in alphabetical order. You may consider using online tools for help</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ https://www.noodletools.com/ ○ http://www.easybib.com/ 	/50
<p>TED Talk: _____ Deliver a 7-8 minute TED talk discussing your project and the injustice you explored How does your film and research relate to <i>Persepolis</i>? What broader insight into <i>injustice</i> does your research yield?</p>	/40

Student Name: _____

Section: _____

Research Topic: _____

Film

Choice: _____

Research Source 1: _____

Research Source 2: _____

Research Source 3: _____

Research Source 4: _____

Thesis: _____

Presentation Comments

Start 🕒 _____ — Finish 🕒 _____

[Total Time: _____]