

## Teaching Anti-Utopian/Dystopian Fiction in RFL/EFL Classroom as Intercultural Awareness Raising Tool

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### Abstract

The article sets out to explore and substantiate the effectiveness of using anti-Utopian and dystopian fiction in teaching intercultural communication. It is based on the lasting experience of teaching Russian and English languages and cultures to students from many European, Asian, and African countries trained as Russian and English philologists at the Kyiv National Linguistic University. Intercultural literacy is one of the conditions sine qua non for successful communications and career in the rapidly globalizing world. Intercultural awareness in the Foreign Language Classroom can be raised by incorporating literary texts written in target languages into the curriculum. In addition to being instrumental for acquiring linguistic prowess, they can also play a substantial part in fostering (inter)cultural competences in non-native speakers. The two texts by contemporary Russian and British writers (Tatiana Tolstaya's *The Slynx* and Jeannette Winterson's *The Stone Gods*) were selected as case studies due to their artistry in addressing familiar and relevant human concerns, while containing specific cultural codes to be deciphered and understood by the international students. It was established that the success of the teaching/learning process relies on the interactive dialogic qualities inherent in the texts under study and enabling comparative, interdisciplinary, and cross-cultural approaches to them, thus contributing to the formation of full-fledged intercultural speakers. As demonstrated by the article, current dystopian fiction may serve as an efficient tool in enhancing intercultural competence in international students.

**Keywords:** anti-Utopia, dystopia, intercultural awareness, linguistic and intercultural competences, literature in foreign language learning

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## I. Introduction.

Recent decades have seen a pronounced shift of focus in Foreign Language Learning (FLL) from the acquisition of merely linguistic skills and competences to a broader objective of gaining intercultural prowess. As Gonzalez Rodriguez and Puyal put it, “the linguistic aspect of language learning has been played down in favor of an intercultural competence framework where learners can acquire skills that enable them to explore cultural complexity and enhance cultural understanding” (Gonzalez Rodriguez & Puyal, 2012, p.105). Currently, the Kyiv National Linguistic University provides training in what is traditionally referred to as Russian and English Philology to the students from twenty-six countries with diverse backgrounds and cultures. Since philology serves in Ukraine as an umbrella term for language and literature studies, literature-based courses (*Literary Studies Today, Theory of Literature, Contemporary Russian and British Fiction*) complement standard language teaching academic disciplines. In conducting these courses, we rely on the comparative approach encouraging the students to transcend cultural boundaries, enhancing their awareness of inevitable limitations in their native culture-bound worldview, and exposing them to intercultural experiences. These dynamics, in their turn, facilitate the students’ adaptation in a non-native environment. Multi-vector literary flows delineate border zones where students become more open and responsive to foreign aesthetic and moral values and co-opt them into one meta cultural space without rejecting the standards of their native cultures.

Among literary genres selected for the syllabi, Russian and British anti-Utopian and dystopian fiction figures prominently featuring (often apocalyptic) visions of the future and, therefore, presenting particular interest for young learners. In addition to classical texts in these genres authored by Yevgeny Zamyatin, George Orwell, and Aldous Huxley, the students can delve into more up-to-date (un)desirable futures imagined by late 20<sup>th</sup> – early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries British and Russian / Ukrainian writers.

The article sets out to explore the educational possibilities inherent in the works by two contemporary Russian and English writers – *The Slynx* by Tatiana Tolstaya and *The Stone Gods* by Jeannette Winterson to foster foreign learners’ intercultural competence (ICC). The choice is due to the shift of focus in the utopian and dystopian fiction. Though the problem of “individual versus totalitarian regimes” that had previously dominated the genre has not, unfortunately, lost its relevance, the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century spotlighted other global concerns. These include environmental and anthropogenic problems, biogenic engineering, cloning, space conquest as a new frontier, increasingly fluid gender roles, and (the future now become fearsome reality) world-scale pandemics. The current utopian and dystopian writings often tackle these and other urgent global matters. The selected texts address many of them in culturally specific ways offering a vast and fertile interpretative field for intercultural explorations.

## 2. Theoretical Background of the Research

### 2.1. Intercultural Awareness through Literature

In this article, “culture” is understood not as once prevalent “capital C” concept implying “high culture” (Th. Carlyle’s “body of arts and learning” or Matthew Arnold’s “the best which has been thought and said in the world”), but rather in its broader anthropological meaning as “sum total of behavior patterns, arts, values, beliefs, institutions, and other products of work and thought characteristic of a people and socially transmitted” (Vann Woodward, 1998, p. 55), as well as

customs, mores, and manners. Moreover, we tend to agree with Piller (2017) that “for intercultural communication studies, to be meaningful in an increasingly interconnected world <...>, they need to eschew a priori definition of culture” (Piller, 2017, p.7). Instead, “culture and cultural difference should be made relevant by and to the participants as something that is created and recreated through text or talk” (Piller, 2017, p. 7).

The need for intercultural training derives from the current state of our rapidly globalizing world, presupposing enhanced mobility of national/ethnic groups and individuals, integrated economies, and intensive planet-wide electronic communications. To prevent “encounters between civilizations” from turning into (already happening) “clashes of civilizations” (Samuel Huntington), it is necessary to equip diverse human contingents with practical intercultural experiences. According to Alred et al. (2003), it is through them that people born and socialized into specific groups and assuming their values and conventions to be “natural” and universal, may start questioning them and thus become more flexible and empowered to deal with contemporary realities. Various aspects of this problem are discussed in Sercu (2005), Fenner (2006), Byram (2008). Thus, the ultimate product of foreign language teaching should be an “intercultural speaker”, that is, “the language learner who also acquires knowledge and skills of cultural mediation or interpretation and not just a linguistic competence modeled on a native speaker” (Alred et al., 2003, p.2). Foreign language learners should be trained as “‘critical’ intercultural beings capable of actively engaging in a dialogue that transcends boundaries – real and imagined” (Dasli & Diaz, 2018, p. XI). The problem gets increasingly pressing since, according to Stadler (2020), the complicated and unpredictable nature of current global interactions makes intercultural encounters more prone to conflict. Despite active discussion on how to accomplish this goal, “educators are still looking for effective techniques and approaches that allow language teachers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to teach culture in ways that promote authentic communication” (Dema & Moeller, 2012, p. 78).

National literature representing “the personal voice of a culture” (Fenner, 2001, p. 16) is widely recognized as one of the best vehicles for transmitting specific cultural patterns, including both cognitive and affective components, the latter conducive for the better appropriation of the former. Narančić-Kovač and Kaltenbacher have every reason to claim that “teaching literature in the foreign language context best supports intercultural awareness”, while also performing other user-beneficial functions, such as promoting “learners’ problem-solving strategies, creativity, and their critical thinking and reading skills”(2006, p. 84). Bassnett and Grundy (1993), Clandfield (2004), and other researchers articulated similar views. Thus, “literature largely changes the context and the scope of FLL; it redefines foreign language teaching, shifts its focus towards new goals, and makes it more relevant in terms of the complex needs of contemporary learners as participants in global communication”(Narančić-Kovač & Kaltenbacher, 2006, p. 78). Company et al. (2019) make a convincing case for including literary texts in the EFL curriculum as essential in the development of ICC because they are “samples of authentic language in use; introduce voices from different cultural backgrounds; contribute to raising cultural awareness; promote discussion and positioning” (Company et al., 2019, p.55).

## 2.2. *Anti-Utopias and Dystopias*

Our students coming from different cultural backgrounds are subject and susceptible to the exterior and interior transformations caused, among other factors operating in our “liquid modernity” (Bauman), by non-stop elaboration and upgrading of electronic technologies. The digital era nurtures in society, including students, new psychological and reflective misgivings regarding an unpredictable future. Therefore, alarmism has been steadily moving center stage in sociology and psychology, philosophy and literary studies.

Fiction and film generically respond to this situation in anti-Utopias and dystopias centered on modeling the future and provoking in readers/viewers brainstorming necessary to avoid its catastrophic scenarios. In the educational context, their principal function may be defined as orienting younger generations towards seeking solutions for contemporary planet-scale problems and making the world more co-habitable for diverse cultural traditions.

Consensus has not yet been reached about the boundaries between the genres, with some scholars tending to conflate them (see, for example, Hoda, 1990). In his seminal study, though, G.S. Morson emphasizes the difference between them, asking the question of whether the author debunks the myth of the paradise to come as hostile to an individual (anti-Utopia), or denounces today’s hell projected and aggravated into the future (dystopia) (Morson, 1981, pp. 115-141). Some scholars stress the potential of dystopia as the “extrapolation from the present that involved warning” (Sargent, 1994, p. 8), implying “that a choice and, therefore hope, are still possible” (Sargent, 1994, p. 26). Booker (1994) and Moylan (2000) also draw a demarcation line between the genres. A contemporary scholar specifies dystopias on the following grounds:

“a) they do not presuppose or effect a total rejection of the Utopian impulse <...> as such; b) their criticisms are emphatically subjective, i.e., explicitly marked as originating from the position of a concretely situated subject <...>; c) they are overwhelmingly narrative, rather than argumentative, in nature, <...>; d) their orientation is politically and ideologically ambiguous, precisely for that reason” (Balasopoulus, 2011, p. 63).

As critical to dystopian vision, Moylan accentuates the narrative zooming on one of the subjects of anti-human social environment projected into the future with the storyline developing around the “alienated protagonist as she or he begins to recognize the situation for what it really is and thus to trace the relationship between individual experience and the operation of the entire system” (Moylan, 2000, p. XIII; Afakan, 2017). It makes sense to identify the novels by Tolstaya and Winterson as dystopias as they possess typical genre characteristics modified in each case by national traditions and individual quirks.

Living in a pandemic makes dystopias even more relevant for many readers as instruments of coping with this horrifying experience. Such kind of books, Zielinski (2020) argues, “featuring bleak futures, where people are forced to grapple with new devastating realities wrought by climate change, biowarfare, pandemics, totalitarian governments or technology”, can provide some relief to the readers finding themselves in similar, even though less dire, circumstances.

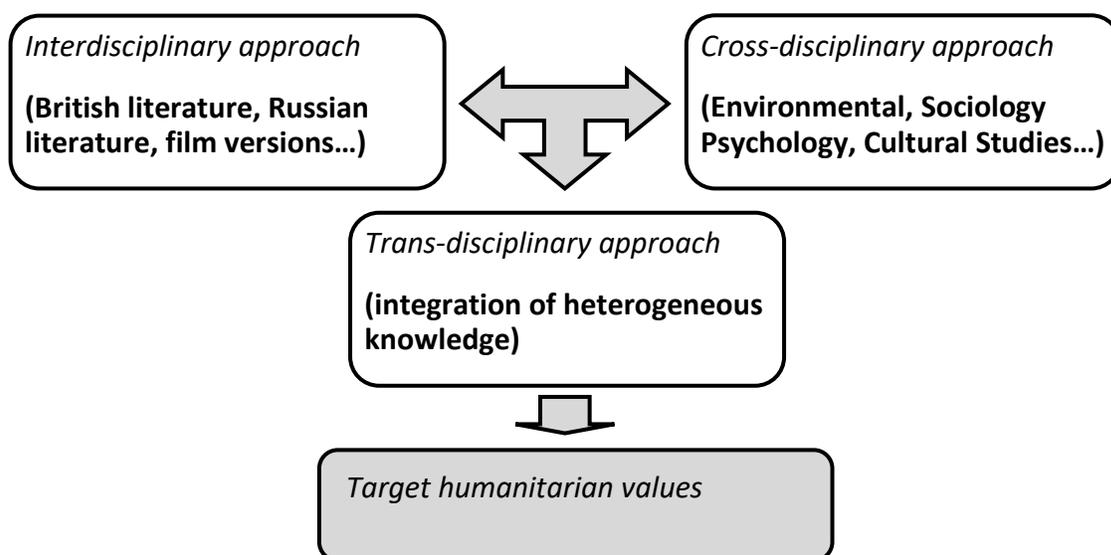
### 2.3. Post-Humanism

A substantial corpus of present-day anti-Utopian and dystopian fiction incorporates ideas put forward by Post-Humanism, a relatively novel cross-disciplinary trend in the humanities. Steve Nichols made an early attempt to delineate its contours in his *Post-Human Movement Manifesto* (1988). Nichols urged humans to take a new evolutionary step through relinquishing their programmed anthropocentric “regime of operation” as incapable of meeting modern challenges (Nichols, 1988). The following years saw the rapid development of Post-Humanist thought (Hayles (1999), Badmington (2000), Haraway (2008), Wolfe (2010), and others), with Pepperell proclaiming the present to be “The Post-Human Condition” (Pepperell, 1995). The principal tenet of this mindset is the need for reconsidering ever more complicated relations between the humans and nature and/or technology, giving up their Renaissance-engendered self-aggrandizing as unacceptable and obsolete “species-ism” (Wolfe, 2010, p. XIV).

### 3. Methods of Research

Relying upon comparative analysis of British and Russian literary texts and their screen versions, where available, an attempt is made to fashion a learning platform operating under global pandemic conditions. Significantly, anti-Utopian and dystopian films facilitate students’ comprehension of the original texts read not in their native, but in foreign languages – English or Russian – activating various perception channels and resulting in a more integrated learning effect. Interdisciplinary approaches coupled with cross-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary elements (see, particularly, Ausburg, 2006) secure the better acquisition of the material (see Figure 1).

We share the proposition that commonly useful activities in using literature in language classrooms are “mostly based on the dialogic nature of a literary text” (Narančić-Kovač & Kaltenbacher, 2006, p. 86). Open-ended questions and interactive practices are, in this respect, the best way for the teacher to accomplish educational goals



**Figure 1.** Interpretative approaches in comparative analysis of fiction

## 4. Discussion.

### 4.1. Literary and social contexts

The thriving of anti-Utopias and dystopias in Russia in the late 20<sup>th</sup> – early 21<sup>st</sup> century was primarily caused by the collapse of the totalitarian system accompanied by the blurring of moral guidelines, lack of political and economic stability, distrust, and fear of the future. This period saw, among others, the publication of V. Voynovich's *Moscow 2042* (1986), L. Petrushevskaya's *New Robinsons* (2000), T. Tolstaya's *The Slynx* (2000), A. Volos' *Maskav Mecca* (2003), V. Pelevin's *Empire V* (2006), O. Slavnikova's *2017* (2006), V. Makanin's *The Crawlway* (2009). These texts model catastrophic futuristic universes by projecting the damaging trends from the writers' contemporary reality. British dystopias of the same period derived their critical impulse from the flaws of modern democracy and technological progress threatening the autonomy and agency of individuals – Ian Banks' *The Wasp Factory* (1984), Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2006), Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods* (2007).

### 4.2. "The Slynx" as a Grotesque Dystopian Compendium of Russian Literary Culture

Tatiana Tolstaya, best known worldwide for her caustic essays and short stories, amazed her fans by writing a dystopia. Besides its genre, her novel *The Slynx* is also unusual in its unique archaized language reminiscent of the old Russian chronicles, and in relying upon the narrative strategies imitating the conventions of *skaz* (a traditional Russian form of oral narrative).

The "brave new world" depicted in *The Slynx* emerged from a global nuclear explosion exterminating nearly the whole population (at least, that is what old legends say). The humans born over the next couple of centuries suffer from all kinds of mutations ("Consequences") that might assume the shape of fish scale and gills, or a coxcomb, or a tail with claws. These creatures/people inhabit the city once referred to as Moscow. Tolstaya treats transformations caused in human physical appearance and psyche by the long-term consequences of a large-scale nuclear explosion in a detailed and scary manner, endowing her novel with "horror" and Gothic overtones.

The characters seem to inhabit two realities at once. On the one hand, their minds still bear the reverberations of the lost Russian civilization with its arts and literature, its universities and intelligentsia kept alive through occasional surviving texts distorted in the course of continuous faulty rewriting. Meanwhile, original printed books of the past are under a strict ban since the authorities believe they could trigger mental revival and turn unseemly creatures into human rebels. On the other hand, the people are scared by the new horrifying reality. The site of former Moscow is taken by the town of Fedor-Kuzmichsk, surrounded by dense woods and marshes, the home of unfathomable and terrifying Slynx embodying all subconscious Freudian anxieties:

"If you wander into the forest, it jumps on your neck from behind: hop! It grabs your spine in its teeth – crunch – and picks out the big vein with its claw – and breaks it. All the reason runs right out of you. If you come back, you're never the same again <...> (Tolstaya, 2003, p. 4).

The writer places her characters into the world of Russian folktales (*The Bun* (Gingerbread Man), *Riaba the Hen*, *The Turnip*) and of Pushkin's *Lukomorye* (meadow on the seashore, the fairy-tale locus described in the prologue to his poem *Ruslan and Lyudmila*) speckling her text with numerous verse quotes from Pushkin, Lermontov, Blok, Tsvetayeva, Okudzhava... But the Blast has turned Pushkin's fairy-tale topos into a different kind of place altogether portrayed with ironic

pessimism. With “green oak-tree” gone, there is no longer a “learned cat” walking around on a chain, and, consequently, the grey mice had bred in enormous quantities, becoming the staple food and the main currency for the mutants. Mice and Slynx are the two pillars on which their new life-style rests.

It is the text’s rich, albeit parody-like and ironic, intertextuality that makes it a good read for advanced level Russian language learners. In her striving to remind the readers about the gorgeous cultural epochs, now extinct, Tolstaya saturates her story with references, direct quotations, and allusions making it an inexhaustible treasure-trove of Russian cultural matrices. In the defamiliarized context, international students can revisit familiar texts through a different (dystopic) prism and thus embrace them in a new light. In the novel, however, lofty poetic stanzas alternate in the protagonist’s mind with his primitive thoughts and desires. Nevertheless, following the humane traditions of classical Russian literature, Benedikt’s final soliloquy almost wholly consisting of famous classical citations (Pushkin, Nekrasov, Pasternak...) arouses sympathy and commiseration:

"I only wanted books – nothing more – only books, only words, it was never anything but words! <... > What is in my name for you? Why does the wind spin in the gully? <...>? What do you want, old man? <...> Grab the inks and cry! Open the dungeon wide! I'm here! I'm innocent! I'm with you!!" (Tolstaya, 2003, p.111).

Thus, drawing upon literary and folklore imagery, the writer interweaves threads of various cultural codes – from fairy tales oral rhetoric through detailed realistic/naturalistic descriptions to impressive apocalyptic visions – into her intertext.

Still, Tolstaya’s grotesque world is not hopeless: even though the society had reversed far back, the humans eventually start regenerating. The main spiritual treasure of any civilization – the texts – had made it into the dark times. It is the attitude towards them that would determine the path to be taken by humankind: further degeneration and mutation, or revival and return to the fold of culture. It is by no accident that the book chapters bear the letter names from the Old Russian alphabet as if to assert the importance of literacy for human survival as a species.

#### **4.3. Fighting Species Stereotypes in Jeanette Winterson’s dystopia “The Stone Gods”**

Unlike Tolstaya’s sophisticated cultural lingo, Winterson’s dystopic novel is written in relatively simple English, enabling EFL learners to focus on its contents. The writer embraces the fundamental postulates of Ecofeminism – a strand in Post-Humanism identifying societal practices of ruthless exploitation of women and the environment by patriarchal systems and postulating unique relations between these two traditional objects of domination. Besides, specific female physiology and the distribution of gender roles in (post)industrial societies contribute to mystifying their kinship. In her much-anthologized 1985 essay, *Cyborg Manifesto*, Haraway supplements women and nature with technology. She uses the term “cyborg” to describe a new symbiotic entity resulting from the combination of the human and the technological, as a metaphor for a liberation strategy. For her, cyborg symbolizes the violation of three essential boundaries: between the animal and the human; between the animal-human and the machine; and, finally, between physical

and non-physical (Haraway, 1991, p. 152). Thus, the cyborg myth has considerable potential as an instrument for re-conceptualization and redistribution of power relations in society.

It is from this position that a cyborg character is used in *The Stone Gods*. As in other Winterson's books, her multilayered text presents a fanciful mish-mash of chronotopes; the reality of late capitalist society dons fantastic masks, and feminist issues are treated in an unexpectedly grotesque vein. Present-day flaws are masterfully projected into an imagined future. The planet Orbus is divided into zones of influence between the Central Power (i.e., Western technocracies), the Eastern Caliphate, and the SinoMosco Pact (the names are telling enough). The planet's natural resources are depleted, and the Central Power's high-tech civilization is planning mass migration to a newly discovered Blue Planet (easily recognizable as our own Earth in prehistoric times). The author makes no attempts to conceal her dystopia's generic continuity concerning famous models by Huxley, Orwell, and Zamyatin, evident in how she depicts total control exercised by society over individuals and its merciless disposal of free-thinkers. Concomitantly, the focus on technicalization and robotization of life brings to their logical conclusion alarming trends of our times.

On the one hand, following the dystopian formulaic conventions, the female journalist Billy Crusoe (the story's first-person narrator) is an anti-conformist not fitting into the framework of hedonistic mechanized society consequently provoking suspicion, mistrust, and persecution on its part. Her "male" first and second names are meaningful, hinting at her "manly" characteristics and her future replaying of DeFoe's Robinson's destiny in the epoch of space conquests ending up on an uninhabited planet. She lives in a natural sanctuary, on an authentic ancient farm surrounded not by robots but by living animals and plants. She also declines eternal youth and beauty enjoyed by everyone on Orbus thanks to genetic engineering, and she even assists rebellious exiles. Thus, the readers are introduced to the ecofeminist motif of the alliance between woman and nature against the oppressive system in which masculinity equals mechanization. It is soon joined, however, by the third ingredient – technology, in the figure of a gorgeous cyborg Spike, a unique female Robo Sapiens. With her mission accomplished, the robot is to be dismantled. Billy, however, falls in love with Spike and assists the cyborg in her flight from the lab. The rest of the action abounds in adventures typical of popular fiction but with a tragic ending.

Of particular interest for readers in a learning environment is how the author addresses philosophical and anthropological issues, such as the porosity of boundaries between humans and the human-made, between the flesh and the metal. Students are encouraged to trace the production of this effect by focusing on recurrent text parallels between the "living" and the "mechanical". For example, when Spike is subject to data draining, "she looks like she's giving blood. I suppose she is – the data she stores is her life's blood, and when it's gone, so is she" (Winterson, 2009, p.27). The story of the relationship between Billy and Spike, two females belonging to different species and dying on the snow-swept Blue Planet, translates theoretical Post-Humanist speculations into the realm of emotions and imagery. Winterson impels the young readers to apply the cyborg metaphor for a better understanding of the complicated relations between human beings and the rest of the world and to think afresh about what Donna Haraway nicknamed "a nasty developmental infection called love", without which any human future would feel dystopian.

## 5. Conclusion

The comparative study of Russian and British dystopian novels in the RFL/EFL classroom helps raise the international students' awareness of the genre's premonitory warning nature and the alarming consequences for human civilization ensuing from information overloads, accelerated life pace, anthropogenic disasters, and radical social and ecotechnogenic transformations. By exposing foreign language learners to the disturbing visions of the future generated in various cultural contexts, it is possible to alert them to distinctive differences without breeding hostility towards them, but, on the contrary, confirming the belief in the fundamental unity of humankind.

The juxtaposition of dystopic protagonists from various cultures encourages the students to construct their typology as bearers of humanistic ethical values opposing the techno-consumer civilization of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and its ideological and mythological structures. The writers' tragic world view typical of the transition era prompts the students to seek spiritual and moral mainstays to support them in a new and challenging stage of history. In their culturally shaped depictions of the painful transition to Post-Human dimensions, contemporary authors offer socio-humanitarian paradigms vital for our future cohabitation on the planet Earth. Therefore, they are a must for international language and culture student entities entrusted with a mission to carry them on to their communities.

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