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Universal themes as a bridge in transnational literary studies

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Abstract: *This paper examines the role of universal themes such as love, death, identity, grief, and the search for meaning as conceptual bridges in transnational literary studies. Based on a comparative and world literary framework, this study argues that universal themes function not as a tool for cultural homogenization but as dynamic sites of cross-cultural dialogue that allow readers and scholars to explore linguistic, geographical, and ideological boundaries. Through qualitative and hermeneutic analysis of selected transnational literary works and theoretical frameworks, this paper shows how repetitive thematic structures facilitate the circulation and reception of literature across national contexts. These findings suggest that universal themes, when read through a cultural lens, reveal shared human experiences and irreducible peculiarities of local traditions. This study contributes to the ongoing debate in the study of world literature by proposing a multiriversal reading model that respects the universality and cultural specificity of the literary theme, as well as examining the pedagogical implications of this model for the teaching of world literature in various educational contexts.*

Keywords: *universal themes, transnational literature, world literature, comparative literary studies, cross-cultural narratives*

INTRODUCTION

In an era of accelerating globalization, the question of what makes literature cross cultural and national boundaries has become one of the most pressing concerns in the study of literature. Scholars of world literature have long debated whether the global circulation of texts depends on formal nature, institutional mechanisms such as translation and literary appreciation, or something more fundamental is a shared reservoir of human experience encoded in a repetitive thematic structure (Damrosch, 2020; Casanova, 1999; Moretti, 2000). This question needs in-depth study, which is why this paper focuses on the concept of universal themes as bridges in transnational literary studies.

Universal themes of love, death, identity, grief, the search for meaning, and the tension between individuals and communities emerge throughout the evolving literary tradition. Independently these themes touch on dimensions of human experience that transcend specific cultural formations (Hogan, 2026). At the same time, the way these themes are symbolized, resolved is always culturally specific, making them a place of productive tension between the universal and the special. Rather than being a problem to be solved, it is precisely a universal theme that can result for transnational literary analysis.

The concept of transnational literature itself has evolved rapidly in recent decades. Beyond previous models that prioritized national literary traditions as the main unit of analysis, transnational literary studies now pay attention to the flows, circulations, and hybridization that occur when texts, writers, and readers cross

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boundaries (Sánchez-Espinosa & O'Kane, 2025; El Abdelaoui, 2026). In this context, universal themes have a dual function: that is, to make texts readable and emotionally resonant for readers from different cultural backgrounds, while encoding the worldview, values, and specific social norms of the communities that produce them.

The significance of this inquiry goes beyond the study of academic literature. As Duhan et al. (2024) argue, in an era of ecological crisis, global inequality, and democratic vulnerability, it has become imperative to achieve a new articulation of human commonality, and literature with its ability to make the specifically universal and universal the primary source for this task This observation demonstrates the ethical and political stakes of the questions this paper addresses: the study of universal themes in transnational literature is not just an academic exercise but a broader contribution to building cross-cultural understanding in a world that is at once more connected and fragmented than ever.

The concept of "transnational literature" itself needs clarification from the start. As used in this paper, the term refers to literary works that cross national and linguistic boundaries in one or more of the following ways: through the biographical experiences of their authors (who may be migrants, exiles, or members of diaspora communities); through thematic engagement with the experiences of migration, displacement, and cultural encounters; through processes of translation and international circulation; or through the formal and aesthetic strategies they employ to represent intercultural lived experiences (Lee, 2026; Ngobalep, 2026). This broad definition encompasses a wide range of literary works, from canonical texts of postcolonial literature to contemporary global novels, from translational classics to emerging literature in the digital age.

LITERATURE REVIEW

World Literature and the Question of Universality

The modern debate about world literature is significantly shaped by three fundamental interventions at the turn of the twenty-first century: Franco Moretti's approach to remote reading and world systems, Pascale Casanova's model of literary world Republic, and David Damrosch's definition of world literature as a way of reading and circulation (Rubin, 2014). Each of these frameworks grapples in different ways with the tension between the universal and the specific that is at the heart of transnational literary studies. Whether Weltliteratur is seen as a conceptual organization, as Moretti and Casanova understood it, or as a collection of literary texts that circulates beyond its origins, as Damrosch does, we cannot ignore the strong global relationships that Weltliteratur relies on for its articulation and concealment.

Moretti's (2000) world-systems approach, which takes on the sociology of Immanuel Wallerstein, argues that world literature is structured by core-peripheral dynamics in which literary forms move from the center (Western Europe and North America) to the periphery, where they are combined with local content. This model is influential but also controversial, as it tends to reproduce the hierarchy it seeks to analyze.

Damrosch (2020) argues that comparative literary studies should integrate comparative, postcolonial, and world literary perspectives to offer a comprehensive picture of these fields in times of great upheaval and great opportunity. Literary studies are currently being transformed by the forces of vast and disruptive globalization. More

works than ever before are circulating around the world in English and translations, and even national traditions are increasingly viewed in transnational terms.

This integrative approach is particularly relevant for the study of universal themes, which require a broad comparative perspective of world literary studies and a culturally sensitive careful reading associated with postcolonial criticism. More recently, academics have begun to question the spatial bias of world literary studies and explore the temporal dimension of literary circulation. Mangalagiri (2026) identifies a growing fatigue with spatiality as a major critical axis and argues for a shift to temporality as the new epistemological dominant in the study of world literature. This temporal shift has important implications for the study of universal themes, which are not static but evolve and change as they travel across time and space. The recognition that universal themes have a history that they emerge, evolve, and change in response to specific historical and cultural conditions. Lounsbery, and Djagalov (2023) on Soviet world literature show how the concept of Weltliteratur was adopted and transformed within a socialist internationalist framework, resulting in a distinct field of literature with its own patterns of production, circulation, transnationalism. This illustrates the broader point that the concept of world literature is not single but multiple, and that its meaning changes as it travels across various cultural and political contexts. As Ette and Person (2021) argue, the study of world literature in the plural requires attention to the diverse, overlapping, and sometimes contradictory frameworks within which literary texts are produced, disseminated, and received around the world.

Transnational Literature and Cross-Cultural Narratives

Transnational literature, as a field of study, focuses on texts that cross national and linguistic boundaries, both through the movement of writers, translation and circulation of texts, as well as thematic engagement with the experiences of migration, diaspora, and cultural hybridity (Sánchez-Espinosa & O'Kane, 2025). At the heart of transnational literature is questions of mobility, home, and identity that are universal in scope while being articulated in a culturally specific way (El Abdelaoui, 2026).

The concept of diaspora has become central to the study of transnational literature. Lee (2026) introduces the concept of "transposition" as a core ethic of diaspora writing as world literature, arguing that diaspora literature should be viewed as a creative and multimodal collection of moving vectors that can only achieve temporary stability. This article introduces transposition as a core ethic of diaspora writing as world literature. Transposition refers to a sociopsychological disposition that transcends all single positions or attitudes. Inserting a social theory of position with a trans- prefix allows us to think not only between positions or attitudes, but beyond the possibility of fixation on a position or attitude. This concept of transposition is closely related to the function of universal themes in transnational literature: both involve movements beyond fixed positions and a willingness to engage with diverse, overlapping, and sometimes contradictory cultural frameworks.

Postcolonial theory also makes a significant contribution to the understanding of transnational literature. Homi K. Bhabha's concept of the "third space"—the liminal space of cultural negotiation in which hybrid identities are generated—is highly influential. Chen (2026) shows how Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children runs cultural negotiation not only thematically but also through narrative techniques themselves,

framing postcolonial identity as an ongoing process, rather than a static synthesis. This insight is directly relevant to the study of universal themes: the third space is a space in which universal themes are negotiated, transformed, and given new meaning through cross-cultural encounters. Vishnupriyan (2025) develops this argument further by analyzing hybridity as a thematic focus as well as a narrative technique in postcolonial literature. This study presents hybridity as a thematic focus as well as a narrative technique through an in-depth analysis of several works from the diaspora literature of South Asia, the Caribbean, and Africa, including Andrea Levy's Small Island, Salman Rushdie's The Satanic Verse, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Americanah. These texts challenge essentialist notions of national identity and loyalty by depicting the complexities of cultural negotiations, memory, and belonging. The universal theme of identity, in these texts, is not a fixed essence, but rather a dynamic process of negotiation and transformation, a process that is culturally specific and universally recognizable.

The role of translation in enabling the cross-border circulation of literature has been widely theorized. Forsdick (2024) argues that translation allows texts to "circulate to a wider world beyond their linguistic and cultural point of origin," and that the epistemology of world literary translation involves not only the production and consumption of texts, but also the transformation of meaning as the text moves across cultural contexts. Translation is routinely used as a defining aspect of World Literature, most notably in the work of David Damrosch, who claims in a number of studies that the circulation between contexts in different languages is the basis of the 'advantage' of any work that falls into this category, i.e. translations that allow texts to "circulate to a wider world beyond their linguistic and cultural point of origin." Universal themes play an important role in this process: they provide a semantic framework that allows translated texts to be understood and appreciated by readers who do not have direct access to the source culture. Alva (2026) further argues that world literature, in Damrosch's sense, is not simply a collection of great works from different countries, but rather a mode of circulation and reception that gives new life to cross-border texts, and that translation is a central force in shaping this process. World literature today has emerged as one of the most dynamic and inclusive fields of literary study. Beyond national and linguistic boundaries, it seeks to understand how literary works work, change, and acquire new meanings in various cultural contexts. David Damrosch's seminal book, What is World Literature? (2003) offers an interesting definition of this field, arguing that world literature is not simply a collection of great works from different nations, but rather a mode of circulation and reception that gives new life to cross-border texts.

Universal Literature: Theory and Method

A systematic study of the recurring patterns of themes, narrative structures, and character types of literary universals that arise in a variety of genetically distinct literary traditions has been developed with great rigor by Patrick Colm Hogan and his collaborators at the Literary Universals Project. Hogan (2026) proposes a ten-step methodology for isolating universal candidates, starting with gaining a broad understanding of two genetically distinct and actually unrelated literary traditions. Gain a broad understanding of two literary traditions or orations that are genetically distinct and (relatively) unrelated. This is the most difficult step. However, this does not require the expertise of a specialist. However, it does require one to be familiar with the standard

"cultural" views within those traditions, even if it does not assume that such a standard view is true or the only possible one.

This methodological approach is important because it bases the study of universal themes on rigorous comparative analysis, rather than on abstract philosophical claims about human nature. By requiring an understanding of a particular literary tradition and its cultural context, it protects against the risk of projecting Western or Eurocentric assumptions into non-Western literature, a risk that has been a constant concern in the study of world literature (D'haen, 2020). This methodology also recognizes the difficulty of this task: achieving true familiarity with two or more genetically distinct literary traditions requires ongoing engagement with the language, history, and cultural context of those traditions, a requirement that challenges the disciplinary boundaries of conventional literary studies.

The concept of the "pluriversal text," introduced by Zen and Literature (2025), offers a complementary framework. Pluriversal texts acknowledge and actively engage with a wide range of worldviews, epistemologies, and cultural realities that coexist without attempting to standardize or prioritize them. Pluriversal texts acknowledge and actively engage with a variety of worldviews, epistemologies, and narrative forms that coexist. The main argument states that literature serves as a crucial "cartography of literary togetherness," mapping the complex geographies of affiliations, diasporas, hybridities, and contested spaces that define contemporary global consciousness. These frameworks are particularly useful for understanding how universal themes function in transnational literature: they do not impose a single homogeneous meaning but create a space in which many cultural meanings can coexist and interact.

The study of narrative empathy also provides important insights into understanding how universal themes function as transnational bridges. Qi and You (2025) show empirically that exposure to foreign literature significantly predicts positive attitudes of outsiders among Chinese readers, either directly or indirectly through sequential mediation between emotional investment and cultural empathy. Exposure to foreign literature significantly predicts positive attitudes from outside groups, both directly and indirectly. In particular, emotional investment in foreign narratives facilitates personal relationships with characters from different backgrounds, enhancing cultural empathy and, in turn, more favorable outsider attitudes. Our findings highlight that foreign literature is a valuable medium for fostering intercultural empathy by providing readers with indirect experiences from diverse cultural perspectives. These findings provide empirical support for the theoretical claim that universal themes serve as bridges: by allowing readers to invest emotionally in characters from different cultural backgrounds, they encourage the kind of cross-cultural empathy that is essential for transnational literary understanding.

Mangharam (2025) raises an important critical question about the relationship between empathy and world literature, arguing that the world's literary institutions too often commodify the pain of the "other" as entertainment under the pretext of empathy. Based on Hannah Arendt's concept of "representative thought," Mangharam proposes an alternative model of empathy as perspective taking rather than emotional unity, a model that seeks emotional understanding without collapsing the distinction between self and others. Various critics scoff at the idea that fiction develops the reader's capacity for empathy. Instead, they argue that emotions prioritize near, visible, and familiar

human pain over others, as well as being associated with the release of catharsis that is unrelated to any moral action. Alternatively, Namwali Serpell points to Hannah Arendt's idea of "representative thinking," which, instead of virtually being someone else or feeling what they feel, asks you to imagine what it would be like to be them, using your own mind but from their position. This critical perspective is important for the study of universal themes as a transnational bridge: it reminds us that the function of universal theme bridges is not automatic or guaranteed, but rather depends on the quality of the reading practices that those themes use.

METHODS

This study uses qualitative, hermeneutical, and comparative approaches in the analysis of universal themes in transnational literature. Its main objective is to examine how repetitive thematic structures, in particular love, death, identity, and the search for meaning, serve as bridges between culturally distinct literary traditions and enable the circulation and reception of literary texts across countries.

The data for this study consisted of theoretical frameworks and selected literary works drawn from transnational literary studies published between 2015 and 2026. The selection of theoretical sources prioritized recent contributions in world literary studies, comparative literary theory, and transnational literary criticism, with particular attention to works that explicitly address questions of cultural universality and distinctiveness. Literary works were selected based on their status as recognized examples of transnational literature that have been analyzed in the scientific literature for their engagement with universal themes.

The analytical method combines a close reading of hermeneutics with a comparative thematic analysis. A close reading of hermeneutics pays attention to the specific ways in which universal themes are articulated and symbolized, resolved in individual texts, while comparative thematic analysis identifies patterns of similarities and differences between texts from different cultural traditions. The hermeneutic approach adopted in this study draws on the philosophical hermeneutic tradition associated with Hans-Georg Gadamer, in particular his concept of "horizon fusion" (Horizontverschmelzung), a process in which the horizons of the interpreter's own understanding are expanded and transformed through encounters with texts from different cultural traditions. This concept is directly relevant to the study of universal themes as a transnational bridge: encounters with universal themes in texts that are culturally foreign are experiences that can produce a fusion of horizons, broadening the reader's understanding of texts and their own cultural assumptions.

This comparative thematic analysis takes the methodology developed by Hogan (2026) for the universal study of literature, which is tailored for the specific purposes of this study. Instead of attempting to establish the universality of a particular theme through a statistical analysis of a large corpus of texts, this study focuses on a small number of carefully selected examples that illustrate the mechanisms of how universal themes function as transnational bridges. This approach prioritizes the depth of the analysis over broad scope, and is in keeping with the exploratory and theoretical objectives of the study.

The validity of this analysis is based on the triangulation of a variety of theoretical perspectives including world literary theory, postcolonial criticism, literary universal

studies, and narrative empathy research as well as the use of peer-reviewed scholarly sources published in reputable academic journals and publishers. The study does not claim to offer a comprehensive survey of universal themes in world literature, but rather develops a theoretical explanation of how they serve as bridges in transnational literary studies, as well as proposing a pluriversal reading model that can guide future pedagogical research and practice.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Analysis of universal themes in selected transnational literary works and theoretical frameworks yielded three key findings. First, the universal themes of love, death, identity, grief, and the search for meaning consistently serve as cross-cultural points of recognition across genetically distinct literary traditions, allowing readers from different cultural backgrounds to meaningfully interact with the resulting texts in contexts far removed from their contexts. Second, the way these themes are articulated is always culturally specific: the same universal themes take on different symbolic forms, narrative structures, and ethical valences depending on the cultural traditions in which they are embedded. Third, the encounter between different cultural articulations of a universal theme is generative, not merely comparative; rather, it generates new meanings and critical insights that cannot be provided by the two traditions separately. These three findings together support the paper's main argument: that universal themes serve as bridges in transnational literary studies not by erasing cultural differences, but rather by creating productive sites of cross-cultural dialogue where differences and similarities are maintained. This analysis also reveals that the function of these bridges is not automatic but depends on the quality of reading practices, the availability of cultural contexts, and the institutional framework through which world literature is taught and studied.

Discussion

Love as a universal theme in transnational literature

Love has consistently been identified as one of the most dominant and powerful universal themes in world literature (Jordan, 2024). However, its universality does not mean that love is experienced or expressed in the same way across different cultures. Rather, love serves as a universal theme precisely because it is a place of intense cultural negotiation, a domain where various societies articulate their deepest values, social norms, and visions of human prosperity. The universality of love as a theme is not something certain, but rather an achievement: love is generated through the encounter between the various articulations of love cultures, and it is always debated and temporary.

An interesting example of love as a transnational bridge is provided by the comparative analysis of Sophocles' Antigone and Nguyễn Du's The Tale of Kiều. Despite coming from very different cultural contexts that are ancient Greece and eighteenth-century Vietnam, both texts address the theme of female love. A comparative study published in Hypatia (2024), the love of Antigone and Kiều has three fundamental similarities: both women live a life of love in a world where love is forbidden; both practice love in the dark; and both choose to love in an unconventional way, creating

possibilities in terms of contemplating the interaction between life, death, and freedom. This example illustrates how the universal theme of love serves as a bridge: it creates a point of connection between two texts that otherwise do not seem to have much in common, allowing for a comparative analysis that illuminates both the shared dimensions of the human experience, through which the specific culture of the experience is articulated and meaningd. The comparison between Antigone and Kiều does not reduce the two texts to mere illustrations of universal themes; rather, it reveals the specific cultural logic that each text uses to articulate the theme of love, and generates new insights that cannot be generated by the two texts separately. Xu (2026) shows how Arabic literature, which sits at the intersection of Eastern and Western literary traditions, mediates and synthesizes narratives of love and human relationships from various cultural sources.

The theme of love in transnational literature is also shaped by the experience of diaspora and migration. Khan et al. (2026) show how contemporary English-language postcolonial fiction including Mohsin Hamid's Exit West, Kamila Shamsie's Home Fire, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Americanah, and Bernardine Evaristo's Girl, Woman, Other engage with the universal themes of love and a sense of belonging in the context of migration, expulsion, and cultural encounter. In these texts, love is not a simple or simple emotion, but rather a complex and debated terrain in which questions of identity, a sense of belonging, and power are negotiated. The universal theme of love serves as a bridge not by simplifying these complexities, but by making them readable and emotionally resonant for readers from different cultural backgrounds.

Death, Grief, and Mourning Across Literary Traditions

Death and grief are one of the most universal human experiences, and they have produced some of the most powerful and enduring forms of literature in various cultures. Elegi, a literary form dedicated to mourning and the expression of grief, provides a very rich place to examine how universal themes function as transnational bridges. The universality of death as a human experience does not mean that death is understood or represented in the same way in different cultures; rather, different cultures have developed different ways of understanding death, and these differences are reflected in the literary forms used to represent and mourn death.

Bardazzi, Binetti, and Culler (2025) have edited a large collection that navigates complex expressions of mourning across languages, cultures, and traditions, illuminating the ever-evolving contemporary forms and discourses of elegy in world literature. By adopting a transnational approach, this collection shows how the universal experience of grief produces a literary form that is culturally specific but still readable relatively across traditions. The collection includes contributions on Chinese poetry, contemporary European elegies, and the environmental literary elegy dimension, demonstrating the breadth and diversity of transnational elegies as a literary form.

A comparative analysis of life and death in Kyrgyz and Chinese literature by Madaminova et al. (2026) further illustrates this. Although there are profound differences between cultures. The universal theme of death serves as a bridge not by erasing cultural differences, but by creating a common foundation on which different cultural traditions can dialogue. Comparisons between representations of death in

Kyrgyz and Chinese literature reveal both the same human concern for death and the very different cultural frameworks in which that concern is radically articulated.

Identity, Non-Existence, and the Search for a Sense of Belonging

Identity and its consequences in the form of alienation, belonging, and displacement are other universal themes that serve as powerful bridges in transnational literary studies. El Abdelaoui's (2026) comparative analysis of Laila Lamimi's The Other Americans and Leila Slimani's The Country of Others shows how two Moroccan transnational writers, working in different languages and cultural contexts, engage with universal themes of difference and homelessness. Both texts explore the experiences of characters who are doubly marginalized by gender and racial factors both in their host societies and in their homeland, suggesting that the experiences of displacement and alienation, while culturally specific in detail, have a universal dimension that allows for cross-cultural recognition and empathy. Ngobalep (2026) extends this analysis to the African context, examining how Nadine Gordimer's None to Accompanied Me and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Americanah interact with the universal themes of transnationalism, identity, and exile. This study argues that migration does not break the bonds of homeland; rather, migrants build "transnational spaces" that bridge host and home countries, maintaining family, cultural, linguistic, political, and economic relationships while adapting to new societies. This concept of transnational space is directly relevant to the study of universal themes as transnational bridges: transnational spaces are spaces in which universal themes are negotiated, transformed, and given new meaning through cross-cultural encounters.

The theme of identity in transnational literature is also shaped by the experience of writing across cultures, the practice of writing in a language other than the mother tongue or from a position between cultures. Li (2025) examines the cross-cultural writing of Chinese-American writer Li Yiyun as an example of how transnational writers navigate the tension between cultural homogenization and the preservation of cultural memory as well as individual emotional experiences. This observation demonstrates the importance of individual authors' agency in transnational literary production: the universal themes that emerge in transnational texts are not simply products of impersonal cultural forces, but are shaped by individual writers' specific experiences, choices, and creative strategies navigating the complex terrain of cross-cultural identity. The theme of belonging in transnational literature is also shaped by experiences of racial and ethnic discrimination. Torres (2026) shows how Junot Díaz's fiction interacts with universal themes of belonging, love, and identity in the context of the Dominican diaspora in the United States, showing how these themes are shaped by the specific historical experiences of colonialism, dictatorship, and racial discrimination. This example illustrates the importance of paying attention to specific historical and political contexts in which universal themes are articulated as themes: the universal theme of a sense of belonging is not an enduring abstraction but rather a historically present concern shaped by specific experiences of power, violence, and resistance.

Narrative Empathy and the Pedagogical Implications of Universal Themes

The study of universal themes as transnational bridges has important implications for the teaching of world literature. Research on narrative empathy

suggests that exposure to foreign literature can promote cross-cultural understanding and positive attitudes toward other cultured people, but this effect is not automatic and depends on the quality of reading practices used in engagement. Qi and You (2025) show that emotional investment in foreign narratives facilitates personal connection with characters from different backgrounds, increases cultural empathy and, in turn, more favorable outsider group attitudes. Belarde et al. (2025) show empirically that the teaching of world literature through intercultural pedagogy can result in significant improvements in intercultural competence among high-level students, especially in emotional empathy and acceptance of a new worldview. These findings support the argument that universal themes, when taught through a culturally sensitive pedagogical approach, can be an effective bridge between different cultural traditions and foster the cross-cultural empathy essential for global citizenship.

Ogolla and Sheila (2026) identify important structural and pedagogical limitations in the implementation of world literature education in Kenya, noting that the established literary syllabus contains only a limited number of texts, mainly West African and Anglophone works, with minimal representation of Asian, Latin American, and Indigenous literary traditions. These findings demonstrate the importance of curriculum design in realizing the potential of universal themes as transnational bridges: curricula dominated by Western texts cannot fully utilize the function of universal theme bridges, as they do not expose students to the full diversity of cultural articulation of these themes. Chen (2026) provides empirical evidence on the role of cultural memory references in enhancing empathic evocation through translation, suggesting that cultural memory footnotes and references can encourage empathic evocation in readers of translated texts. These findings have important implications for the teaching of world literature: showing that providing students with cultural context for the texts they read can increase their empathic engagement with those texts, and that the function of universal theme bridges is strengthened when readers have access to the cultural framework on which the theme's traditions are based in the source tradition.

CONCLUSION

The universal themes of love, death, identity, grief, and the search for meaning serve as bridges in transnational literary studies by enabling cross-cultural dialogue, facilitating the circulation and reception of literary texts across national and linguistic boundaries, and generating new meanings through encounters between different cultural traditions. This analysis identifies three main mechanisms by which these bridge functions operate: thematic resonance, thematic translation, and thematic dialogue. These mechanisms operate simultaneously and interactively in transnational literary texts, and together form the function of bridges of universal themes.

The function of bridging universal themes is not automatic, but depends on the quality of the reading practices used for those themes. The most productive encounter between the various cultural articulations of the universal theme is the most clearly visible of cultural differences, that is, in which the encounter with different cultural articulations of the universal theme eliminates the reader's own cultural assumptions and opens up new possibilities for understanding. This function of defamiliarizing universal themes is one of the most important contributions that transnational literary studies can make to a broader cross-cultural understanding.

For literary pedagogy, the concept of universal themes as a transnational bridge proposes a new approach in the teaching of world literature in order to interact with the diversity of global literary traditions. Universal themes as entry points into unfamiliar and teacher literary traditions can help students develop the cross-cultural empathy and critical awareness that are essential for navigating an increasingly interconnected world.

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