

The Historical Novel as a Basis for Developing Linguistic and Literary Competence in Secondary School Literature Classes

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Abstract

Students attending Slovenian secondary schools develop their literary competence mostly by reading either canonical works of world literature or classic Slovenian canonical literary works. These two types of literature are much more demanding and they require greater effort from a reader than young adult, mostly contemporary, fiction (YA), which is covered in primary school literature classes. Nineteenth century works of literature and novels written in the first decades of the twentieth century account for a large part of the Slovenian classic literature. From a linguistic and thematic point of view, translated works of world literature from that period do not pose a big problem for Slovenian students, given their contemporary translations. However, Slovenian national literature from that period represents a greater challenge for Slovenian secondary school students, mostly on account of its linguistic and thematic remoteness. Students are unable to understand certain words; therefore, their literary experience is hindered, whilst teachers oftentimes do not even pay attention to this problem, because they are more concerned with the elements of literary theory and literary history. By analyzing the historical novel *Visoška kronika* (The Visoko chronicle), written by the famous Slovenian writer Ivan Tavčar (1851–1923), this article examines certain obstacles that obstruct the understanding of the historical novel (archaic language, complex style, ignorance of historical facts, habits and the way of life in the past, etc.) and the possibilities of tackling these issues. *Visoška kronika* was selected for this study on account of its intercultural themes, its message, narrative techniques, special linguistic and stylistic features, and also due to the fact that the novel occupies an important place in the Slovenian literary system.

Key words: literary competence, linguistic competence, historical novel, archaic language, Ivan Tavčar, literature didactics

Introduction

In the past, literature was considered important for various reasons: it served, for example, religious purposes, it was thought to be extremely valuable for upbringing, and it has always been perceived as an indicator of broad general education and one of the best ways to learn a language; in the period of Romanticism, literature also represented an important national awakener and

stimulator of national emotions for most European nations, and it greatly affected the formation of a national identity. Due to its diametrically opposed function, literature can even become an ideological instrument, a series of stories that captivate readers and make them accept a hierarchical organization of society; at the same time, literature can represent a sphere where ideology is revealed, and it may also raise doubts about itself (Virk 2006: 3). The world of books (and the world of art in general) is the socially accepted “world of freedom,” where taboo topics can find their shelter and where fears and stereotypes we dislike are hidden; when reading literature, “we practise tolerance—tolerance for textual difference, artistic strangeness, and tolerance towards ourselves” (Šlibar 2006: 24). The reading strategies related to artistic texts are different from the reading strategies related to non-artistic texts, and individuals with highly developed general reading competence do not necessarily have highly developed literary competence—i.e., “the ability to consciously experience, understand, and evaluate the content and form of various literary works” (Krakar Vogel 2004: 41).

Literature classes in Slovenian schools are aimed at developing students’ spiritual and cultural progress, and they are based on national (Slovenian) and world literature works which are both classified as the literary canon. The results of the study by Irena Pieper (2006) show a similar situation in other European countries (e.g., Romania, Germany, the Netherlands): secondary school students learn about different literary genres (epic, drama, lyric), about literary theory and literary history, and quite frequently also about a certain economic, philosophical, psychological, and social context. Despite focusing on the works of the literary canon, certain European school curriculums (e.g., in Germany, the Netherlands) display increasingly more sensitivity to the interests of secondary school students, which is reflected in specific thematic approaches and also in the fact that students are actively engaged in selecting books included in school reading lists; besides, the impact of literary reading on shaping one’s personality is taken into consideration (development of cultural capital), and the key competence that an individual person shall develop in literature classes are determined (Pieper 2006: 9).

Secondary school Slovene language or literature curricula are comparable to European curricula. Students develop their reading skills by reading classic canonical Slovenian literary works and the canonical works of world literature, either by reading entire books or by reading certain passages, and these literary texts are divided into mandatory and optional ones. In Slovenian schools, just like in other European schools, teachers are the ones who are allowed to make the final selection of literary texts intended for classroom reading.

In actual practice, however, grammar school teachers mostly leave the opportunity of selecting texts on their own too largely unexploited,

because they are worried that students will not be sufficiently prepared for their final matriculation exam; therefore, they are more concerned with covering all obligatory final exam readings. According to Alenka Žbogar, during the four-year period of their schooling, grammar school students read at least 120 obligatory readings, twenty optional readings that are explored in the context of contemporary times, and a few young adult books and genre texts at a teacher's discretion. An extensive list of readings that students should be familiar with "may result in the fact that their knowledge is reproductive (learning by heart) rather than useful or functional, and there is not enough time for the development of reading competence" (Žbogar 2007: 53).

Except for poetry and home readings, students become familiar with the majority of literary works when reading selected excerpts, which are discussed with reference to an entire text and some other circumstances (author, literary period, etc.). Despite criticism that an excerpt with information about the author and a brief summary represents just another uninteresting database (Grosman 2004: 268), literature didactics is generally in favor of discussing excerpts since in this manner students can become familiar with a larger number of literary texts and, besides, students may become bored if they were to deal with a certain text for too long (Žbogar 2013: 87). Discussing excerpts is also justifiable from the systemic literary-didactic paradigm viewpoint, because it is useful for "learning and comparing various elements related to motifs, themes and forms of some representative texts within the literary system" (Krakar Vogel and Blažič 2012: 13).

An overly extensive curriculum may lead to superficial reading, and besides, there is insufficient time to get students' feedback on a literary text and to clarify any dilemmas or ambiguities that may affect students' understanding of a text and the way they experience it. This applies in particular to classic Slovenian literature from earlier periods which students find especially difficult to understand due to its linguistic and thematic remoteness, and although students acknowledge its cultural significance, they prefer reading world literature, even world literature works from previous literary periods in contemporary translations (Jožef Beg 2015). This finding is also confirmed by studies on the perception of older Slovenian literature, especially poems by France Prešeren. The understanding of Prešeren's poetry has been discussed in detail by Zoran Božič (2010), in individual articles by Boža Krakar Vogel (2004), and in various other research works. Various studies have established that students are well familiar with France Prešeren's personality and his lifestyle, and that they are well aware that he is considered to be one of the greatest Slovenian poets. However, students find it quite difficult to understand his poems, not only because of the demanding

metaphors, but also because of his archaic language.¹ Students have no less difficulty reading and experiencing Slovene novels from the period of realism, since they are unable to relate themselves to motifs, themes and language from that period. Nevertheless, these novels are extremely important since they help students to better understand the period in which the Slovene national identity was formed.

Different research studies have been carried out in Slovenia on the topic of reading interests, and all of these studies have one thing in common: secondary school students want to read books with interesting and exciting stories and they are not fond of classic literary texts prescribed by school curriculums² (Žbogar 2007, Jožef Beg and Andrin 2012, Jožef Beg 2015). However, it is rather interesting that literary works such as *Antigone* by Sophocles or Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, which represent canonical repertoire of the Slovenian literature curricula, can be found on the list of most popular books.

Studies also show that those secondary school students who have the habit of reading in their free time tend to move on from YA literature to adult literature, mostly genre literature, which has been translated from other languages (crime, adventure and romance novels, biographies, fantasy novels, science fiction, etc.); in some cases, students also read novels in the original language due to their delayed translations (e.g., *Fifty Shades of Grey*, *Hunger Games*, *A Game of Thrones*). A study on key competence (Jožef Beg 2015) shows that the list of literary works that have been cited by students as their free-time reading contains no short stories, no poetry, no plays, and only few Slovenian literary works. Merely ten students (1.7%) stated that the last book they had read in their free time was a literary work by a Slovenian author (Vladimir Bartol's *Alamut*, Drago Jančar's *To noč sem jo videl [I Saw Her that Night]*, Ivan Cankar's *Hlapec Jernej in njegova pravica [The Bailiff Jerney and his Rights]*, and Boris Pahor's *Nekropola [Necropolis]*).

Based on the foregoing, it can be concluded that for many students, school represents the only place where they can learn about quality national literature. Due to the fact that teens and young adults are reluctant to read classic literature, especially Slovenian literary works from previous periods (e.g., the comedy *Ta veseli dan ali Matiček se ženi [This happy day or Matiček is getting married]* by A. T. Linhart, Prešeren's poems, the novels

¹ In order to deal with the obstacles hindering the understanding of Prešeren's poetry, Božič, for example, suggests that the most adequate didactic measure to improve the experience of a stylistically demanding classical poetry is the prozification of Prešeren's poems. Božič also suggest that such converted poems should be juxtaposed with the original ones (Božič 2010).

² In primary schools, Kersnik's and Tavčar's short stories; in secondary schools, *Sosedov sin* and *Deseti brat* by Josip Jurčič, *Jara gospoda* by Janko Kersnik, the short story "Tilka" by Simon Jenko.

Deseti brat [The tenth brother] by Josip Jurčič and *Jara gospoda* [The Parvenus] by Janko Kersnik), it is all the more important to choose the right teaching strategies, since the essence of contemporary teaching methods does not lie in avoiding literary classics, but in using creativity to find therein some exciting key points that may capture the attention of young people, and use those engaging points to enter this different world of such verbal art.

Visoška kronika, a historical novel written by Ivan Tavčar (1851–1923), also falls within the scope of classic Slovenian literature that requires the reader to have broad knowledge and a special sensitivity for partly archaic language used by the author to illustrate the setting (the time and place of the story). When reading this novel, students should—apart from gaining an insight into literary elements such as characters, setting, style and structure of narrative texts, a narrative technique, and a narrator—also obtain the necessary competence for a better understanding of historical narrative in general (Poznanovič Jezeršek 2008: 26).

The historical novel in secondary school Slovene language curricula

The historical novel is perceived as a novel, the theme of which is based on historical reality depicted in literary motifs set side by side forming a coherent image of a certain historic period, wherein, at least from the reception viewpoint, the distinction between historical science and a literary text is blurred.

With regard to the nature of historical conflict which has been transformed into artistic conflict, Nadezhda N. Starikova distinguishes the following forms of the historical novel: historical-biographical novel, historical-philosophical novel, and historical-social novel, as well as, only conditionally, historical novels “where history represents the basis for the main themes and motifs that serve as a foundation for reflections which are far from direct philosophical, social, or ethical aspects of the individual past episodes” (Starikova 2003: 253).

The historical narrative occupies an important place in Slovenian curricula. Students attending professional secondary schools (four-year programs) become familiar with the historical novel when discussing a special literary genre—namely, the historical narrative. The grammar school literature curriculum contains a list of four literary texts—that is, four historical novels: the epic *War and Peace* by Leo Tolstoy, and the novels *Visoška kronika*, *Alamut*, and *Minuet for Guitar* by Vitomil Zupan. These three novels have also been selected as the literary topics for the final matriculation essay exam at the end of the fourth year, whilst *Visoška kronika* and *War and Peace*, are included in the second-year home reading list. The recommended reading list contains the following historical novels: Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe*, Henrik Sienkiewicz’s *The Knights of the Cross*, Mark

Twain's *The Prince and the Pauper*, Ivan Tavčar's *Vita vitae meae*, Bogdan Novak's *Dog Countess*, Anna Wambrechtsamer's *Danes grofje Celjski in nikdar več* (Counts of Celje today and never again), and Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (Poznanovič Jezeršek 2008).

A wide range of historical readings is intended to illustrate and cover an individual literary-historical period; therefore, it can be concluded that these texts were obviously selected as recommended readings with an aim to provide additional information about the time period, rather than for the purpose of exploring them as poetic forms. The optional reading list shall contain literary works that are more appealing to students and, according to research studies on reading habits, the optional reading list shall also include historical novels that are classified by research participants as extremely popular. As a matter of fact, the popularity of the genre is a bit debatable since the so called "romantic novels in a historical disguise" are often mistakenly considered by respondents as historical novels; for example, novels written by Julie Garwood and Amanda Quick, the two authors who use a historical background only as a scenery for romance plots (Kovač et al. 2015: 4) and, according to Starikova, these works can therefore be, by definition, only conditionally classified as historical novels.

Preparation for reading the historical novel

Visoška kronika is regarded by Slovenian literary critics as one of the best Slovenian historical novels, and according to Starikova, it can be placed among the historico-social novels which contain "the principle of social analysis that represents the main tool for analyzing socio-political collisions of the historical past" (2003: 253). In this novel, which was supposed to be the first part of a trilogy about the Khalan family on their Visoko estate, the writer intertwines history with people's characters, depicts the protagonist's private life destiny, which is presented as an embodiment of national history (social and moral), and presents, in a documentary form, the Counter-Reformation period in the second half of the seventeenth century. In 1919, the novel was published in twelve sequential parts in the literary magazine *Ljubljanski zvon*. This literary work was first published in book format in 1921 as the sixth volume of *Tavčarjevih zbranih spisov VI. zvezek* (Tavčar's collected writings, volume 6). In 1929, the novel was translated into Italian, followed by translations into the following languages: German (1947), Czech (1948), Serbian (1949), Slovak (1949), Hungarian (1960), Polish (1961), Macedonian (1964), Bulgarian (1972), and French (1975).³ According to the Cobiss data, *Visoška kronika* was published in the Slovene language twenty-five times between 1931 and 2015.

³ Most translations in this article are from Timothy Pogačar's English-language manuscript translation.

Visoška kronika is a historical novel which portrays the Khallan family and depicts father Polikarp's sin and the penance which his son takes upon himself for his father's wrongdoing. The narrator Izidor is very religious and superstitious young man who was to marry Agatha Schwarzkobler and thus does penance for his father's sin (Polikarp killed Agatha's grandfather, confiscated the military booty and used the money to buy the Visoko estate upon his return to Škofja Loka), but due to his indecisive personality, Izidor loses his bride. When she was accused of witchcraft, it is not Izidor who supports her and stands by her side, but his younger brother Jurij.

Due to its complicated themes and motifs, the complexity of its message, and its linguistic and stylistic features, *Visoška kronika* is not really the most appropriate option to be included in a primary school reading list, whereas in secondary school programs the exploration of this work is adjusted to a certain educational level and students' abilities. The reading preparation is, in any case, essentially important since one needs to be familiar with seventeenth-century historical circumstances in order to understand the story itself, and the students do not necessarily learn about these circumstances in history classes.

The reading preparation should be problem based and students should aim to research historical circumstances related to seventeenth-century feudal relationships in the Slovenian countryside, the consequences of medieval colonization (the German community in the area surrounding the town of Škofja Loka), the Counter Reformation period and persecution of Protestants, religious wars (the so-called Thirty Years' War), and witch trials. Due to the extensive volume of material and topics, it is sensible to split students into groups and assign them tasks for individual work. Students should divide their work within a group and explore the available resources. Students should make their own decisions regarding the form of the report on key findings: they can prepare a poster or a leaflet, make a short film, etc.

Before reading, we discuss certain features of the literary text which students can easily notice when flipping through the book for the first time. Tavčar, namely, wrote the novel in the style of a chronicle, a type of the historical novel where a fictional seventeenth century chronicler is included as the narrator, while the author only plays the role of someone who merely discovered the chronicler's notes and now acts as editor, providing some additional explanation about certain parts of the chronicle. The novel contains thirty-two side notes, reminiscent of old chronicles, which summarize or comment upon the events happening in public or private life of the Kalan family ("My father in the battle at Lützen 1631" [324]; "The sad death of Jošt Schwarzkobler. October 1648" [328]).

The novel ends with a postscript written by Izidor's seventeen-year-old son Georgius and the author's (editor's) statement: "This is the end of the

first part of The Visoko Chronicle” serving as an announcement of a continuation of the novel which, unfortunately, was never accomplished.

A linguistic-stylistic analysis of *Visoška kronika*

Particular attention should be paid to specific linguistic-stylistic features of the novel. Since, according to the curriculum, numerous texts have to be covered, there is not enough time to read the entire novel in class; therefore, students are given insight into specific linguistic expressions by reading short passages containing certain linguistic idiosyncrasies. They are used as examples to draw students’ attention to certain specific linguistic features and to help them develop strategies for addressing and clarifying doubts and uncertainties.

Visoška kronika is told by the narrator or chronicler, a simple and deeply religious rural man who starts writing a family chronicle in the last year of his life after returning home as a war invalid who was involved in an eleven-year armed conflict, and he expresses the following hope:

If God prolongs my life and prevents the carpenter—who day after day, drives nails into the funeral coffin of my wounded breast—from finishing his work for yet a few more months, I will write everything down in detail and describe it for those who come after me that they may realize how the first rule is to have faith in God and the second is to be meek. It is difficult for me to write—as awkward and slow as plowing land when the blade will not pierce the layer of clay.⁴ (Tavčar 1919: 16–17)

The chronicler uses colorful language, his comparisons are taken from rural life, and he expresses his religious attitude to life by referring to God, saints, and the Bible.

The novel was written in the literary language from the early twentieth century; however, it is very obvious that the author wanted to capture the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century *Zeitgeist* or spirit by using words and syntax from that period. When students read the novel *Visoška kronika* as their home reading, they are supposed to fill in a special table prepared by a teacher. The table contains certain linguistic peculiarities and students are supposed to complete the table and provide specific examples taken from the book.

⁴ Če mi Bog podaljša življenje ter zadrži mizarja, ki dan za dnevom zabija v mojih prestreljenih prsah žebelje v mrtvaško mojo rakev, da vsaj še nekaj mesecev ne dokonča svojega dela, bom vse prav natanko zapisal in tistim, ki pridejo za mano, da izprevidijo, da je prvo, zaupati v Boga, drugo pa, krotiti samega sebe. Pišem namreč težko, okorno in počasi, kakor se orje zemlja, če se lemež noče zarezati v ilnato plast.

Some features of Tavčar's language:

Linguistic features	Example
archaic word order, vocabulary, and syntax as well as titular feudal style	"I, Georgius Posthumus, my father Izidor's son, born after his death, still having my truly beloved mother Margareta Wulffing ..." ⁵
and the use of titles as a sign of humbleness and respect	"the high-born, honourable and powerful Mr Joannes Franciscus, who has to this day remained the sovereign of the Fraysingen diocese and all its property" ⁶
Latin expressions (vivat, victoria), Latin names next to Slovenian names	bishop Conradus = škof Konrad, Joannes Franciscus = Janez Frančišek
Latin wise sayings with the corresponding Slovene translations written by the chronicler	"Margareta coelo clemente fruitur," which means: Margareta je čisto gotovo deležna popolnega nebeškega kraljestva! ⁷
German expressions	paar pezalt = paid in cash; Nadelprobe = needle test
expressions for objects typical of the turbulent seventeenth century, mostly military and judicial terms	cuirassier, comrade, cornet, guards, musket; assessor, prison, tax, Spanish horse
others archaic expressions	bağaža 'luggage, equipment', brez dvojbe 'without any doubt', frajman 'executioner', kastel 'fortress, castle', lazaret 'hospital', najgorši 'the most attractive, best', nemško olje 'German beer', v postavnem redu 'according to the law', dopadljivo 'attractive', španjolsko 'Spanish', bržkotne 'probably', ondi 'there', nikdo 'no one', vzlic 'despite', radi 'because of'
participles ending in -ši, in English -ing participles	opazivši mojo preplašenost 'noticing my fearfulness'

One of the strategies that can be used to make the text more appealing to students is close or detailed reading. In this manner, students read selected passages from a longer literary text, in our case *Visoška kronika*. The novel is addressed by means of guided reading, which takes place in three different

⁵ "Jaz, Georgius Posthumus, sin očeta Izidorja, rojen po njegovi smrti, ki mi živi še vedno čez vse ljubljena mati, Margareta Wulffingova ..." (Tavčar 1919: 662).

⁶ ".../ visokorojenemu, najsvitlejšemu in premočnemu gospodu Janezu Frančišku, ki je še danes solnčno obsijani vladar škofije v Fraysingenu in vsega njenega imetka" (Tavčar 1919: 16).

⁷ Margareta must certainly be having great time in the Kingdom of Heaven! (Tavčar 1919: 662)

phases: the first phase is focused on vocabulary, the second phase is prepared for interpretive reading, and in the third phase the content of the novel is explored.

Let us take as an example the passage from the beginning of chapter 8, where students determine linguistic and stylistic characteristics, identify and explain irony, phrases, establish the effectiveness of linguistic and stylistic means, etc.

Reading passage:

I took care of everything at the castle, and the authorities recognized me as the owner and lord of the two Visoko farms. I had to pay whole sacks of money: I paid the registration tax, the death tax, the weekly farthings, the tenth and twentieth farthings, and God knows what else; only the air I breathe they didn't tax me on! For it is true that people lived more cheaply in the old days than today, when even my chief bailiff raises his annual wage of ten German gold pieces by two whole gold pieces; and besides I had to promise him a pair of broadcloth breeches into the bargain, which is no trifle! These days are hard for a lord!

I was informed of what was written in the will. And it was written in the first place that I not set aside the promises made at my father's death bed.

My brother received fifteen hundred gold pieces in our money and was to have all his needs provided for as long as he worked at home. The one good fortune was that I still had the Swedish war chest in the house. It pulled me out of the water, for otherwise I would surely have drowned⁸ (Tavčar 1919: 386).

⁸ Na gradu sem opravil vse in gosposka je pripoznala, da sem lastnik in gospodar visoških dveh gruntov. Plačati sem moral cele koše denarja: plačal sem urbarščino, umrlino, tedenske vinarje, deseti in dvajseti vinar in bogve kaj še vse; samo zraka, ki ga diham, mi niso obdačili! Pač res, v starih časih se je živelo ceneje ko danes, ko mi je še celo prvi hlapec svojo letnino desetih nemških goldinarjev povišal za cela dva nemška goldinarja; in pri tem sem mu moral obljubiti še ene prtene hlače, kar tudi ni malenkost! Težki so dnevi za gospodarja!

Naznanilo se mi je, kar je bilo zapisano v testamentu. Zapisano pa je bilo na prvem mestu, da naj ne postavim v stran obljub ob očetovi smrtni postelji.

Brat je dobil petnajststo domačih goldinarjev in da bodi preskrbljen z vsako potrebščino, dokler dela pri hiši. Le sreča, da sem imel v hiši še švedsko vojno blagajno! Ta me je izvlekla iz vode, ker bi bil drugače gotovo utonil.

a) Vocabulary

The first phase is focused on vocabulary; a selected extract is used for intra-subject learning where literature and language are linked, whereby 2nd year students deepen their knowledge of etymology and morphology:

- students read an extract quietly in order to get a general impression of the text;
- when reading the text quietly for the second time, students underline all unfamiliar words (e.g. grunt 'large estate', urbarščina 'a special tax' goldinar 'florin', prtene hlače 'cloth trousers'); they write the explanation of the unfamiliar words on a worksheet (they will find most definitions of them in the online *Slovar slovenskega knjižnega jezika* [Dictionary of the Slovene literary language]);⁹
- reading an extract aloud (read by individual students);
- discussing vocabulary while working in groups, students determine peculiar expressions, clarify dilemmas and uncertainties, find answers to their questions.

b) Syntax analysis, interpretive reading preparation

On the level of syntax, special features of the literary style are reflected in a complex sentence structure and passive sentences. In the second phase, the syntactic features are examined, whereby students revise their knowledge of syntax which they gained in primary school, and at the same time they also get prepared for interpretive reading:

- another silent reading of the text; students pay attention to the sentence structure and sentence mood: complex sentences in the first paragraph; exclamatory sentences suggest emotional experience; they examine final and non-final punctuation and they consider the role of the punctuation in the sentence—they mark pauses and intonation and thus they get prepared for interpretive reading;
- interpretive reading;
- discussion about syntactic features and the impact they have on the reader.

c) Discussion of the narrator

In the third phase, the content of the novel is explored. Students, in pairs or in groups, discuss what they have found out about the first-person narrator

⁹ Access to the portal *Fran. Slovarji Inštituta za slovenski jezik Frana Ramovša ZRC SAZU* (www.fran.si).

from the given passage (his status, character traits, family relations, etc.) and about the story setting (time and place in the novel). They write down content-related questions that may be raised while reading a passage. Students will probably be wondering what the narrator had in his mind when he exclaimed: “How lucky I was to have in my house the Swedish war cash box!”, and they will also be curious to know, how the cash box got to Visoko. Those who have already read the novel may question honesty of the God-fearing narrator, which may trigger new questions about the ethics of the narrator’s conduct. They will detect examples of irony (“...only the air I breathe was not taxed!”) and metaphorical expressions (“It pulled me out of the water, otherwise I would have definitely drowned.”).

The third phase is concluded by means of a discussion which helps students clarify their dilemmas or any final ambiguities that may arise. The entire study of *Visoška kronika* is rounded off by doing interpretative reading once again, and by undertaking some new tasks—for example, reformulating the text in such a way as if it had been written by a contemporary author/student. Accordingly, the vocabulary, syntax, writing tone, etc. are modernized, and the effect of the new text is evaluated in comparison with the original version.

The method of close reading combined with dictionary work proves to be effective for the development of linguistic competence on all levels of education. The tasks are differentiated in such a way that, in case of students enrolled in vocational and professional secondary school programs, it is the teacher who underlines the ambiguous parts of the text for them, whereas second-year grammar school students should perform this task on their own.

The aim of addressing the language of a literary text is to make readers familiar with the text, so that they can also delve into the analysis of motifs and themes, which is no less demanding than linguistic analysis.

Analyzing motifs and themes in *Visoška kronika*

The historical novel can serve as a great starting point for exploring our own as well as other cultures, analyzing the text in the context of contemporary times, and for the development of literary and other competence. Students are given extracts with the key topics which are related to historical circumstances that shaped the first-person narrator and which they explored when they were preparing for the reading. Due to time constraints, the emphasis is placed only on the narrator’s attitude to war, farmland, religion, and language.

Students can work individually or in groups, and each topic is dealt with by two groups discussing their findings during the reporting process.

The independent work, either individual or group work, is followed by a guided discussion which is rounded off with a summary of the results.

The theme of war

The seventeenth-century religious wars between Catholics and Protestants are part of the narrator's life from his childhood until his death. Students summarize the key events related to the motif of war, and while reading a given extract, they discuss Izidor's depiction of war events and compare his attitude to war with his father's attitude to warfare.

Passage for discussion about the wars:

No one who has not been in a war himself knows what war is!
The ordinary folk are always and everywhere battered when
armies fight: no life is safe then, neither woman nor child is safe.
All such things I saw with my own eyes. I saw death carry off
old men, I saw violence done to girls, I saw huts burned, cities
pillaged and leveled. My heart was not in that bloody
handiwork; St. Izidor be my witness that I did not take part in
massacres or pillaging!

I remained true to my service because I was sworn to,
and there was no force that would have made me disloyal to the
regiment's standard. Nonetheless, I did not enjoy war and I
prayed to God that he would halt it with his powerful arm.¹⁰
(Tavčar 1919: 545–46).

Izidor, the narrator, even as a soldier remains faithful to the catholic religion, therefore he is the complete opposite of his father Polikarp who was a Lutheran and he also fought in religious wars, but as a mercenary, which means that he fought on the side of those who paid him more.

We discuss with the students to which war the description in the passage refers. How Izidor presents it and what it conveys to the reader. They briefly present the historical facts about these wars and consider whether they were just religious contradictions. The contradictions of the seventeenth

¹⁰ Nikdo ne vé, kaj je vojska, če ni bil sam v vojski! Raztepeno je ljudstvo povsod in vselej, kjer se tepó armade: takrat ni varno nobeno življenje, takrat nista varna ne ženska, ne otrok. Vse take reči so videle moje oči. Videl sem umirati starce, videl sem, kako se je sila delala dekletom, videl sem, kako so se palile koče in kako so se plenila in podirala mesta. Nisem bil s srcem pri krvavem tem rokodelstvu; sv. Izidor mi je priča, da se nisem udeleževal morij in ne plenitev! Ker sem prisegel, sem ostal zvest svoji službi, in ni je bilo moči, ki bi me bila izneverila polkovi zastavi. Vojske vzlic temu nisem bil vesel in k Bogu sem molil, da bi jo ustavil z močno svojo roko.

century are related to the political situation in Slovenian lands at the time of Tavčar.

The theme of farmland

Both father and son are strongly attached to their farmland or estate. This is another theme that is commonly accentuated when addressing the novel in class. Students find parts of the text which are related to the motif of the attitude to farmland. They discuss the motives that encouraged the ex-soldier Polikarp to buy the two Visoko estates, what kind of master of the estate he was, and how he managed to transfer his attachment to farmland to his successor.

Polikarp had a hard time giving up the management of the estate which he had bought with dirty money—that is, money obtained through crime. In this respect, the narrator writes the following thoughts: “He looked down and scowled, and finally the words barely wrenched themselves from his lips—that he wanted to will the estate to me. He demanded a promise from me not to dissipate Visoko, mortgage it, or rent it¹¹ (Tavčar 1919: 70).

Izidor proved to be a good master of the estate, however, he did not die as a farmer, but as a soldier. He renounced the estate when he realized that he did not deserve it, since his profane haughtiness was stronger than the love he should have had for his bride.

For the sake of his estate and good name, Izidor betrays Agatha, who is accused of witchcraft. Izidor indeed pleads for Agatha and he asks the bishop Joannes Franciscus not to send her to the stake. In doing so, however, he does not acknowledge Agatha as his bride: “So it’s not love for the unfortunate woman that has brought you to me but love for your two holdings, which would come to shame if we condemn Agata Ema Schwarzkobler? ?”¹² (Tavčar 1919: 525)

This topic is most foreign to students; most believe that people today are less connected to the earth than in the past. They identify more with the land in the sense of the homeland, which they extract from the paragraph:

Native land—not empty words these: it is a part of my life, and if the land is taken from me, life is also taken from me. When you are eaten up to the bones, when you are everywhere persecuted as if mushrooms had sprouted all over your body, your native land will receive you with the same face as it

¹¹ Črno je gledal predse, končno pa se mu je le izvila beseda iz ust, da mi hoče izročiti posestvo. Zahteval je od mene obljube, da Visokega ne zapravim, ne zadolžim in ne zajem.

¹² Ni te torej privedla k meni ljubezen do nesrečne ženske, pač pa ljubezen do tvojih dveh kmetij, ki bi prišli v sramoto, če obsodimo Agato Emo Schwarzkoblerjevo?

received you once when you were still being put in a cradle.
(Tavčar 1919: 660).¹³

The theme of religion

Special attention is paid to religious motifs, which students find quite interesting due to various elements such as religious wars, the God-fearing narrator, and his commitment to penance for his father's and later also his own sins, superstition, and the witch trial itself. Religious motifs are discussed in the light of historical circumstances, and they are also explored in the context of contemporary times. Students are to find out who are the people in *Visoška kronika* who are more advanced and forward thinking (Joannes Franciscus, Škofja Loka women), and how their progressive thinking is reflected in the novel.

It is interesting to compare both brothers, Izidor and Jurij. While Izidor comes across as humble, insecure, and fearful of God's punishment, Jurij seems to be a completely different, full-blooded literary character who, despite spending only four years in the city school, thinks with his own head, which is clear during Agatha's trial, when he explicitly states at the hearing that witches do not exist, and he is also very brave, even bold when questioned by the interrogator. That's how he gains the sympathy of townspeople, who are in favor of Agatha, especially the sympathy of the enlightened bishop Joannes Franciscus. Superstition and humbleness are foreign to Jurij and that is precisely why he is rewarded, whereas Izidor is left only with a penance, not only for his father's sin, but also for his own vanity: "When the mill wheels came to a halt and when my tired soul regained its slightest power, I knew that I was to do penance not only for my poor father's sins, but also for my own sins."¹⁴ (Tavčar 1919: 653).

The theme of language

The last thematic set is dedicated to intercultural themes, tolerance between the two language communities, adaptation to a foreign environment, etc. Before reading the entire text on their own, students are given the task to pay attention to those parts of the text that depict the intercultural relations between Kranjci (an expression which was used to denote the Slovenes;

¹³ Zemlja domača – ni prazna beseda: del je mojega življenja, in če se mi vzame zemlja, se mi je tudi vzelo življenje. Ko si oglodan do kosti, ko te povsod preganjajo kakor bi se bile gobe razpasle po tvojem telesu, te sprejme domača zemlja z istim obrazom, kot te je sprejela nekdaj, ko so te še v zibel polagali.

¹⁴ Ko sta mlinski kolesi odnehali in ko je izmučena moja duša prišla k neznatni moči, sem vedel, da mi je delati pokoro ne samo za ubogega svojega očeta, temveč tudi zase, za svoje velike pregrehe.

Tavčar, namely, did not use the term the Slovenes since, when referring to the seventeenth century, we cannot yet speak of national consciousness) and German immigrants who were colonists in the Poljane Valley as early as in the Middle Ages. There is very little contact between the two nations, and intolerance, which is most obvious on the linguistic level, is evident on both sides.

On his way to the Wulffing family, where Izidor was to propose marriage to Margareta Wulffing, he meets Mrs. Pasaver and he describes her language as follows: "She said a few words I did not understand because she spoke in the German language which I find similar to squeaking of a wheel running over sharp rocks with difficulty."¹⁵ (Tavčar 1919: 131)

Marks Wulffing, the future bride's brother, is no more tolerant of the Slovene language: "So, she is to join the people who speak as if they were our barking dogs!"¹⁶ (Tavčar 1919: 135).

After breaking the engagement with Margareta, Izidor undergoes humiliation when he is attacked by her two brothers in Škofja Loka, but in the end it is only Izidor who is punished by the baron: "I was the one who was, after all, attacked, but eventually they punished me, not them. Probably because I am not German!"¹⁷ (Tavčar 1919: 267).

An even greater intolerance of the Germans is reflected in Polikarp's words which he used to comment upon the decision that it was time for his son to get married:

"I will tell you something: Fear the Tajčars!" At that time, we called Tajčars those who had been attracted to our parts from Germany and had taken the best farms from us.

He began again: "I know that lot, they are greedy, they think that they are better than us, and they are hungry for our land. They tear whomever doesn't bark with them to pieces. To stop up their throats I will marry you, and you will take a Tajčar, so she won't have German children. It's true they know how to work the land best. Your mother was also German-born and she wasn't a bad housewife, although she liked to anger me."¹⁸ (Tavčar 1919: 70).

¹⁵ Izpregovorila je nekaj besed, katerih nisem umel, ker je bila ta nemška govornica podobna škripanju kolesa, kadar s težavo teče po ostrem kamenju.

¹⁶ In med ljudi naj bi prišla, ki govore, kot lajajo pri nas psi!

¹⁷ Bil sem vendar napaden, pa so me kaznovali, prejkone zato, ker nisem bil Nmec!«

¹⁸ Nekaj ti rečem: »Tajčarjev se boj!« Tajčarje smo imenovali takrat tiste, ki so se bili privlekli z Nemškega v naše kraje ter nam odvzeli najboljše kmetije.

The narrator appears to be really satisfied when Margareta wants to demonstrate, at her parting from her suitor Izidor, that the Slovene language is not foreign to her: "She was stretching out a parcel in my direction, she used a few Slovene words and then finished her talk pleadingly: Take it, take it!"¹⁹ (Tavčar 1919: 142) He is also pleased with the fact that Agatha got used to the environment which is rather foreign to her:

Agata quickly became accustomed to her new life. /.../ She exchanged her clothes and started to dress like us. Before long she was becoming happier. At work or wherever she would start singing songs, which we liked, even if she was singing in a foreign tongue. A year had not gone by and she was already twittering in our language, with difficulty at first, clumsily, and mixing in German words, so that we all had to laugh at her. She, too, would laugh and did not allow herself to be frustrated until she could speak just as we spoke.²⁰ (Tavčar 1919: 450)

The fourth thematic set thus aims to explore the role of the Slovene language in the past and in contemporary times. Students examine whether the selected extracts reflect the chronicler's or the author's attitude to language, which they establish by means of their knowledge of historical circumstances related to the Slovenian linguistic and cultural identity. They discuss the importance of language skills for greater tolerance among language communities in the local environment, and they revise the history of language from the Reformation period until the end of the nineteenth century.

Conclusion

In the second half of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Slovenian historical novel played an important role in defining, articulating, and formulating Slovenian collective perceptions. As

Zopet je pričel: »Ta zarod poznam, je požrešen, misli, da je več, kot smo mi, in naše zemlje je lačen. Kdor z njimi ne laja, ga raztrgajo. Da jim goltanec zamašim, te oženim in Tajčarko boš vzela, da ne bo imela nemških otrok. Res je, zemljo vedo najbolje obdelovati. Tudi tvoja mati je bila nemškega rojstva in gospodinja tudi ni bila slaba, dasi me je rada jezila.«

¹⁹ Molila je zavitek proti meni, mešala nekaj naših besed ter končala proseče: »Nemi, nemi!«

²⁰ Agata se je hitro privadila novemu življenju. /.../ Spremenila je obleko in pričela se je nositi po naše. Kmalu je postajala veselejša. Pri delu ali kjersi je bilo, je rada zapela pesem, ki nam je bila všeč, in najsi je pela v tujem jeziku. Ni še minilo leto, pa je že gostolela v naši govorici — najprej težko, okorno in z vmešavanjem nemških besed, da smo se ji morali vsi smejeti. Tudi ona se je smejala in se ni dala spraviti v zadrego toliko časa, da je govorila, kakor smo govorili mi sami.

stated by Grdina, historical novels helped co(create) our ancestors' world of ideas and imagination, and this applies also to those who belonged to the social elites, therefore this genre cannot be regarded as a typical or standardized form of the so-called mass culture (Grdina 2003: 161).

The historical novel is not a history textbook, which is an important fact that should be pointed out before reading the novel. In order to become familiar with the difference between the historical novel and history, students explore different sources on a selected topic, and afterwards they compare historical facts with their realization in the novel and try to determine how much artistic freedom the author of the novel has afforded and what was the purpose of that freedom. Students also examine the time and the circumstances of the novel's origin and they identify possible links with the story itself, motifs, and themes, they explore the reaction of the public to the publication of the novel, and the course of its canonization (its place in the Slovene literature, translation into other languages, dramatization, etc.).

They discuss their findings and define their views on the themes in the novel which can be defined as timeless: guilt and penance, false accusations and correction of injustices, religious and national intolerance, etc. Group work and discussions are followed by various creative activities (e.g., an imaginary interview with a literary character; a script for staging a selected extract; dramatization, illustration, strip, the choice of music background to dramatization, the presentation of a motif from *Visoška kronika* in a short film).

By taking into account several diverse elements such as different interests and abilities, the specific peculiarities of a group, a study programme and individual students, a teacher selects an activity that will bring past times closer to students, so that they will have a better understanding of their own present.

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POVZETEK**Zgodovinski roman kot izhodišče za razvijanje jezikovne in literarne zmožnosti pri pouku književnosti v srednji šoli**

V slovenskih srednjih šolah dijaki razvijajo literarno zmožnost predvsem z branjem kanoniziranih dela iz svetovne književnosti in klasičnih besedil nacionalne književnosti, ki so zahtevnejša in od bralcev terjajo večjo angažiranost kot mladinsko, večinoma sodobnejše leposlovje, ki so ga brali pri pouku književnosti v osnovni šoli. Velik del slovenske klasike predstavljajo besedila iz 19. stoletja in prvih desetletij 20. stoletja. Medtem ko svetovna književnost iz tega obdobja z jezikovnega vidika zaradi sodobnih prevodov ne predstavlja večjih težav, so dela iz nacionalne književnosti zaradi jezikovne in tematske odmaknjenosti za dijake velik izziv; nerazumevanje besedišča in izkušnjsko oddaljene teme ovirajo njihovo doživljanje klasičnega leposlovja, učitelji pa zaradi osredotočenosti na z učnim načrtom predvidene literarnoteoretične in literarnozgodovinske prvine na to pogosto niti niso pozorni. V prispevku bomo na nekatere ovire za razumevanje in možnosti za njihovo odpravljanje opozorili ob zgodovinskem romanu Ivana Tavčarja Visoška kronika. Roman spada med zahtevnejša dela ne le zaradi časa nastanka (1919), ampak še posebej zaradi avtorjeve želje, da z delno arhaizacijo ponazori dogajalni čas, tj. 17. stoletje. Zaradi kompleksnih tem v romanu, ki jih dijaki ne morejo povezati z lastnimi izkušnjami (npr. vojna, odnos do zemlje) niti s predznanjem zgodovine, je treba dijake na branje celotnega romana dobro pripraviti, jim pokazati metodo tesnega branja in jim z ustvarjalnimi nalogami približati delo, ki je del šolskega literarnega kanona zaradi svojih medkulturnih motivov, sporočila, pripovedne tehnike, jezikovnih in slogovnih posebnosti, pa tudi zaradi svoje pomembnosti v slovenskem literarnem sistemu.