

'What do you think?' Let me tell you : discourse about texts and the literature classroom

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‘What do you think?’ Let me tell you: Discourse about texts and the literature classroom

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Keywords

literature, reading, cognitive linguistics, stylistics, knowledge

Abstract

This article examines the practice of studying texts in secondary school English lessons as a particular type of reading experience. Through a critical stylistic analysis of a popular edition of John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, the article explores how reading the text is framed by educational editions, and how this might present the purpose of studying fiction to students. The article draws on two cognitive linguistic concepts – figure/ground configuration and narrative schemas - in order to explore how ‘discourse about a text’ (Mason, 2016) can potentially influence how students read and engage with a text. Building on a previous article (Giovanelli and Mason, 2015), the notion of *pre-figuring* is developed to offer an account of how a reader's attention can be directed to particular elements of a text, thus privileging some interpretations and downplaying others. The article then reflects more widely on the perceived purposes of studying fiction with young people, exploring in particular the recent rise of support within the profession in England for Hirsch's (1988) ‘cultural literacy’ model, which sees knowledge about texts as more valuable than authentic reading and personal response.

Introduction

The study of literary fiction has dominated both secondary curricula and examination specifications in England since the beginning of the twentieth-century. Generally speaking, there have been two opposing positions. The first, initially influenced by the Leavisite tradition of scholarship that revolutionised English teaching in both secondary and higher education (see Hilliard, 2012), has presented the study of literature as close reading and the extraction of meaning, promoting the authority of the text, and the production of literary-critical responses. In this classroom, the teacher's role can often be to disseminate information and to validate understanding; the approach taken is one of direct instruction (Brooks and Brooks, 1993). The second stance is more reader-centred, involving an epistemology of reading in classrooms that is rooted in understanding response and viewing interpretation as dynamic, complex and socially-oriented. Generally, secondary English teachers have aligned themselves more with the second through the 'personal growth model' (DES/WO, 1989; Goodwyn, 2010). In turn researchers have thus argued that literature classrooms should be reader-oriented spaces where authority is reconfigured and where meanings are understood as socially negotiated and constructed (Maybin, 2013; Yandell, 2013).

In this paper we examine how learning activities may foreground different ways of viewing the practice of reading in the classroom. We explore the tension that can exist between allowing students to engage with texts unmediated, and presenting information to them so that literary meaning is conceptualised as a type of knowledge and a form of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Specifically we are interested in how

teaching materials might promote a particular way of thinking about meaning in the classroom and how such materials, through their structure and linguistic detail, position student-readers to engage with a text in a particular way. We frame our study within the cognitive linguistic concepts *narrative schema* and *figure-ground*, and specifically draw on our own work on *pre-figuring* (Giovanelli and Mason, 2015) to analyse teaching materials that accompany John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (Steinbeck, 2000), once a popular choice on GCSE English Literature specifications, but now commonly used with younger students at Key Stage 3.

This paper is organized in the following way. Following this introduction, we provide a brief overview of the specific nature of the textbook in the classroom. We then examine reading in the classroom and teachers' and students' knowledge by drawing on our earlier work on narrative schemas, figure and ground and pre-figuring. We use these ideas to provide a critical stylistic analysis of our data before discussing our findings in the light of recent debates about literary reading and the question of knowledge and the curriculum.

Set texts and literature teaching

In schools, the use of an educational edition of a set text offers a distinctive way into a literary work. Typically such editions will contain summary notes, questions and other paratextual material that means that a student's interaction with the literary work itself is automatically mediated to some degree. Given that such editions offer content-advice (summaries and synopses of plots and characters) and pedagogical methods (questions, answers and activities), we would argue that a study edition is

comparable to a textbook. Consequently, it stands as an important artefact and helps to provide a particular representation of a subject in the classroom. Apple (1986, 1992) argues that textbooks, by their very nature, legitimise particular ways of viewing subject content, foreground cultural and political ideologies and provide powerful representations of knowledge. In a similar way, Castell et al. (1989) suggest that the textbook occupies a unique place in the classroom, its authority extending far above other pedagogical materials.

Of the many kinds of texts available to the modern reader, the school textbook holds a unique and significant social function: to represent to each generation of students an officially sanctioned, authorised version of human knowledge and culture.

(Castell et al.1989, vii)

Harwood (2014, 2) argues that studies of the textbook can take place at three different levels: *content* (topics and the ways in which this is presented); *consumption* (how books are used) and *production* (the ways in which books are designed and produced to promote ways of thinking about material). Thus studies that examine the ways that such materials are used (e.g. Haggarty and Pepin 2002) or survey the tension between providing high-quality learning materials and a too narrow focus on examination requirements and assessment criteria (Oates, 2014) are analyses at the level of consumption. In contrast, we are unaware of any studies in a secondary English context that have examined the content and production levels to analyse how the language of such material might be responsible for both positioning students as readers and promoting ways of thinking about the subject. As Olson (1989) argues, the distinctive registers employed by textbooks enact specific social relations in

learning environments; our intention in this article is to offer a more fine-tuned analysis of language to provide a critical stylistic account of an educational edition of a set text.

Readers in the classroom

The literature classroom is a specific discourse environment in which participants (teacher and students) are largely 'unequal' (Fairclough, 2014), roles and routines are essentially mapped out (Edwards and Westgate, 1994), and ground rules for educational practice are established and adhered to (Edwards and Mercer, 2012). The teacher remains an authority figure able to influence how reading is enacted and the types of interpretation that are legitimised and positioned as preferred responses to literary texts. In the majority of circumstances where teachers introduce texts to their classes, there is an imbalance of knowledge and experience: generally teachers are re-readers guiding students who are first-time readers.

Re-readers and first-time readers will have dramatically different *narrative schemas*. A narrative schema represents an individual's version of a text that becomes stored with other narrative schemas in a mental archive (Mason 1, 2016, 165-6). Narrative schemas are developed (or *accreted*) through experiencing the literary text so that a bank of knowledge develops (either directly through reading or indirectly through being told about it). Teachers have richly accreted narrative schemas - their experience with a text they are teaching is likely to be expansive - whereas a first-time reader's schema is skeletal or non-existent. In this way, students reading a set text accrete their narrative schemas as they go from both their direct experience of reading

but also the ‘discourse *about* the text’ (Mason, 2016, 167) that they are exposed to via teacher and peer discussion.

In Giovanelli and Mason (2015), we drew on figure-ground configuration, originally a concept from gestalt psychology, to propose a framework for accounting for the ways in which teachers might set up activities that foregrounded a particular theme, idea, interpretation or viewing lens before a reading activity. We focused on a case study in which a teacher taught characterisation in Chapter 19 of *Holes* (Sachar, 1998) in such a way as to – unintentionally - promote the character of the Warden as villainous, and to downplay other possible interpretations that the students might have wanted to explore from their reading. In this instance, the configuration of villain (figure) and other possible interpretations (ground) resulted in a teaching situation where

...the teacher is *pre-figuring* the students’ attention. In such lessons what is relevant to the lesson tasks and objectives forms the *figure*; other potential avenues of interest remain in the *ground*.

(Giovanelli and Mason, 2015, 46)

As a strategy, pre-figuring, whether intentional or not, has the potential to disrupt the natural attentional attractors in a text and privilege certain interpretations. In the context of the classroom, the ability to pre-figure rests largely with the teacher as the dominant participant; in classrooms that are informed by a pedagogy of transmission, this can mean that the vast range of resources and ideas, and possible connections and interpretations that students might be willing to make are relegated to the ground. One of the consequences of such pre-figuring is that students’ schematic knowledge is

accreted through indirect means rather than a first hand experience of the text. In our example, the teacher's interpretation that the Warden was a villain had the potential to accrete the students' narrative schemas in a way that we argue is a *manufactured* rather than an *authentic* reading (Giovanelli and Mason, 2015). Initially, we considered these as simply either/or categories but it is clear that the relationship between the two is clinal; there are, after all, degrees to which pre-figuring may take place.

Data, methodology and methods

Our interest is in exploring the extent to which interpretations are pre-figured in an educational edition of *Of Mice and Men*. We are particularly interested in the ways that tasks are set up, how literary texts are framed and how teachers might be encouraged and positioned to set up and enact particular pedagogies in the classroom. This is not to suggest of course that all teachers will follow the route prescribed by an educational edition; rather we want to explore the approach to teaching literature such editions appear to both endorse and promote.

We have selected Sections One and Six – the first and last - since we feel that these are representative of the edition as a whole and also provide a neat way of examining the framing of literary response at the perceived start and end of students' reading. For each, we provide a qualitative analysis of the features of the pedagogical apparatus, examining the text in light of its pre-figuring strategies and the ways in which it evokes narrative schemas. Our analysis is largely linguistic and interpretative in focus, and seeks to uncover and examine embedded ideologies in the data that

promote distinctive ways of thinking about the literary reading in the classroom. As such, it represents an example of a critical stylistic (Jeffries, 2008) approach to discourse.

Analysis

Edition Design

A prevalent feature of the Longman edition is the decision to include the educational ‘Notes’ intermittently throughout the book rather than at the end. These notes are given additional prominence by being situated at the beginning – rather than the end – of each ‘Section’. Each entry comprises a summary of the forthcoming Section, a ‘What do you think’ series of prompts designed to guide reading, more detailed ‘Questions’, and then some ‘Further activities’. Each Section’s educational notes are formatted as a double page spread, meaning it is not visually juxtaposed with the novel text itself (see Figure 1).

<<Figure 1 here>>

This format potentially has two main consequences for readers proceeding chronologically through the edition.

1. Readers will encounter a summary of each Section before they read it. In other words, they are exposed to discourse about the text prior to actual reading, meaning

that their subsequent experience will be necessarily tuned against an accreted overview.

2. Readers will encounter a series of questions that they are unable to answer at the point that they are posed.

The format itself systematically and structurally inverts the order in which a reader would typically read and discuss a text in almost any other context. That is, whether for a book group, a university seminar or simply for pleasure, readers will typically read first and discuss second.

Section One

The summary of events in Section One provides details both of the backstory to the main narrative (George and Lennie leaving their last post) and highlights the key action that takes place in the Section to follow

- George Milton and Lennie Small rest in a clearing on their way to a nearby ranch where *they expect to sign on* for temporary work
- They have *hurriedly left the ranch...*
- Lennie *pleads* with George to tell him over and over gain about their dream ranch
- Lennie's *main task* will be to tend the rabbits

(Steinbeck 2000, 16)

For students who encounter this before they have had a chance to read the text, specific lexical choices have the potential to both activate previous schematic knowledge and pre-figure the following narrative events. The summary begins in the present tense ‘George Milton and Lennie Small rest...’. This explains the current position of the characters at the opening point of the novel but then projects a future time frame that pre-figures a later state of affairs: the characters’ future plans would not be revealed to the reader until six pages into the opening Section. The subsequent introduction of the backstory through a shift to the past tense, ‘have...left’ also pre-figures a history for George and Lennie and thus frames the narrative events through the teaching notes of the text rather than through a first-time reader’s own encounter with the fictional world. From a critical perspective, one of the most intriguing parts of the opening of the novel is the way that Steinbeck develops and carefully crafts his characters over the first few pages and delays their backstory; the prefiguring of such information thus has the potential to minimise the literary impact of Steinbeck’s work.

The pattern continues throughout the introductory paragraph.

- Lennie *pleads* with George
- Lennie’s *main task*

In these instances, the dream that forms such an important part of the novel is outlined to readers in simple summative comments; readers who have minimal schematic knowledge will have this information accreted to their schema rather than being allowed to read about it themselves. These summative comments represent a very good example of discourse about the text.

The ‘What do you think’ prompts, as we have previously noted, are probably designed to provide a steer on students’ reading. The detail is presented to readers in the form of prompts that foreground particular aspects of the storyworld and thus acts as what we term a *mediated figure*. The educational notes explicitly position the reader to accept a figure-ground configuration with particular elements foregrounded.

For example:

- The setting is important (the setting is spatially figured against other grounded aspects of the opening, for example the relationship between George and Lennie)
- The scene by the river is important (the river is spatially figured against other grounded aspects, for example the setting described at the opening of the Section)
- The natural world is important (the natural world is thematically figured against other possible themes that a reader might consider emerging from reading)

Finally in this section, we examine three of the five ‘Questions’:

1. What do Steinbeck’s first descriptions of George and Lennie tell us about their characters? Is there anything that he writes about Lennie which leads us to believe that he has the mind of a child?
2. What is the significance of the dead mouse in terms of what it might tell us about Lennie?
3. George appears to get easily annoyed with Lennie. Do you think that George is being honest when he states that he would be better off without Lennie?

(Steinbeck, 2000, 16)

In each example, the clausal patterning potentially pre-figures a particular response. In questions 1 and 3, noun clauses ‘that he has the mind of a child’ and ‘to get easily annoyed with Lennie’ appear after verbs expressing degrees of certainty (in the case of the first example, the noun clause is embedded). In the case of question 2, the pre-figuring occurs through the use of wh-question and the way that the interpretation is phrased; the ‘question’ posed isn’t *whether* the dead mouse is significant but *what* its significance is. In all three examples, the phrasing makes it very difficult, we would argue, for a first-time reader of the text to legitimately question the following

1. George has the mind of a child
2. The dead mouse is significant
3. George is annoyed with Lennie

The reader is thus positioned to accept the contents of the statements crucially *before* reading has taken place. The authority of the text as a material artefact would consequently make it very difficult for a reader not to take these points as legitimate and authoritative ways of interpreting what is to follow in the text.

Section Six

Many of these patterns are also apparent in the Section Six notes. The narrative schema accretion that is prompted by the Section Six spread is particularly intriguing because the main action of this last instalment, and arguably the zenith of the whole novel – George’s shooting of his friend Lennie – is revealed four times.

- George distracts Lennie's attention and shoots him in the back of the head.
(Summary)
- Think about the feelings and actions of George as he decides to kill his close companion himself, rather than allow Lennie to become the victim of a lynch mob. (Introduction to the questions)
- How does George distract Lennie in order to carry out his grim task? (Question 3)
- Does Slim approve of George having killed Lennie? (Question 4)

(Steinbeck, 2000, 138)

As in Section One, some of these references are not simply descriptive but evaluative. That is, the reader is not only told *that* George kills Lennie, but also why: the introduction to the questions in particular categorically asserts George's underlying motivation for his actions which, whilst clearly implicit, is never explicitly stated by Steinbeck. This pre-figures a preferred interpretation of George's actions. Perhaps more than any other element of these educational sections, this firmly frames the text as an object of study rather than a novel to be read and enjoyed, showing no qualms about offering up this final and biggest 'spoiler'.

The summary and questions also encourage a strong focus on George, who is consistently presented as the active agent, with Lennie displaced either to the object who is acted upon – being first distracted (twice) and then killed – or simply omitted. In the introduction to the questions, Lennie is not named at all in the first instance, but is instead referred to using a noun phrase that defines him by his relation to George rather than as an independent character: 'his close companion'. When he is named in

the latter part of the sentence the focus remains on George and his actions. Stockwell (2009, 25) cites activeness and agency, as two good attentional attractors for readers and argues that characters or objects syntactically placed as active subjects within sentences tend to form the figure of a reader's attention. As such, through the repeated references to George and a focus on his agency, the questions pre-figure him as the 'important' focus of the final Section. One could posit that, as the author of the educational notes has already accreted the knowledge that Lennie dies, it is almost as though he is dismissed as dead already.

Both the summary and then the questions offer a chronological precis of the forthcoming Section meaning that, if read, the reader has two initial phases of potential narrative schema accretion preceding their own reading. As in Section One, the shifting tense within the questions page seems to indicate a simultaneous address to multiple enactors of the reader: a reader who has not yet read the Section ('As you read think about'); a reader who is currently reading the Section, concurrently with the questions ('Why do you think George *is* not angry with Lennie'); and finally a reader who has read the Section ('Does Slim approve of George *having killed* Lennie?'). This last question, question four, is particularly intriguing when consider alongside question three: 'How does George distract Lennie's attention in order to carry out his grim task?' Lennie seems to die somewhere between questions three and four, with the non-finite presentation of 'Does Slim approve' introducing a static atemporal element, as though Slim exists outside the story reported in the novel, in a stable state of approval or disapproval.

Finally, the fifth question directly quotes the final line of the novel, meaning that readers encounter the last line of Section Six first. This again foregrounds dissection and piecemeal examination of the text – an approach which is also physically realised through the interspersion of the educational supplements throughout the text as an edition - over a coherent narrative to be read in sequence and undisrupted.

Discussion

The examples of pre-figuring discussed offer evidence of the tensions between a conception of studying literature as a means of facilitating students' personal growth and skills of cultural analysis on the one hand, and an exercise in cultural heritage and accrual of cultural capital on the other. This divide could be characterised as respective emphases on engaging with and responding *to texts* against learning *content*. This tension is perhaps unsurprising when English education is situated within its historical context. From the inception of English as a school subject there has been a lack of consensus about what its primary purpose is, or should be (Gibbons, 2013). However, traditionally in England teachers have tended to favour the personal growth model, whereas the key champion of the cultural heritage model has historically been policymakers (Marshall, 2000), enacted primarily through the National Curriculum. Whilst a brief perusal of the latest incarnation of the National Curriculum shows that this is clearly still the case, there has been an additional surge of support in the last year from within the profession itself championing a transmissive model of literature teaching focused explicitly on students accruing knowledge of certain texts.

In both cases, the influence of E D Hirsch is explicitly acknowledged (Hirsch, 1988). Hirsch's work focuses on the idea of 'core knowledge' and 'cultural literacy'. Hirsch defines being culturally literate as 'possess[ing] the basic information needed to thrive in the modern world' (Hirsch 1988, xiii). Though offering a list of 5,000 'names, phrases, dates and concepts' which he argues constitutes this 'core knowledge', Hirsch contests the notion that this is prescriptive: 'cultural literacy is not represented by a prescriptive list of books but rather by a *descriptive* list of information actually possessed by literate Americans' (1988, xiv). With regard to reading literature in particular he defends his list claiming

the idea of cultural literacy has been attacked by some liberals on the assumption that I must be advocating a list of great books that every child in the land should be forced to read [...] very few specific titles appear on the list and they usually appear as words, not works, because they represent the writings that culturally literate people have read about but haven't read. *Das Kapital* is a good example.

(Hirsch, 1988, xiv)

In spite of his claim that his list is not prescriptive, Hirsch's argument does explicitly advocate in favour of a cultural heritage approach to teaching fiction, where learning discourse *about* texts is as good if not better than young people actually reading them, and works which are 'known by the culturally literate' – predominantly canonical and 'the classics' – should form the exclusive focus of the English literature curriculum.

In England, this approach to the study of fiction, and in fact education in general, has been advocated by several vocal practitioners within the profession itself via social

media and blogging sites (see for example Facer, 2015; Kirby, 2016). Although we acknowledge the strength of feeling in these positions, we cannot agree with the vision of English - closely aligned with Hirsch - that such commentators ask for. A useful metaphor with which to conceptualise the kinds of knowledge units championed by these positions is what Paulo Freire referred to as the 'banking metaphor' of education. Duncan-Andrade and Morrell explain that under this paradigm:

teachers treat students as passive, empty receptacles and schooling becomes a process whereby knowledgeable experts "deposits" bits of information into the impoverished minds of students. Instead, Freire advocated a pedagogical practice centered upon dialogue, inquiry and the real exchange of ideas between teachers and students.

(Duncan-Andrade and Morrell, 2008, 55)

This deficit framing of the knowledge and experiences young people bring to the classroom, and the personal responses they provoke, is undoubtedly reflected in both Hirsch's language and his approach. Cultural literacy is presented as a relatively stable list with no recognition of other knowledge and experience. Whilst the positive intention regarding social justice is clear to see throughout Hirsch's writing, we would suggest that his approach codifies and perpetuates the very inequality he seeks to destroy by legitimising one form of knowledge and downgrading or dismissing others. Here pre-figuring extends to selecting what should be learnt about a text - the dead mouse is significant, George shoots Lennie at the end – with the remainder left in the ground because ultimately it is unimportant and contributes nothing to a student's cultural literacy. In contrast the questions of which knowledge is 'core', and which

texts are the ‘best that have been written’ is a matter of both perspective and opinion. It is undoubtedly true that canonical texts – or ‘the classics’ – *are* currently imbued with a higher degree of cultural capital than, for example, the works of young adult authors such as J. K. Rowling or John Green. Yet, perhaps practitioners ought to reflect on why this is the case before committing large amounts of class time to making sure students populate manufactured narrative schemas with their teacher’s discourse about these ‘great works’.

Hirsch’s conceptualisation of knowledge is largely exemplified in the linguistic make-up of the edition of *Of Mice and Men* we have analysed. Such pedagogies may encourage homogenous and less creative responses from students. For example, Xerri (2013) draws on interviews with teachers and students to show how a vicious circle can operate in classrooms where teachers feel pressurised into providing ‘meanings’ of poetry, and students are fearful of developing their own responses. In such a classroom, the teacher can be positioned as a ‘gatekeeper to meaning’ (2013, 135), with students often concerned with finding information *about* a poem rather than engaging in the clumsy and uncertain world of shaping and reshaping meaning through reading, discussion and re-reading. Consequently, there is a danger that practitioners lose sight of the importance of viewing reading as a *transaction* between text and reader (Rosenblatt, 1978) where the reader’s role as an active participant is foregrounded and knowledge is understood as negotiated and socially constructed (see for example discussion and associated pedagogies in Benton et al., 1988; Giovanelli, 2016a, 2016b; Karolides, 1999), rather than fixed as an element of knowledge, and transmitted.

Conclusion

Our discussion raises some important questions about the difference between studying literature and learning about texts. We have shown that teaching materials themselves may promote a certain way of conceptualising and framing the nature of reading literature in the classroom and have argued, through a detailed critical stylistic analysis, that such materials can have potentially problematic consequences. In our example, the questions presented pre-figure to the extent that they work to delegitimise certain responses and do little, we would argue, to promote a genuine engagement and transaction with literature.

We should add that we are aware that teaching materials are always further mediated by a teacher and that policies and ideological positions regarding knowledge and the reading of literature rely on degrees of enactment in the context of the classroom. Indeed, teachers will often use educational resources in ways that authors of those resources can neither control nor imagine (Van Dormoien, 1986). However, the inherent textual positioning of novice readers by the study guide that we have explored offers a fascinating example of how such a resource could be made to promote a pedagogy that argues that 'literary interpretations should be taught as explicit knowledge' (Tharby, 2016). In the current educational landscape, a critical approach to discourses of literature teaching in secondary schools can address the problematic notions of agency in the knowledge-based curriculum and examine how pedagogical tasks offer the potential for more or less authentic reading experiences for students.

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