

Theoretically Speaking...

Teaching Literary Theory in the New A Levels

Literary theory has, since 2008, for the first time become a formal element of an A Level syllabus. *Barbara Bleiman, Jake Lund* and *Gary Snapper* reflect on teaching theory at this level and explore some of the lessons learnt from the first three years.

Theory in the New A Levels

Amongst the new A Level English Literature specifications which started in 2008, one made the bold move of including a unit of coursework which required students to take an explicitly theoretical approach to a literary text. The AQA B specification's A2 module 'Further and Independent Reading' asks students to think about one or more of three theoretical approaches – political, linguistic or aesthetic – and to apply one of these approaches to a text of their own choice. AQA provides, as set text for the unit, a critical anthology incorporating extracts from introductory theory books which serve as a starting point for the work. Having understood the fundamental elements of the theory (or theories), students then choose a text to write about. This text might be a conventional literary text of any kind (either one studied on the course already, or a new text), or it might be a text whose literariness might be disputed in conventional terms (such as a comedy script, a popular romance, or a graphic novel); or it might even be a non-literary text. The students' response, whilst discussing readings of the text in the usual way, is required to show an awareness of the way in which specific political, linguistic or aesthetic positions or interests might inform such readings.

As Barbara Bleiman explains below, there has been a long history of minority experimentation with teaching elements of theory at A Level; but the formal inclusion of theory into the AQA B syllabus is a radical and interesting step. The recent survey of A Level teachers carried out by NATE (and published in this edition of EDM) has revealed considerable enthusiasm for this unit – but also some dismay at the lack of appropriate

advice and resources made available for the teaching of something both unfamiliar to many teachers and new to many classrooms.

The lack of appropriate advice and resources is partly explained by the fact that the whole thing has been, in a sense, an experiment; we were never likely to be certain what works until we had tried it. Now that we have been twice through the A2 course, however, it is surely time to begin sharing our experiences locally and nationally, discussing what we have discovered, and letting each other know what works and what doesn't work. Easier said than done – when there are so few forums or networks available for A Level teachers to work together in this way.

This article, however, sets out to make a contribution by presenting three different perspectives. Whilst focused largely on the AQA B unit, it is hoped that this will be of value to others who wish to introduce elements of theory into their teaching, since other A Level Literature specifications (such as OCR and Edexcel) also now explicitly encourage, allow or enable such modes of theoretical study, whilst not having gone so far as to make them a compulsory element. Barbara Bleiman's piece, especially, offers a more general overview of issues to do with teaching critical positions in the classroom. Jacob Lund offers advice on teaching feminist, Marxist and metaphorical approaches in the AQA B unit, whilst I conclude by suggesting some accessible ways of introducing the idea of theory to students.

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Embracing Theory

Literary theory at A Level, past and present

Barbara Bleiman suggests that the time for theory at A Level has come, and reflects on how and why it might be taught.

A bit of history – where we’ve come from

When I first started teaching in the 1970s it was very unusual for teachers to explicitly teach critical theory as part of A Level English Literature. Textual study was much more firmly based on ‘plot, characterisation and theme’, as was evidenced by the kind of questions asked in A Level exams at the time. My own degree at Oxford was broadly Leavisite, based on all kinds of unacknowledged assumptions and presented as ‘theory free’, though of course it had its own set of underpinning ideas that were implicit, rather than explicitly stated. Even the arrival of Terry Eagleton at Wadham did little to help me break free of my Leavisite ‘chains’. Here was ‘high theory’ – Lukacs, Goldmann, the Russian formalists and others – but very little mention of texts and how one might apply these difficult theories to the books I was studying. I had no frame of reference into which to place these ideas. It was terrifying and for a few years, I steered clear of theory.

It was only when I started teaching, in 1978, that the value of applying critical theory to texts started to emerge, through the discovery that teachers, in small pockets, were finding accessible and practical ways of engaging students in high level thinking about the nature of literary study, that impacted on their work on texts.

The ILEA Summer Schools, organised by Richard Exton and Roz Moger among others, spawned many eminently

practical ways of bringing together texts and theoretical ideas that not only engaged students but also acted as a kind of ‘in-service training’ for teachers who, like me, had decided that theory wasn’t for them. Richard Exton’s article ‘The Post-Structuralist Always Reads Twice’, in *The English and Media Magazine*, wittily reached out to teachers, with the tempting offer of engaging and manageable approaches to theory. However it would be some time before

these ideas gained any purchase in the mainstream curriculum.

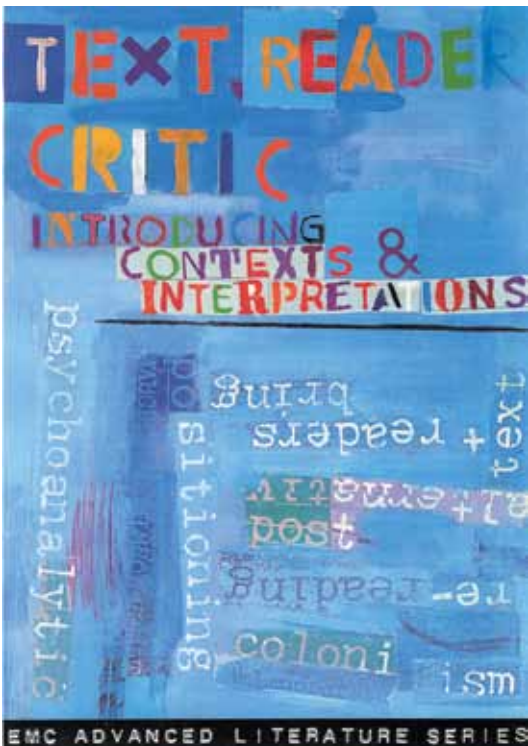
Curriculum 2000 marked something of a turning-point. QCA, working with representatives from the Awarding Bodies, teachers and key figures in Higher Education English, created the first set of ‘criteria’ for English Literature A Level. I was involved in this process and witnessed the ways in which a consensus was reached over what were the essential features of any course at this level. Questions of whether it was good preparation for English in H.E. jostled with other ideas – the importance of developing close reading skills, providing appropriate range, (breadth and depth), questioning what the A Level ‘canon’ should look like in the early 21st century and what skills and knowledge should be fostered.

This first set of criteria led to the explicit requirement for the Assessment Objectives we now take for granted, first introduced in 2000 and then streamlined and refined in 2008. Of the five objectives agreed, two involved the requirement to show understanding of ‘alternative interpretations,’ (current AO3) and to understand the contexts in which texts are produced and received (current AO4). Although the extent to which they have been followed through fully into specifications has varied, according to the ‘interpretations’ of each of the Awarding Bodies, they have been a strong prompt for teachers to question what they mean by alternative interpretations and consider whether that might include looking at different critical positions and the work of individual critics.

Theory in the 2008 specifications

The 2008 specifications all operate within the framework of the Subject Criteria and Assessment Objectives set down by QCA. So, all are required to address and assess AO3 and AO4. But there are huge differences in what that means. Of all the specifications, AQA B takes most seriously the opportunity offered by Curriculum 2008 to teach students critical practices using literary theory. As Jacob Lund indicates in his article, the Critical Anthology coursework at A2 offers a significant opportunity to read about a range of critical positions and then apply one or other to a single text. In this unit, the scope for applying critical perspectives to texts already studied allows it to become part of the course as a whole, rather than an entirely separate unit that has little bearing on the rest.

Other specifications, such as OCR, also require some reading of critical material. Critics rather than critical theories are suggested texts in their Unit 1 required



reading but the Examiners' Reports and Mark Schemes all indicate that the Awarding Body is very open to students drawing on their knowledge of critical positions and theories. As with any critical reading, it has to be well done and other specifications also treat favourably student work that demonstrates high levels of engagement with theoretical positions and incorporates it effectively into textual analysis. Of all the specifications, perhaps AQA A is least positive about theory, with a greater emphasis on personal response than some of the others.

Ways of teaching critical theory at A Level

One, perhaps somewhat unrecognised, influence for change is the simple fact that since the late 1980s there has been a new generation of English teachers who are themselves confident with reading theory and using it to illuminate texts, because they have studied it on their degree courses. They are in a much better position to teach it at A Level than their predecessors. However, perhaps what is a little less obvious to them is how to apply what they've learned to the *A Level* curriculum, and to offer students something that is appropriately introductory, rather than dauntingly difficult – to avoid terrifying them off, as I was myself at the age of 18.

Looking back at some of the early material from the ILEA Summer School, one can see just how 'right' they got it. Critical theory was introduced with a light touch (but without condescension), and then applied to texts, often short ones like poems or short stories. Many of their approaches were drawn on and developed (and explicitly acknowledged) in EMC's book *Text, Reader, Critic*, which came out to support the teaching of 'alternative interpretations' and 'contexts' in 2000.

When teaching critical theory at A Level, as opposed to university, it's worth bearing in mind a few key ideas that can help make it both accessible and illuminating.

1. Introducing theory

At A Level, you're *introducing* theory rather than laying on an undergraduate course in it. Bombarding students with too much or too difficult material won't allow them to engage confidently with the underlying concepts, which can in themselves be perfectly accessible. Little bits of original source texts, or accessible accounts (such as those by Peter Barry, or Bob Eaglestone, or articles in *emagazine*) can be more helpful than whole books, though of course some rare theorists write with such clarity that students might enjoy reading the whole thing. (Adrienne Rich's feminist articles on *Jane Eyre* or Emily Dickinson, or Edward Said's *Orientalism* might be such a case.)

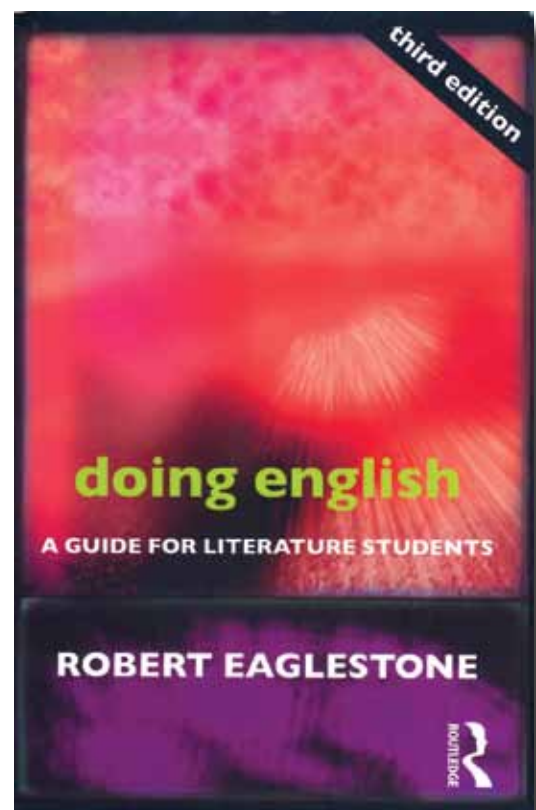
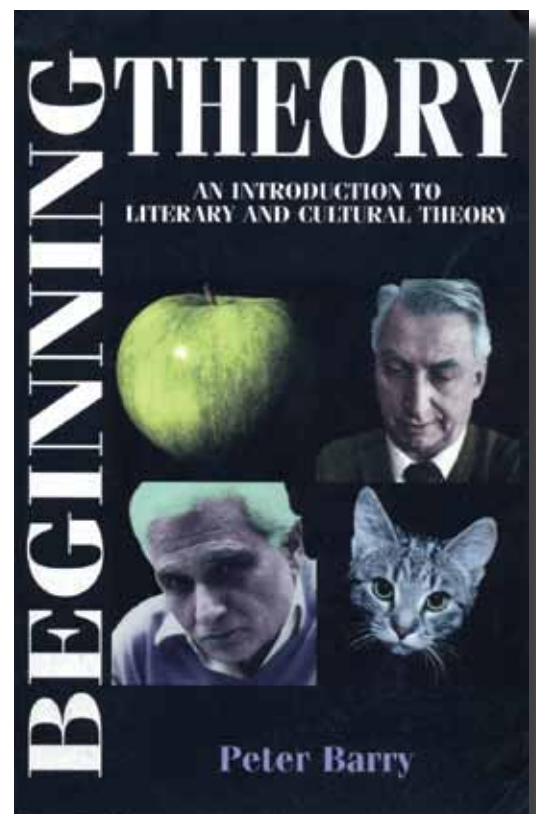
Introductory lessons can and should be fun. For instance, using a children's picture book to look at possible readings from different critical positions, is a really lively and engaging way of demonstrating how theories work in practice. Sue Brindley, of Cambridge Education Department, drew our attention to this and EMC

has since had great success taking *Where the Wild Things Are* as the text for discussion.

Using a text for a younger reader, or a short story, allows the text itself to be read and enjoyed in one sitting; exploring critical positions is undertaken on a short, enjoyable and seemingly unchallenging text. The critical positions themselves reveal the depth and richness of the text and throw up all kinds of unexpected interpretations. This activity shows how working with critical positions can *illuminate* the text. It is not an imposition of a layer of theory but rather a fascinating lens through which to look at the text in new ways. It contributes to close reading skills, rather than distracting or detracting from them.

One caveat. In introducing critical positions, it's important to distinguish clearly between the critical position of the reader and the ideology of the text itself.

At this early, introductory stage, students can muddle the two, for example, thinking that the text *itself* is feminist, Marxist or psychoanalytic, as opposed to the reading. This is most likely to happen when only one kind of reading is offered, for instance, only a feminist interpretation of 'The Sick Rose', where students then may think that *Blake* is a feminist. If you offer a range of critical angles on the poem, and debate the insights each offers, students more readily get the idea that it is the *reading* rather than the text itself that comes from a particular critical position.





In introducing ideas about literary value and the canon, there are lots of interesting possibilities for thinking about the nature of literature, whilst having fun. One starting point is to look closely at reading habits, trying to categorise texts and think about the fine nuances of why we regard some things as literary, some as 'great', and others as 'just good reads', why one thing is chick lit, another genre fiction and so on. On EMC courses we have done highly entertaining activities with teachers, looking blind at extracts from a range of texts and

trying to make judgements about whether they are 'literary' or not, romantic fiction or not and so on. These kinds of activities make a good introduction to questioning value in particular texts.

2. Mapping the terrain

It can be all too easy to become immersed in theoretical ideas and lose the big picture of how and why such ideas are important and useful. Bob Eaglestone's book *Doing English* is an excellent introduction to literary studies that is focused on these big questions. It encourages students to think about what literary study is all about: 'What are we doing when we are doing English?' Each chapter asks questions. For instance the chapter on literary value and the canon starts with four questions:

- Can literature be defined?
- What is literary value?
- What is the canon?
- How does the canon affect you?

A book like Eaglestone's can help the teacher provide an overview that allows students to place any particular theory or writer within that context, rather than plunging straight in. So for instance, his categorisation of different theoretical approaches as either intrinsic to the text or extrinsic, is helpful in understanding the big picture of what makes cultural materialism or new historicism different from, say, formalist or structuralist approaches.

3. Demonstrating how theories are applied to texts

Showing students how theories can be, and have been, applied to texts keeps the study rooted in the practical, rather than risking going off into the stratosphere. For A Level, the text needs to be at the heart of the study. Our resource, *Text, Reader, Critic* provides lots of concrete examples of texts being read through the lens of particular theories. For example the Hemingway short story 'Cat in the Rain' is an excellent candidate for multiple readings from different perspectives and, indeed, we quote substantially from David Lodge, who has written about the story, introducing psychoanalytic and other approaches.

In *emagclips*, the bank of videoclips on the *emagazine* website, Peter Barry demonstrates Marxist, Feminist and Psychoanalytic approaches to individual poems, to show what it means to read those texts from different critical positions. Barry's book *Beginning Theory* also includes plenty of textual examples, so that theoretical practices are demonstrated using actual texts. (Incidentally his book has excellent bullet point lists of the essential ideas and approaches of the critical positions he explains.)

Richard Jacobs's book *A Beginner's Guide to Critical Reading* is a series of essays on texts, including *Wuthering Heights*, *Paradise Lost*, Shakespeare's sonnets, Emily Dickinson and others. His abstracts at the beginning of each chapter provide a useful indication of the theoretical angle he is taking on each text.

Teachers can also model different critical perspectives for their students themselves. On recent courses, I've offered teachers an example of this based on Raymond Carver's short story 'Little Things'. Students first read short critical position statements, summing up theories such as Marxism, feminism, psychoanalytic approaches and so on. Next they read three extended paragraphs which take three different critical perspectives on the story.

They:

- a. identify the critical position
- b. talk about what additional insight each position gave them
- c. debate whether there is one that they find more compelling than the others, or whether they want to be eclectic in taking interesting ideas from more than one.

Modelling a Marxist, feminist or psychoanalytic reading gives students an idea of the kind of writing they themselves might be able to do, in taking on the mantle of a particular kind of critic. It also gives them the right to disagree and to acknowledge that sometimes a particular perspective may *not* be very illuminating, or perhaps less illuminating than another.

4. Finding a good match – choosing texts and critical positions

When it comes to choosing texts, it's worth thinking long and hard about matching the text to the critical position. There are good reasons why critics allied to some theories

tend to concentrate on books of a particular period or of a particular kind. For instance, Marxist criticism has often focused on classic realism, partly because absences from the texts, hidden assumptions and underlying ideologies are rich pickings within texts of this kind. Where the writer is him or herself engaging with debates about class, with an ideological awareness of their own, it is harder for the critic to distinguish his/her analytical approaches from the text itself. Much easier to throw a critical light, than just agree with the light that's already there, shining strongly and clearly!

For that reason, I would personally find it easier to write about class in *Mansfield Park* than in Tony Harrison's poetry, or take a feminist angle on D.H. Lawrence's *The Virgin and the Gypsy* than on Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. Often there can be more to say by way of critique, than by applauding the writer's stance. If Emily Dickinson had proclaimed her female voice, and worn her politics on her sleeve as Carol Ann Duffy does in *The World's Wife*, perhaps there would have been a less fascinating debate among feminist and other critics about her work.

Having said that, some texts that take a strong stance of their own *can* provoke rich discussion and where there is a pre-existing critical debate this can fuel students' own thinking. Often this will take students beyond the 'feminists think that...' or 'Marxists think that...' formulation, into subtler differences between critics within a theoretical approach. So for instance Angela Carter, in *The Bloody Chamber*, may have proclaimed her feminist credentials loudly but has provoked strong debate among feminists. Is she playing into male fantasies, or reclaiming eroticism for women? Is she as 'new' as she would have us believe, 'pouring new wine into old bottles' or is she trapped in the same old patterns? Is she more of a post-structuralist than a feminist?

One simple test is to put forward for yourself 3 or 4 texts and do a quick bullet point list of what's of interest from a particular critical position. For example, for feminism:

Seamus Heaney, Philip Larkin, Simon Armitage, John Betjeman. One could perhaps find a feminist approach to Armitage and Heaney, but for me Larkin and Betjeman would give me a lot more to say! If one switched the focus

to post-colonialism, perhaps Heaney and Betjeman might be most interesting. Or if you were looking psychoanalytically, maybe all four might provoke plenty of ideas.

No such thing as 'theory free'?

I hope that I've shown some of the ways in which theoretical approaches can enhance the study of texts. English has always been a contested subject and, in the universities, the place of theory was once hugely controversial and hotly debated. Now, there seems to be more of a consensus around its value and more general acceptance of the fact that there is no such thing as 'theory free' criticism. A more pluralist and eclectic use of theories, that keeps literary texts in the foreground, can be highly illuminating and avoids the pitfalls of 'theory for theory's sake'. The new developments at A Level, thankfully, seem perfectly set up to allow us to embrace literary theory and make our students better, more confident and critical readers as a result.

Thanks to my colleague Lucy Webster for help with this article.

EMC is running a course for teachers on 'Dealing with Critical Material for AQA B Coursework' on 8th December 2011. We are also currently working on a 'student handbook' on critical material, hoping to publish next year.

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From Marxism to Metaphor

Approaches to the AQA B Critical Anthology

Jake Lund suggests ways of handling the AQA B Critical Anthology to get the best from students

Theory in AQA B

Including a unit that requires the use of particular critical approaches in relation to chosen texts has one rather obvious, and rather utilitarian, recommendation: the study and application of critical theory occurs as a significant component across undergraduate English Literature courses

available in the UK. So for the proportion of A Level English literature students who intend to study for an English degree, the critical approaches side of the *Further and Independent Reading* unit of AQA Specification B has the potential to provide a useful introduction to



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approaches that are likely to be encountered in more advanced study.

Practicalities aside, it is also clear that the unit gives students the opportunity to develop analyses of texts in ways that might significantly challenge other responses that they may have had in mind: those interested in an historicist backdrop to Donne's love poetry, for example, might unlock an area of fascination by adopting, say, a feminist approach.

However, one of the requirements of this specification as a whole, and perhaps of this unit in particular, is that it is quite prescriptive in terms of how students are to respond to texts. An example of this from the AS course is the rubric for the *Aspects of Narrative* exam paper. In *Further and Independent Reading*, students are compelled to adopt approaches at a point in their literary careers where many are only just getting to grips with the business of literary method as a whole. This is perhaps particularly true in relation to prose, where narrative techniques such as free indirect discourse, focalisation, interior monologue and narrative reliability still present themselves as strange beasts. While the very able can run with all this and cope with synthesising it into a particular approach, many students feel put into that they cannot respond in a pluralist way to texts.

Given all of this, there are nevertheless some general approaches that seem to work more effectively than others, irrespective of particular student abilities, and they are discussed in what follows.

Marxism: problems and choices

AQA's *Critical Anthology* (2009) reproduces an extract from Bertens (2004) that offers little more than an

explanation of Marxist theory in general; and therein lies a problem. Its emphasis upon what Marxism is, as opposed to what Marxist literary critics actually *do*, has, in my own experience, sometimes encouraged draft essays or other preparatory work that includes paraphrased summaries of Marxist philosophy with any old analysis of the chosen literary text tacked on behind. One way of avoiding this sort of work from students is to foreground some of the key approaches used by Marxist critics by providing critical essays that show the approach in action. Essays that demonstrate Marxist engagement with sub-text, and more recent criticism that has concerned itself with the flux and ambiguity of texts, can go a long way in helping students to think and write in an appropriate way. An accessible and useful introduction to what Marxist critics do, together with a suitable example of criticism, is included in Barry (2002).

A second, and not unrelated, difficulty with the AQA material is that its largely theoretical presentation of concepts such as social class or mode of production can encourage students simply to map these ideas onto the *content*, as opposed to the language and form, of a literary text. Clearly this is disastrous in terms of the AO2 response, and it is an approach that is sometimes compounded by the work of independent-minded students who have sought out for themselves examples of early Marxist criticism which of course *does* frequently focus on content. From the outset, therefore, it's important that classroom study is sharply focused on Marxist responses to the literary method of a given text. One way of doing this might be to choose, say, a short lyric or short story that employs familiar forms and familiar devices and model a Marxist response to them. The advantage of this approach is to couple the unfamiliar (Marxist criticism) with the

'Breaking the Chain' by Tony Harrison: ambiguity of form, symbol and language

Harrison's poem explores the tensions inherent in working class aspirations for social mobility, where working class fathers buy for their sons a set of dividers used in the technical drawing department of an unnamed factory as a means of helping them to achieve a blue collar position within the industrial workplace. The fact that Harrison uses the sonnet form to present working class experience is significant in that it represents the appropriation of what might be seen as an elite form by those sections of society who are not traditionally responsible for cultural hegemony. Moreover, the poem itself, like many of Harrison's other sonnets, deploys the form in extended mode (sixteen lines), which arguably adds to this sense that the cultural products of a ruling elite have been remade by those beneath. Alternatively, the form of the poem can be seen as a variety of false class consciousness; here, the message is perhaps that the voices of the working class can only be heard through the legitimising structures imposed by those with cultural and economic power.

The 'dividers' in the poem stand on one level as a symbol of the division between blue and white collar workers, though

they also represent the division that has occurred between the persona's father (a white collar worker) and the persona himself, who has rejected the particular form of social mobility offered by the dividers in favour of another, perhaps literary, career that separates him from his working class background. The ambiguity here lies in the fact that the dividers are literally, of course, attached, and so the device operates to suggest both the possibility and the impossibility of an upward shift in terms of social class.

The language of the poem is dominated by the idiom and dialect of a Northern working class community, and to this extent Harrison seems to engage with a politics of empowerment. However, this language is increasingly undercut by a separate, and more standard, register that is the voice of the persona himself: the diction of 'acknowledged', 'bestowed' and 'eternity' in the poem delivers such a voice. Because of this, it is very difficult to argue that this text endorses any particular class sensibility or model of society; instead, we are as readers presented with Harrison's ambivalence towards class consciousness of any kind.

familiar (e.g. sonnet form or symbol) as a means of building upon existing knowledge.

The panel at the bottom of the previous page gives an example of the sort of starting point I have used with my own classes. From these, students have been able either to develop their critical response in relation to the text discussed or, alternatively, they have taken the general approach as a basis for the exploration of a text of their own choosing.

Feminism: problems and choices

A way of introducing feminist approaches to literature at A Level is to raise two important issues that may seem self-evident to teachers but which, in my own experience, are rarely clear in the minds of students who are starting out in this kind of criticism. First, it is useful for students to see from the beginning that there is a difference between reading in a feminist way and texts that are produced by writers who are explicitly engaged with feminism as a politics. Against this background, students are more likely to produce work that is conscious of the strengths and weaknesses of their critical approach to a text or, in the case of works by feminist writers, they will more readily acknowledge that the subtleties and ambiguities of a text demonstrate that feminism is not some unchanging doctrine that finds its expression in literature.

A second essential starting point is that students need to have in mind what kind of society produced their chosen text. Without this, there is the danger that, for example, current critical ideas about the marginalisation of women are simply transported back to texts that date to well before the growth of the feminist movement of the 1960s, where gender relations and gender politics may be significantly different. Attention to the context of a text's production (AO4) also enables students to see more readily that a writer may have been attempting to present

female experience in a new light, given the conditions of their own society at the time. The panel at the bottom of this page takes a brief look at how these two introductory ideas open up the potential for successful analytical writing that operates within this critical approach.

Metaphor: generating debates

One of the initial challenges that students face when starting out with the 'metaphorical' approach is that of understanding its position in relation to explicitly political readings of texts, particularly if they have covered Marxist and feminist approaches beforehand. Among my own students, those who claim to be uninterested in politics, or who are suspicious of what they see as defunct political theory, have often grasped this approach with enthusiasm because it seems to them to be ideology-free. The consequences of this can be that students explore the importance of metaphor within a text without any real recognition that their responses are shaped by their interpretation as 21st century readers and by their own understanding of a text's historical context.

One way of avoiding this is to use part of an early session to work on the idea that this approach is *implicitly* ideological in that it allows the values of the individual reader to drive the interpretation; an alternative approach that I have found useful is to suggest to students that the metaphorical approach is an implicit rejection of political readings, and this is in itself an ideological position. Students of mine who have engaged with these ideas have tended to produce essays that clearly evaluate the strengths and limitations of their arguments in relation to their chosen literary text.

Even if you deliberately set essay questions that demand debate about the usefulness of this approach from the outset, students are often tempted to work assiduously through the various meanings of all (or most of) the

Approaching two short stories

Fay Weldon's 'Weekend': feminist writing

Fay Weldon's short story has at its core the experience of Martha - a wife, housewife, career woman and mother - and her attempts to negotiate these conflicting roles during two days at her family's weekend cottage. On the face of it, the messages contained within this story are clear: the position of the middle class woman of the late 1970s is chaotic, emotionally painful, and powerless, and students often readily infer this from the text and rightly conclude that this is the work of a feminist writer. However, the complex modulation of the narrative voice within the text, in which an interior monologue alternates with the free indirect discourse of characters other than Martha, potentially opens up a reading that shows a self-consciousness on the part of the main character together with forms of mockery in relation to others, particularly Martha's chauvinistic husband. Here then, students are able to interrogate the ambiguities of a text in a way that avoids a rather static discussion of just how feminist Fay Weldon is.

Kate Chopin's 'The Story of an Hour': A new(ish) way of seeing

My own experience is that students, as 21st century readers, are not particularly shocked at Kate Chopin's presentation of a woman who feels tremendous liberation at the sudden death of her husband. Any sense of shock that might have been felt by the first readers of this story is perhaps irretrievably lost, but the danger here is that students make their personal response the basis for their critical writing and, as a consequence, conclude that the story is rather banal in terms of what it suggests about female experience. By attending to late nineteenth and early 20th century ideas of womanhood and marriage from the start, students are able to engage with a context of production (AO4) that begins to reveal the ways in which Chopin addresses and contests the marginalisation and stereotyping of women that is so prevalent in the literature and society of the time.

metaphors in a text and conclude that a metaphorical approach is terribly important in unlocking a text's ideas. The result, generally speaking, is interesting enough work that is undermined by a thin or absent AO3 (alternative interpretations) response. There seem to be at least two ways of avoiding this.

1. Different ways of reading metaphor

The first is that you could encourage students to pitch one of the other critical approaches prescribed by the unit against the metaphorical approach, so that, for example, the historical and intellectual backdrop to Donne's use of metaphor in the elegy 'To His Mistress Going to Bed' is challenged by a feminist reading of the positioning of the woman in the poem. In a poem as metaphorically rich as this, you are likely to encourage responses that read metaphors in two or more distinct ways without necessarily focusing on structural elements or other devices in the text.

2. Metaphor as one element of meaning

A second approach is one that is essentially Practical Criticism. Here, students are able to compare the extent to which the weight of meanings in a text are carried by its metaphors in comparison with its other elements. To take another Early Modern lyric, Shakespeare's Sonnet 73 ('That time of year thou mayst in me behold'), it is not too difficult for students across a wide range of abilities to see that the use, for example, of rhyme, reverse feet, and caesurae contribute, along with metaphor, directly to the poem's central ideas of love and ageing. In addition to addressing the business of alternative readings, this way of handling the metaphorical approach also gives students the potential to produce sharply analytical writing in terms of

language, form and structure (AO2).

Moving on to Texts and Genres

If you intend to teach Texts and Genres (LITB3) after the *Further and Independent Reading* unit, it is quite possible that students will want to engage with particular critical approaches in relation to chosen texts within the Gothic or Pastoral options. There is of course absolutely no reason why students should not use this existing knowledge as a backdrop to their study, but it is worth bearing in mind that the questions on the LITB3 paper do not in any way insist on this type of response. More important, perhaps, in terms of students' understanding of literary criticism, is the idea that, at least at this stage in their careers, they can take a pluralist approach to texts that is perfectly legitimate.

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Challenging Literature Introducing Theory at A Level

Gary Snapper suggests ways of introducing theory to get students talking about the underlying issues

Lessons from the university

When carrying out doctoral research on the transition between A Level and university English in 2006, I attended a complete series of first year undergraduate seminars and lectures on literary theory at one university (a highly regarded new university at which the average English A Level grade of English students was B). This was an eye-opener for me in many ways, not least because I myself never studied literary theory at university (although I had since gone on to understand some of the basics...)

The module was organised by alternating readings of literary texts with readings of literary theory. So, one week the students would read and discuss *Othello*; the next they would read about post-colonialism and discuss the theory in relation to *Othello*; and so on. As a basic structure, this seemed fine. In practice, there were many problems.

Reading *Othello* in a week was in itself quite a challenge for some; more of a challenge for many was finding that they only had a one-hour lecture and a 50-minute seminar to explore the text formally in a class setting, before moving on to apply literary theory to it.

But by far the most problematic aspect of it was the reading of the theory. The set text for the module was a chunky undergraduate literary theory anthology (not an *introduction*, but a comprehensive anthology) which surveyed all the major strands of literary theory and presented extracts from significant critical works in literary theory – a bit of Derrida, Foucault and Baudrillard here, a bit of Cixous, Lacan and Hegel there. Many of these essays were extremely challenging reading, which even I found difficult. An additional reading list (never referred to in

lectures or seminars) listed one or two introductory texts (such as Peter Barry's *Beginning Theory*) as additional reading, but the essays in the anthology often formed the core of what was discussed in the seminars.

To cut a long story short, the majority of students reacted to this by adopting a strategy of resistance which manifested itself in almost complete silence in seminars, creating a frequently uncomfortable teaching and learning environment. (See my article in *English in Education* (Snapper, 2009) for a detailed account of how this happened).

Lessons for A Level

Watching this from the point of view of a teacher of A Level English Literature, I was struck by several things. First, it confirmed the difficulty of a situation whereby so many of our students go on to university courses in English (and other subjects), where they are immediately expected to read significant quantities of sometimes difficult criticism and theory, when many of them will have read almost no literary criticism and will never even have heard of literary theory (albeit that this is a situation which has been changing gradually since Curriculum 2000).

Secondly, I became aware that the problem for many of these students was that they were being asked to apply complex ideas about political and cultural concepts or movements such as feminism, Marxism and post-colonialism to *literature* when many of them had little idea of what those notions entailed in relation to the *social and political* world around them. It was clear that many of them had never had a formal opportunity in their 14-19 education to learn about and discuss fundamental issues in relation – for instance – to gender, class and race. (This, incidentally, has strengthened my belief that some form of General Studies should be compulsory for all at A Level, as it is (in the form of 'Theory of Knowledge') – in the International Baccalaureate).

Further, I became more strongly aware of a level of meta-cognitive awareness about literary study which students were not equipped with. In other words, they were used to responding to an agenda set by teachers and syllabuses and bounded largely by set text study, in which *any* meta-cognitive agenda – why do we study literature? what is the canon? what are literary values? how do I position myself in relation to these issues? etc. – has *never* been on the table.

Thus, in several different ways, I saw in action a learning situation in which students were placed considerably beyond their 'zones of proximal development' (as Vygotsky has it). I realised that there is little point in 'doing theory' with students unless it is presented to them in a form which takes into account where they are starting from in terms of *what they know* about literature, language, culture and politics, and *what they are able to do* in terms of reading and thinking skills. Such a starting point would

aim to make the topic genuinely accessible to them, enable them to understand and internalise the reasons for doing theory, and bring them 'on board' with the project intellectually.

The question of who, if anyone, is to 'blame' for this situation – the schools for not providing a sufficiently progressive curriculum, or the universities for not providing a sufficiently accessible curriculum – I leave to one side (though I believe that it is a combination of both). Rather, I would like to suggest ways in which these perceptions can be put to use in the A Level classroom.

Introducing theory at A Level

Above, I argued that students at A Level tend to lack a level of meta-cognitive awareness about literary study, because they have been trained to be obedient to the demands of the curriculum rather than to question or challenge them. There has been no space in the curriculum for questions like 'why do we study literature?' and 'why do we study these texts in this way?' – even though such questions are very good questions which lead to fascinating and important areas of cultural inquiry; and so students have learned to shelve them.

Yet, in my experience, many A Level students love to think and talk about these issues, as it offers them an opportunity to discuss their own beliefs, values, attitudes and positions in relation to culture, education, politics, etc., and to explore the ways in which questions they might previously have felt were 'off limits' might be significant and valuable. Robert Eaglestone (2001), indeed, has argued that 'all seventeen year olds are natural theorists. They ask the big questions of literary texts because they really care about what they mean.'

The curriculum now offers us a formal opportunity to address some of these questions. But, as my research suggested, we must be sure to find a starting point which allows our students to 'tap in' to the questions they already have about literature and literary study – which will eventually lead to an understanding of the idea that we can approach literary texts and literary study from a variety of critical viewpoints and perspectives, and from there to literary theory.

There is a tendency to see 'theory' as being about 'isms' – feminism, Marxism, structuralism, and so on; and indeed, at an advanced level, it's true that such 'isms' are central. However, as Barbara Bleiman points out in her article (above), at A Level, we are not expected, nor is it necessary, to produce an undergraduate level course on theory. Rather, I believe we should see theory as being a set of fundamental questions about literature and literary study which attempt to place it in the context of culture and society more generally, and which might deepen and broaden students' understanding of the English curriculum and give them a greater sense of context and purpose.

Debating literary value

So, before even starting on the critical anthology, I try to get students talking about literary values – theirs, others', the curriculum's. I do this by dividing them into groups and giving each group a set of four newspaper articles to discuss. The articles come from a pile which I have collected over the last 15 years or so from various sources, all of which in some way challenge students to think about *what* they read/ study, *why* they read/study it and *how* they read/study it:

Group One: What about Dan Brown?

- **The Lost Symbol by Dan Brown: *Dan Brown's latest blockbuster is the literary equivalent of Coca-Cola and will no doubt sell as well*** (Peter Conrad, Observer, 2009)
- **A Word of Mouth Success: *Why are people lining up to rubbish The Da Vinci Code? Simple – it's a bestseller that doesn't know its place.*** (Lucy Mangan, The Guardian, August 2004)
- **The Da Vinci Code is as Dickensian as Miriam Margolyes in a bonnet** (David Baddiel, The Times, July 2005)
- **Populist Prejudice: *Crime books easier to write than 'serious' novels? That attitude is frankly, cobbler.*** (Mark Lawson, The Guardian, January 2008)

Group Two: What about 'the Classics' ?

- **A Bit of Bronte Does You Good: *Victorian novels may be hard going, but they are a proper education in broadening the mind.*** (Libby Purves, The Times, May 2005)
- **Canon Fodder: *It's madness to force-feed the classics to teenagers –it could put them off reading for life.*** (Stephen Moss, The Guardian, August 2006)
- **Reading Ruined by Classroom Dissection** (Shereen Pandit, TES, December 2005)
- **Highly Literary and Deeply Vulgar: *If James Kelman's Booker novel is rude, it's a in good company.*** (Robert Winder, The Independent, October 1994)

Group Three: What about Shakespeare?

- **Save us from a winter of discontent – ban the bard** (Miranda Sawyer, The Guardian, September 2005)
- **Shakespeare: Time for a Moratorium?** (Dominic Dromgoole, Richard Bean, Time Out, April 2006)
- **Plays for Today: *If we do not adapt Shakespeare for our times, the richness of his work will be lost.*** (Michael Bogdanov, The Guardian, November 2003)
- **Bard Not That Hard To Follow: *Stop teaching the plays as literature; that is what they have become, but it is not what they were.*** (Paul Innes, Scotsman, November 2009)

I ask students to read and discuss the articles in groups, and then present their thoughts, as well as a summary of the articles' arguments, to the whole class, for further discussion. This never fails to get some very interesting discussion going, not least about students' own feelings and experiences in relation to literature. It also makes it clear that there are plenty of dissenting voices – amongst journalists, literary writers, theatre directors, and others – when discussing the value of literature; and that debates about literature are not confined to the literature classroom. Further, it gives students valuable experience in reading journalistic critical writing, and in following and presenting arguments, and makes them more aware of the potential value of newspaper features for exploring topical and critical ideas.

Clearly, this activity relates most strongly to the 'Aesthetics' section of the critical anthology. However, I would thoroughly recommend doing something similar even if you are not intending to cover that aspect; it serves as a good introduction to the idea of alternative perspectives, and thus leads equally well into the 'Politics' and 'Linguistics' section of the anthology.

Starting from where the students are

What I find most valuable about an activity like this is that starts from where the students *are*, attempting to build on and take advantage of a set of cultural and political issues which students are curious about, but which they don't always immediately see as relevant to the study of literature. Similarly, in going on to introduce feminism and Marxism, I allow students plenty of space to talk generally about and debate fundamental social and political issues about gender and class, before introducing the concept of applying feminist and Marxist perspectives to literature.

With luck, they will be taken by surprise in that, for once, they are allowed to talk about issues that arise from *social reality* rather than from a *literary text!* And, though that is perhaps counter-intuitive in a literature course, it has the potential to bring them back to *literary* texts with a stronger sense of the value of debates about literary *representation*, freeing them up to balance 'appreciation' of texts with a more confident and independent critical voice.

References

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