

## Honors English 12 Summer Reading - Entering the Conversation

Dear Beautiful Children of God,

Greetings. I am so excited that we will be learning and growing together next year in Honors English 12! English 12 is traditionally a **survey course** of British literature. A survey course goes in chronological order and covers key texts from each time period. When we learn about the progression of the English language within its historical, cultural, and philosophical contexts, we gain a greater understanding of the text, the past, and how the past shaped who we are today.

The collection of traditional or "classic" literature that is typically taught in a British literature course makes up what is known as the **canon of literature**. There are many arguments supporting teaching these texts; however, there are also strong critiques of this approach. Due to the texts' age, they may be difficult for a modern audience to understand or relate to. Another critique is the fact that most of these texts are written by dead old white guys, thus limiting room for a greater diversity of voices.

For your summer reading assignment this year, instead of having you read a novel from the traditional canon, I want you to read some articles to enter the conversation about the canon. **"Entering the conversation"** means that you read what people have thought about these topics in the past and then share your ideas. This is also known as **literary criticism**.

I am not asking you to read as much as students in the other honors and AP classes will--but you may find this task more challenging overall! The main text is a **journal article**. Journals are publications written by professionals in a field for other professionals in that field. This is college level reading with complex **syntax** (sentence structure) and elevated **diction** (word choice). You will need to look up unfamiliar words, **annotate** the text to take notes, and reread in order to fully comprehend the arguments.

To help you understand, I have provided some context and explanation of key terms. I also created a reading guide to help identify what's important in the texts. I recommend that you go in order through the packet. Make sure you complete the readings and reading guide by the first day of school. Be ready to discuss and write about these concepts at the start of the year. If you have questions, you may email me at [kwetzel@scecina.org](mailto:kwetzel@scecina.org). Please note that I will be out of the country in the middle of the summer, so it may take me some time to respond.

As a final note, while you are welcome to engage in discussion with other students or family members about the concepts or to conduct further research online to understand the text better, all work in the reading guide must be yours, not that of a friend or AI. This will be a good way to exercise your brains and enable us to engage more deeply with what we read this year. I look forward to hearing your thoughts about the texts. Happy reading!

Peace in Christ,

*Ms. Wetzel*

## Honors English 12 Supplemental Texts

Read these passages before reading the main articles. There are several questions on the reading guide related to these texts.

### Passage #1: Synchronic and Diachronic

Clark, Matthew. "Synchronic and Diachronic." *The Art of Reading Slowly: A Blog about*

*Language and Literature*, 9 December 2020,

<https://the-art-of-reading-slowly.com/2020/12/09/synchronic-and-diachronic/>. Accessed

14 August 2023.

Paragraphs 1-3:

One way to study language is to take what amounts to a snapshot of a language at a particular moment and write down a description of the language at that moment. (One can argue that there is no such thing as "a language at a particular moment", because there will always be different dialects and registers, but for now I will ignore that objection.) A grammar book is a kind of snapshot, but most grammar books are prescriptive, that is, they give rules for how people should speak or write. Linguists generally aim for description; their goal is to say how people actually do speak, not how they should speak.

But languages change all the time, and English in Shakespeare's time was not the same as English today. So another way to study language is to study a language as it changes over time.

These two different approaches are called synchronic and diachronic. Diachronic means sometime like "across time", and synchronic means something like "at a particular moment of time." Linguistics in the nineteenth century was mostly diachronic while in the twentieth century linguistics has been mostly synchronic. But you can't really make a strict division between the two; each needs the other. For instance, a diachronic analysis is sort of like a series of snapshots, a series of synchronic descriptions, just as an old-fashioned movie is a series of still pictures; and a language at any moment shows the traces of what it was like in the past and hints about how it may change in the future.

### Passage #2: Transactional Reader Response Theory

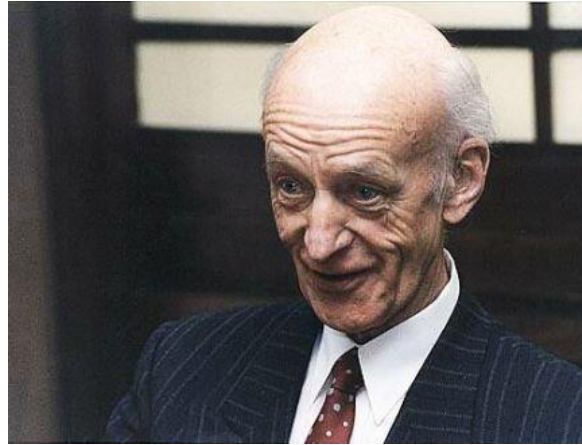
Mambrol, Nasrullah. "Transactional Reader Response Theory." *Literary Theory and Criticism*, 28

October 2016, <https://literariness.org/2016/10/28/transactional-reader-response-theory/>.

Accessed 14 August 2023.

Often associated with the work of Louise Rosenblatt, who formulated many of its premises, transactional reader-response theory analyzes the transaction between text and reader. Rosenblatt doesn't reject the importance of the text in favor of the reader; rather she

claims that both are necessary in the production of meaning. She differentiates among the terms text, which refers to the printed words on the page; reader; and poem, which refers to the literary work produced by the text and the reader together.



Louise Rosenblatt  
and  
Wolfgang Iser

How does this transaction take place? As we read a text, it acts as a stimulus to which we respond in our own personal way. Feelings, associations, and memories occur as we read, and these responses influence the way in which we make sense of the text as we move through it. Literature we've encountered prior to this reading, the sum total of our accumulated knowledge, and even our current physical condition and mood will influence us as well. At various points while we read, however, the text acts as a blueprint that we can use to correct our interpretation when we realize it has traveled too far afield of what is written on the page. [...] Thus the creation of the poem, the literary work, is a product of the transaction between text and reader, both of which are equally important to the process.

[...]

Followers of Wolfgang Iser might explain what Rosenblatt refers to as the blueprint and stimulus functions of the text in terms of two kinds of meaning every text offers: determinate and indeterminate meaning. Determinate meaning refers to what might be called the facts of the text, certain events in the plot or physical descriptions clearly provided by the words on the page. In contrast, indeterminate meaning, or indeterminacy, refers to "gaps" in the text—such as actions that are not clearly explained or that seem to have multiple explanations—which allow or even invite readers to create their own interpretations. [...] In Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* we might say, for example, that the text's determinate meaning includes the fact that Willy habitually lies to Linda about his success on the job, about how well liked he is, and about how important his role in the company has been. The play's indeterminacy includes issues such as how much (or how little) of the truth Linda knows about her husband's career, at what point she realizes the truth (if she ever does), and why she doesn't let Willy tell her the truth about his shortcomings when he tries to do so. Of course, the burden is on us to support our claim that a given textual meaning is determinate or indeterminate.

The interplay between determinate and indeterminate meanings, as we read, results in a number of ongoing experiences for the reader: retrospection, or thinking back to what we've read earlier in the text; anticipation of what will come next; fulfillment or disappointment of our anticipation; revision of our understanding of characters and events; and so on. For what at one

point in the work appears to be determinate meaning will often, at a later point in the work, appear to be indeterminate, as our point of view shifts among the various perspectives provided by, for example, the narrator, the characters, and the events of an unfolding plot. Thus, for Iser, though the reader projects meaning onto the text, the reading activities through which we construct that meaning are prestructured by, or built into, the text. In other words, Iser believes that the text itself guides us through the processes involved in interpreting (projecting meaning onto) it.

According to transactional theorists, different readers come up with different acceptable interpretations because the text allows for a range of acceptable meanings, that is, a range of meanings for which textual support is available. However, because there is a real text involved in this process to which we must refer to justify or modify our responses, not all readings are acceptable and some are more so than others.

#### **A few hints to understand the articles:**

- Both articles are written in British English, so there will be some differences in spelling.
- The journal article uses a citation format that is not the MLA style you know; this version includes the years of the research in order to engage more deeply in the conversation.
- An **abstract** in a journal article is a quick summary of the entire text at the beginning.
- It's okay if you don't understand every reference in the journal article. For this type of article, you really can ignore any names or citations in parentheses.

#### **Article #1:**

Boehmer, Elleke, and Erica Lombard. "British Literature Is Richly Tangled with Other Histories

and Cultures – So Why Is It Sold as Largely White and English?" *The Conversation UK*,

University of Oxford, 16 October 2017, <https://theconversation.com/>

british-literature-is-richly-tangled-with-other-histories-and-cultures-so-why-is-it-sold-as-largely-white-and-english-85625. Accessed 14 August 2023.

Recent global developments have sharply polarised communities in many countries around the world. A new politics of exclusion has drawn urgent attention to the ways in which structural inequality has marginalised and silenced certain sectors of society. And yet, as a recent report shows, diversity and inclusion in fact "benefit the common good". A more diverse group is a stronger, more creative and productive group.

In the world of literary writing, we find similar gaps and exclusions. But these are counterbalanced in some respects by new positive initiatives.

In 2015, a study revealed that literature by writers of colour had been consistently under-represented by the predominantly white British book industry. Statistics in *The Bookseller* show that out of thousands of books published in 2016 in the UK, fewer than

100 were by British authors of a non-white background. And out of 400 authors identified by the British public in a 2017 Royal Society of Literature survey, only 7% were black, Asian or of mixed race (compared to 13% of the population).

### **Colourful misrepresentation**

A similar marginalisation takes place in the curricula in schools and universities, mirroring exclusions in wider society. In most English literature courses of whatever period, the writers taught are white, largely English and largely male.

A fundamental inequality arises in which, though British culture at large is diverse, syllabuses are not. Indeed, many British readers and students find little to recognise or to identify with when they read and study mainstream British literature.

But it's not just a case of under-representation. It's also a case of misrepresentation.

Black and Asian writers who have been published within the mainstream British system describe the pressure they have felt to conform to cultural stereotypes in their work. Their books are often packaged and presented in ways that focus on their ethnicity, regularly using clichés. At the same time, more universal aspects of their writing are overlooked. For example, the covers of novels by Asian British writers usually stick to a limited colour palette of yellows, reds, and purples, accented by "exotic" images.

These writers bristle at the sense that they are read not as crafters of words and worlds, but as spokespeople for their communities or cultures. At its worst, this process turns these writers and their books into objects of anthropological curiosity rather than works inviting serious literary study or simply pleasurable reading. The message is that black and Asian literature is other than or outside mainstream British writing.

Against these exclusions, leading British authors such as Bernardine Evaristo and others have urged for a broader, more inclusive approach. They recognise that what and how we read shapes our sense of ourselves, our communities and the world.

### **Reframing the narrative**

The Postcolonial Writers Make Worlds research project, based in the Oxford English Faculty and The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities, set out to ask what it means to read contemporary fiction as British readers. Working with reading groups and in discussion with writers, we found that readers of all ages entered the relatively unfamiliar worlds created by BAME authors with interest.

For many, finding points of familiarity along gender, age, geographical or other lines was important for their ability to enjoy stories from communities different from their own. Identifying in this way gave some readers new perspectives on their own contexts. At the same time, unfamiliarity was not a barrier to identification. In some cases, universal human stories, like falling in love, acted as a bridge. This suggests that how literature is presented to readers, whether it is framed as other or not, can be as significant as what is represented.

Contemporary black and Asian writing from the UK is British writing. And this means that the work of writers such as Evaristo, Nadifa Mohamed and Daljit Nagra be placed on the same library shelf, reading list and section of the bookshop as work by Ian McEwan, Julian Barnes and Ali Smith – not exclusively in “world interest” or “global literature”.

Equally, much can be gained by thinking of white British writers like Alan Hollinghurst or Hilary Mantel as having as much of a cross-cultural or even postcolonial outlook as Aminatta Forna and Kamila Shamsie.

There are positive signs. A new EdExcel/Pearson A-level teaching resource on Contemporary Black British Literature has been developed. The Why is My Curriculum White? campaign continues to make inroads in university syllabuses. And the Jhalak Prize is raising the profile of BAME writing in Britain. Against this background, the Postcolonial Writers Make Worlds website offers a multimedia hub of resources on black and Asian British writing, providing points of departure for more inclusive, wide-ranging courses. Yet there is still much to be done.

All literature written in English in the British Isles is densely entangled with other histories, cultures, and pathways of experience both within the country and far beyond. Its syllabuses, publishing practices, and our conversations about books must reflect this.

#### Authors

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To read online, go to [British literature is richly tangled with other histories and cultures – so why is it sold as largely white and English? | Humanities Division \(ox.ac.uk\)](#)

**Article #2 begins on the next page.**

## The canon in the classroom: students' experiences of texts from other times

MARK A. PIKE

This paper examines the debate about the English literature canon in schools. It evaluates the importance of the canon in a 21st-century curriculum and considers its relevance to adolescent readers saturated in early 21st-century culture who have disparate identities and diverse backgrounds. The implications for teaching and learning of the chronological, social, cultural, and linguistic distance between pre-20th-century canonical texts and today's readers are examined in the light of the theoretical perspectives of Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser. These perspectives are applied to findings from a recent 3-year longitudinal case study of 13–16-year-olds reading canonical texts and of the responsive teaching they experienced.

Although the position of the English literature canon within the curriculum has been fiercely contested for some time, *English: The National Curriculum for England* (Department for Education and Employment/Qualifications and Curriculum Authority [DfEE/QCA] 1999), the third national curriculum in 10 years, specifies which writers are deemed to be of sufficiently high quality to warrant inclusion in a canon for secondary school English. These authors, officially designated 'major' (DfEE/QCA 1999: 36), are now prescribed for English school children and teachers alike. Schools in England must ensure that children between the ages of 11–16, of all abilities, study literature from 'the English literary heritage', and that teachers explore 'the appeal and importance of these texts over time' with students (DfEE/QCA 1999: 34, strand 2c).

While government policy is implemented in schools in England, the debate about the canon shows no sign of abating. On one side are the traditionalists, such as Bloom (1994: 41), who asserts:

Without the Canon, we cease to think. You may idealize endlessly about replacing aesthetic standards with ethnocentric and gender considerations, and your social aims may indeed be admirable. Yet only strength can join itself to strength, as Nietzsche perpetually testified.

On the other side, as Benton (2000) notes, there is an alliance of those who wish to include other media in the definition of 'texts' and those who

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recommend a more diverse and multicultural canon in the belief that the dominance of dead, white, male writers perpetuates social and cultural injustice (O'Donnell 1984, Blackledge 1994). While ethnocentric and gender considerations result in calls for a more inclusive and culturally representative canon that reflects the diverse identities and cultural backgrounds of readers, conservative educators resist any moves that would diminish the canon's authority. In this paper, I refocus the debate so that literary as well as political arguments inform decisions about the curricular value of literature written in England before 1900.

### **The canon and power: culture and identity**

Canonicity is inextricably bound up with notions of power. Indeed, it was a result of the efforts of a small circle of critics in Cambridge in the 1930s, of whom Leavis (1948), Richards (1929), and Eliot (1932) are the best known, that the canon emerged. Leavis (1948: 144) even maintained that only an intellectual élite was able to make judgements about such literature, insisting that 'our power of profiting by the finest human experience of the past' is rightly in their hands. At about the same time, the New Critics in the USA took a similar stand against the vulgarities of northern, industrialized regions, preferring to reaffirm the golden age of the old South and the values of great literature. Other critics seek to authorize a traditional literary canon for schools in the search for a unified cultural identity that counters the social and moral degeneration of the time (Bloom 1987, Hirsch 1987). In the USA, an influential lobby has recently recommended the reinstatement of traditional US values associated with the Christian faith, the family, and patriotism, and joined the reaction against multilingual provision in schools by supporting an emphasis on the English language and a traditional literary canon. In England, it is recommended that the King James Version of the Bible, a seminal influence upon the Western literary canon and a canonical text of outstanding literary merit itself, should be studied (DfEE/QCA 1999: 34), although this text is generally neglected in schools (Pike 2002c).

Although it may appear that a canon is 'fashioned by particular people for particular reasons at a certain time' (Eagleton 1983: 11), the reality may not be quite that simple. Clearly, the texts were in existence, and were of high quality, before any choices were made by critics or government. It has been suggested, for instance, that a canon 'is not imposed from on top; it has nothing to do with the State's purposes; it's something which you are brought up knowing, just as fairy tales are', for 'Shakespeare, the 18th-century novelists and the romantic poets are among the most readable, wide-ranging and humane of writers' (Open University 1991). Whether children today are, in fact, brought up with such a literary heritage is largely in the hands of curriculum decision-makers. Marenbon (1987) has asserted that just a few decades ago UK high-school leavers had a knowledge of the English literary heritage that would shame many university graduates in English today. My interviews with over 100 English graduates between 2000–2002 for the Postgraduate Certificate in Education English course at

the University of Leeds, one of the largest providers of new entrants to the teaching profession in England, show that graduates' knowledge of the literary heritage varies markedly according to the higher education institution at which they have studied. It should also be noted that many of today's graduates are familiar with a different, and also broader, range of cultural 'texts' than their predecessors.

Modernizers are often keen to point out that the identities of women, ethnic minorities, and the working classes are not found to any great degree in many canonical texts, and that the teaching of English literature, on a global scale, can be viewed as a legacy of British colonialism. Traditionalists, on the other hand, are equally keen to demonstrate that 'the English literary icons used in oppression and domination have also provided a language for resistance and opposition' (Maybin 1996: 252) to injustice. They note the power of a common language to unite people from different language backgrounds in resisting oppression. Many 'African, Indian and Malaysian intellectuals who received an English literary education were at the forefront of the struggle for independence' (Maybin 1996: 252).

This polarity is reflected in the reactions of writers to the dominance of English in literary education. The Kenyan writer, Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'O (1986: 28), has abandoned writing in English, believing that 'my writing in Gĩkũyũ language, a Kenyan language, an African language, is part and parcel of the anti-imperialist struggles of Kenyan and African peoples'. Conversely, Achebe (1975: 221–222) has suggested that African writing through the medium of the English language achieves the expression and dissemination of 'African experience in a world-wide language'.

Although such debates on the literary heritage are helpful, it is important to focus on the transaction between an individual reader and a canonical text. Such an approach is essential if educators are to assess accurately the challenge of canonical texts and gauge the influence on students of those texts.

### **The canon and the individual: relevance and resistance to time**

When people speak of canonical authors and the literary heritage, they are usually referring to writers who inhabited a very different world from their own. To read such writers is to read diachronically across time. Consequently, I examine literary arguments relating to diachronic reading and then report findings from a study that sheds light on the experiences with canonical texts of 13–16-year-olds.

Delaney (1972) contends that today's student is at a serious disadvantage when studying writers from the 'great tradition' because those writers' experiences (she lists fearing hell, observing nature closely, dying of love, dying of consumption, dying of the pox, going to church, and going to prostitutes) are so alien to the modern reader. In contrast to Delaney, I maintain that it is not only unnecessary but even harmful (to their reading as well as their health) for today's readers to have had the same experiences as the writers they study.

The twin assumptions, that the canon should be representative of a multicultural society and that it is morally authoritative, may be questioned when the nature of literature and of readers is adequately understood. Many of the most widely cited arguments about the canon may betray a fundamental misunderstanding of the way readers are capable of reading literary works. It is entirely valid to point out that ‘we do not live by the ethics of the *Iliad*, or by the politics of Plato’ (Bloom 1994: 40). What is important with regard to the canon in schools is that teachers enable young readers of literature to understand that ‘works of art are artificial (and, therefore, not necessarily authoritative and truthful)’ (Stibbs 2001: 42). My position is that, paradoxically, even the very *difference* (be it social, cultural, ethnic, religious, moral, or linguistic) between the world of the canonical texts and that of the reader can justify providing a canon of pre-20th-century works in the curriculum for ethnically and socially heterogeneous schools in the 21st century.

A literary text differs from any other form of writing because it ‘neither describes nor constitutes real objects’, and by definition it ‘diverges from the real experiences of the reader in that it offers views and opens up perspectives in which the empirically known world of one’s own personal experience appears changed’ (Iser 1971: 8). The literary work does not reside entirely with the reader’s own experiences; if it did, it would not be indeterminate, and ‘indeterminacy is the fundamental precondition for reader participation’ (Iser 1971: 14). In their indeterminacy, literary texts are resistant to the course of time, ‘because their structure allows the reader to place himself [*sic*] within the world of fiction’ (Iser 1971: 44). The indeterminacy of a text created in the past allows it to be experienced and re-created in the present. Iser (1971: 45) notes that:

one of the chief values of literature [is] that by its very indeterminacy it is able to transcend the restrictions of time and written word and to give to people of all ages and backgrounds the chance to enter other worlds . . .

It is misguided, therefore, to assume that only texts written in the late-20th or early-21st century can be relevant to today’s adolescents; Blake and Donne ‘can have a good deal more relevance to life today than contemporary poems that foreground the ephemeral preoccupations of the present’ (Benton and Benton 1998: vii). Many effective approaches to teaching such authors have been developed (e.g. Atkinson 1995).

A text’s indeterminacy requires a reader to bring personal experience, cultural background, imagination, predisposition, and even idiosyncratic knowledge with him or her so that a co-construction of meaning with its author is achieved. Consequently, although the relevance of pre-20th-century literature to the lives of young people growing up in a multicultural society is often considered to be limited (Grimes and Belote 1994), it is important to recognize that relevance is not dependent upon writer and reader residing within the same culture or having similar backgrounds. In assessing the role of a reader’s experience, Iser (1971: 7–8) concludes that ‘we recognize in literature so many elements that play a part in our own experience’, and yet they are ‘put together in a different way—in other words, they constitute a familiar world repro-

duced in an unfamiliar form'. The nature of a literary text is especially pertinent in considering some objections to classic literature being read in schools. Pre-20th-century literature, it has been suggested (Gabler and Gabler 1982, Davis 1992), can perpetuate anachronistic values and prejudice sponsored by governments wishing to engineer a certain sort of social cohesion. Yet, it is the very difference between today's experience and such texts that can result in the work 'transcending its historical position' (Iser 1971: 44).

The emphasis on teaching literature from the past in schools with children from diverse social contexts is justified when teachers use such literature to 'address the needs and realities of the world our young people actually inhabit' (Davies 1996: 9). When such an approach is adopted, active and exploratory reading of pre-20th-century texts provides opportunities for students to explore themselves as readers and to consider human experience in other times (and other places if they live outside England). With appropriate pedagogy, such works can 'take on meaning in relation to the very different ideological conditions of contemporary life' (Easthope 1991: 57). In this way, the diachronic transaction can be potentially richer, in certain respects, than a synchronic one. It is worth noting some of the purposes of studying literature. Davies (1996: 141), for example, maintains that:

The fundamental aim of such an area of study is to help readers discover what texts are trying to reveal, in a spirit of good faith. This form of study aims to give young people access to what different generations and cultures are trying to tell each other about their lives; it aims to give them access to the excitement or amazement of hearing such things, and thus to enlarge the scope of their lives.

It is also important to consider how teachers can help readers discover the literature of other generations. Understanding how readers apprehend the past, when it can only be 'grasped through the limited perspective of the present' (Selden and Widdowson 1993: 54), is a complex issue. How readers, saturated in early-21st-century culture, can derive pleasure from texts produced trans-historically when 'we cannot make our journey into the past without taking the present with us' (Selden and Widdowson 1993: 54), requires careful consideration because the sort of experience that different readers have in the present varies so widely.

Canonical works present a significant challenge. Genres and styles of important pre-20th-century poets 'tend to be different from those that are popular today', and it has been asserted that 'allusions (to classical mythology and Christian theology) have little resonance for most of our students' (Protherough 1986: 125). While many works do, indubitably, present a challenge, educators need to be cautious about attributing that challenge to cultural difference. The demands of literature originating in a different time, place, and culture to the reader is, after all, 'only an extreme instance of the tensions implicit in any literary transaction' (Rosenblatt 1978: 56). Each literary transaction is unique because it occurs between a particular individual and a specific work. When dealing with such literature, educators should ensure that they do not perpetuate the widespread

assumption often enacted across the curriculum that knowledge and learning ‘can be considered apart from the identities of learners’ (Davis *et al.* 1996: 163).

The work of Jauss (1982), a proponent of *Rezeptionsästhetik*, is of seminal importance when attempting to understand diachronic reading. Jauss’s theory is derived from the hermeneutics of Gadamer (1975), who had applied Heidegger’s ontology, expounded in *Being and Time* (1962), to literary theory. For Jauss (1982), all interpretations of past literature are created out of a dialogue between past and present. The ‘taste’ of different readers can, therefore, only be understood when one has knowledge of ‘which transsubjective horizon of understanding conditions the influence of the text’ (Jauss 1982: 23). Jauss’s ‘horizon of expectation’ is the criterion readers apply in judging literary texts in a particular period in history. The location of such works within the reader’s literary history is also important as the reception of texts is influenced by their position in the sequence of texts read; ‘the new literary work is received and judged against the background of other works of art as well as against the background of the everyday experience of life’ (Jauss 1982: 41). A new work, by augmenting a reader’s experience, can effect a ‘change of horizons’ (Jauss 1982: 25).

Sufficient distance between the text and reader is required for aesthetic reading to take place. Jauss (1982: 25) defines ‘aesthetic distance’ as ‘the disparity between the given horizon of expectations and the appearance of a new work, whose reception can result in a “change of horizons” through negation of familiar experiences or through raising newly articulated experiences to the level of consciousness’. Jauss’s ‘horizon of expectation’ and ‘aesthetic distance’ appear to be closely related to Iser’s notion of ‘indeterminacy’ which facilitates aesthetic reading. For Iser (1971: 12), ‘the indeterminate sections or gaps of literary texts are in no way to be regarded as a defect; on the contrary, they are a basic element for the aesthetic response’.

It is because literary texts are indeterminate that they invite personal involvement. Works that force no horizontal change entertain rather than educate, because ‘no turn toward the horizon of yet-unknown experience is demanded’ (Jauss 1982: 25). In considering the likely effect on the reader of works that merely entertain, Iser (1971: 14) notes that texts ‘with such minimal indeterminacy tend to be tedious, for it is only when the reader is given the chance to participate actively that he [*sic*] will regard the text, whose intention he himself has helped to compose, as real’. This could explain findings from a recent UK government case study of a school in which negative attitudes to poetry persisted because the ‘range of poems studied was very limited, was too often restricted to light verse’ and the experiences depicted in the works were ‘too close to pupils’ own experiences’ (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority 1998: 14). The danger is that the reading diet in a school will ‘become restricted to immediately accessible poems with predictable subject matter’ (Fleming 1996: 39) as works are chosen that are misguidedly thought to be ‘relevant’ to students’ concerns. It is, therefore, imperative to theorize pedagogic approaches as well as provide a morally justifiable literary and educational rationale for the study of canonical texts.

### **From antipathy to enthusiasm: fostering keen readers of pre-20th-century literature**

In reporting the 3-year longitudinal case study (the ‘Bournemouth case study’) I undertook while working as a full-time high-school English teacher between 1995–1998, I provide information about readers, texts, and teaching. I note readers’ attitudes and attainment in English at the beginning and end of the longitudinal study, outline the range of 20th- and pre-20th-century texts readers encountered, and describe the ‘responsive teaching’ (Pike 2000b: 20) students experienced. I also report readers’ preferences and, significantly, their reasons for those preferences. This case study throws light back on the theoretical perspectives already presented.

I taught a class of 30 students over 3 years, and tracked six readers, who were not at all keen on poetry at the outset, between Year 9 (age 14) and Year 11 (age 16) as they progressed through their General Certificate in Secondary Education (GCSE) by completing coursework and preparing for the terminal examination at the end of Year 11. The aim of the research project was to examine how to foster motivated and intellectually acute readers and ameliorate negative attitudes to poetry. Students were closely observed during ~ 400 hours of English lessons. Teaching strategies were developed throughout this time in response to students’ learning needs by means of action research (Pike 2002a). Three existing same-sex friendship pairs (Josie and Anna, Steve and Rob, Adam and Peter)<sup>1</sup> were chosen. Paired discourse was an integral element of the pedagogy, and it was important that pairs could converse easily. Students were of average to above-average ability and attained levels 5–7 in the national English Key Stage 3 (KS3) test at the end of Year 9 (age 14). By the end of Year 9, 1 year into the study, two of the students (Adam and Peter) attained level 5, two (Steve and Josie) attained level 6, and two (Anna and Rob) attained level 7. (Fourteen-year-olds in England are awarded a level in a range from 4–8 (where 8 is highest).) I taught the class throughout the 3 years of the study in a large state comprehensive school in the Bournemouth area on the English south coast.

These six students were interviewed, kept journals, answered questionnaires, and recorded their discussions of a wide range of canonical and non-canonical literature throughout their course (Pike 2000a). The writing these students produced during the course and also in the terminal examination was analysed with the general focus of attention being responses to texts and teaching methods. Over the 3 years, the motivation and attainment of the six students (four boys and two girls) was monitored.

Significant improvement in both the motivation and attainment of all the students was evident between the ages of 14–16. For instance, Peter, who had a particular loathing of poetry in Year 9 and gained a very modest level 5 at the end of that year, gained an A\* (the highest possible grade representing the best of the A grade range and awarded to very few candidates) in GCSE English literature at the end of Year 11. Peter had also become an enthusiastic and appreciative reader of several challenging pre-20th-century poems. He could reasonably have been expected, on the

evidence of his attainment in Year 9, to have gained a thoroughly average C grade in Year 11. For him to gain a level 5 in Year 9 and an A\* 2 years later in Year 11 was highly unusual.<sup>2</sup>

These adolescents read, responded to, discussed, and wrote about the 15 pre-20th-century poems in the *GCSE English/English Literature Anthology* (Northern Examination and Assessment Board [NEAB] 1998; henceforward *Anthology*)<sup>3</sup> and an even wider range of stimulating 20th-century texts was also studied.<sup>4</sup> The same teaching methods (Pike 1999, 2000b, e) were employed with both the pre- and the post-1900 works. Irrespective of the time of publication, students were encouraged to relate texts to their own experience by reading each one as a 'stimulus'. A simple explanation of this concept is that 'the text is a stimulus activating elements of the reader's past experience' (Rosenblatt 1978: 11). Consequently, when students made their first annotations around a poem or wrote their initial journal entries, any memory stimulated by the text, however seemingly irrelevant, was encouraged. When Anna and Josie came to the line, 'But tradition approves all forms of competition', in 'The Latest Decalogue' (Arthur Hugh Clough), it prompted them to discuss how they competed with each other in music and dance. Although Anna felt they were digressing, Josie, quite rightly, reminded her friend of the instructions I had written in their journals: 'it says if a poem triggers off a memory or something, talk about it'. This emphasis on 'stimulus' was not at the expense of Rosenblatt's (1978: 11) other dimension, text as 'blueprint', where the focus is upon the text, but it did ensure that today's teenagers perceived the relevance of pre-20th-century texts. For instance, in an interview about the reading he had engaged in over the 2 years of his GCSE course, Steve commented 'with "The Latest Decalogue" I can see what's going on around me and what's happening and people are avoiding the law and things like that and it's relevant'. Conversely, Steve explained his dislike for George Herbert's 'Jordan' by emphasizing that he could not get the poem to work as a 'stimulus'; 'when I go through it I can apply no knowledge or anything that has happened to me to this poem'. The concomitant of encouraging readers to read the text as a 'stimulus' is that any passivity or refusal to become involved in making meaning is overcome, thereby reducing the risk of frustration and failure (Pike 2001).

The approach adopted with these adolescents has been termed 'responsive teaching' because 'it is teaching which is founded upon a pupil's response; the starting point is where the pupil is and not where the teacher is' (Pike 2000b: 20). Such teaching involves a 'shift in the locus of control from teacher to pupil' (Pike 2000e: 48) and evolved through action research (Price 2001, Pike 2002a) and the application of reader-response theory (Tompkins 1980, Freund 1987, Pike 2002d). A typical 'responsive teaching' sequence was followed when studying 'The Latest Decalogue' by Arthur Hugh Clough. The text was first read in the summer term of Year 10, and 1 week of lesson time was devoted to it. The teacher read the poem twice to the class and then, being encouraged to allow the text to act as a 'stimulus', students added their initial annotations around the poem and wrote a brief first journal entry. After this, students spent ~ 30 minutes discussing the

poem in pairs and tape-recorded their conversations. Following this paired discussion, whole-class discussion took place, with different students volunteering their responses and interpretations. The teacher did not employ a rapid succession of comprehension questions which can encourage reactive and dependent learners. Considerable effort was devoted to avoiding the all too common situation in which those 'who ask questions—teachers, texts, tests—are not seeking knowledge; those who would seek knowledge—students—do not ask questions' (Dillon 1988: 197). Instead, students took the initiative and were encouraged to devise questions as well as answers. After whole-class discussion, students made a second journal entry in which they recorded their reactions to views quite different from their own that had emerged in the class discussion. This sequence from paired to whole-class discussion enabled readers to try their ideas out on a partner before expressing their views more publicly. Most importantly, students tried out their own ideas rather than repeating the teacher's, and, subsequently, these were the ideas that were the subject of revision or modification.

Whether the teaching of much pre-20th-century literature is in fact based upon the reader's reading rather than the teacher's notes or knowledge is doubtful. The reality may still be that 'pupils are often persuaded to repeat their teacher's opinions rather than to develop their own points of view' (Cox 1991: 78). All too often this leads to the situation depicted recently of a grade 10 class in the USA reading *The Chrysalids* by John Wyndham, in which students 'had an academic understanding of the issues dealt with in the book', but 'only a few of the students seemed to make any connection between the story and their lives' (Davis *et al.* 1996: 159).

The paired work was particularly valuable, as every member of the class was propelled into activity. Students were thereby encouraged to take the initiative and become active thinkers and readers rather than passive recipients of information. After an initial week on 'The Latest Decalogue', the poem was not studied for some months until November of Year 11. At this point, specific information about Victorian England and Clough's views was introduced by the teacher, and then students related this newly acquired knowledge to their understanding of the poem. Students' statements from their journal entries about what they perceived the tone of the poem to be, and the mood they thought it evoked, were then reproduced on a sheet of paper that was circulated among the class and used to provoke further debate. Publishing students' views, which varied significantly, in this way stimulated further discussion. Subsequent teaching was founded on an already healthy debate that developed from readers' own ideas and not from the teacher's.

Apart from the striking progress students made, and the shift from apathy to enthusiasm, one of the most significant findings to emerge from my research was that, by the end of the course, five out of six readers actually preferred certain pre-20th-century works to many contemporary texts that appeared to be far more accessible and, ostensibly, more relevant. Rob, one of the readers who displayed little enthusiasm for poetry at the start of the course, made a fairly typical comment during an interview when he explained:

I prefer the pre-20th-century poems. . . . With pre-20th-century poems you have to go into them and try and find things, get really into the poem and see what the poet is trying to say. Twentieth-century poems seem to be more just text on the page, there's nothing to go into (1 April 1998; Pike 2000a, Appendix B: 24).

Rob can almost be seen disappearing into a gap or an area of indeterminacy within the poem and moving around inside it. Clearly, he believed that he experienced such engagement with pre-20th-century more than with 20th-century texts.

Only Adam, who attained a level 5 in his KS3 English test and was the only reader to prefer 20th-century texts, tended to find poetry with even a little indeterminacy frustrating and difficult. He appeared to confirm Iser's (1971: 6) view that when 'indeterminacy exceeds a certain toleration limit, the reader will feel strained to an almost intolerable degree'. Adam's growth over time with certain texts can, however, be explained in relation to the closure of gaps and decreasing indeterminacy that can be achieved through shared discourse. Before talking to his partner, Peter, during paired work, Adam had a negative reaction to 'The Latest Decalogue', awarding it only 3 out of 10 for enjoyment. After discussion with Peter, he thought it was 'OK', and his appreciation score increased to 5 out of 10. It was, however, only after engaging in dialogue with the teacher that he indicated definite enjoyment of the poem, registering his approval with a score of 7 out of 10. Such a response corresponds somewhat to Riffaterre's (1978) notion that the poem is one gap which gradually develops into a meaning.

An instance of the experience of reading as a re-ordering or shaping of the work to the reader's own familiar world can be found, however, in Adam's interpretation of the conflict between speaker and foe in Blake's 'A Poison Tree' in terms of a rivalry situation in school. After reading 'I sunned it with smiles/And with soft deceitful wiles', Adam explained to Peter that:

I think he doesn't show his enemy he's fearful of him, sort of thing . . . like at school, he's like, you know, 'soft deceitful wiles', trying to keep it all to himself and not show anybody (5 March 1997; Pike 2000a, Appendix C: 60).

Similarly, Peter adapted 'The Despairing Lover' to fit his own experience initially and noted in a journal entry that:

I can make personal connections with the poem, not with the thought of suicide. . . . More a scheme I plotted in a rage but when I cooled down and thought about it, it turned out to be not such a good idea (Pike 2000a, Appendix D: 114).

One of the sample examination questions to accompany 'The Way we Live' section of the *Anthology* for the 1998–1999 GCSE English literature examination was typical in style as it required personal response as well as specific knowledge. Candidates were asked to consider the 'similarities and differences between modern and earlier ideas' and also 'the writer's purposes in the poem'. An extract from Anna's answer illustrates the way readers can understand 'the appeal and importance of these texts over time' (DfEE/QCA 1999: 34, strand 2c) in a way that reflects their present context:

It is clear here that the speaker is being cynical about the way the people seemed to follow the letter of the law but not the spirit or ethos of each. This interpretation of Victorian spiritual malaise causes the reader to look at themselves and the way they live. Clough is intending to correct human vice by showing up the immoral newest decalogue everyone seems to be following. I feel that in today's society we live in a more multi-cultural, pluralistic world, there is less hypocrisy as people are very frank and open about themselves (Anna's terminal examination script, June 1998; Pike 2000a, Appendix H: 30).

Here, Anna evaluates and compares four horizons: Clough's own, that of his society, that of her society, and her own individual perspective. Such comparisons can foster personal, moral, and indeed spiritual development (Pike 2000c, d, 2002b) because of the vantage point such reading and reflection gives students to reflect upon their own views and the world in which they live. In response to this pre-20th-century text, Anna can be seen here reflecting upon her own beliefs and values in relation to the multicultural society in which she lived.

### **Keen readers of pre-20th-century texts: a justification for studying the canon in the 21st century**

To these modern adolescent readers, some of the pre-20th-century poems were more valuable than many 20th-century poems in the *Anthology*, because many of the earlier poems possessed a greater degree of indeterminacy and, therefore, provided more intellectual and personal space for readers to inhabit. Some claims Iser makes for literary texts may be especially true of the pre-20th-century texts in this *Anthology*. The indeterminacy of such works allowed readers the opportunity to move around inside the text, and consequently these texts provided a more satisfying aesthetic experience for them than many less-demanding 20th-century works. Although it would be insufficiently discriminating to equate indeterminacy exclusively with older works, in the *Anthology* studied by these readers (which was the same for candidates across the full ability range and enabled GCSE grades G to A\* to be awarded), the older texts appear to have possessed greater indeterminacy.

Although this study indicates that aesthetic responses are possible without teacher intervention, it also suggests that more developed aesthetic responses are possible with appropriate teacher intervention and group work. It has been argued that 'greater attention should be given to the effects of individuals' writing on other individuals, the group, and the writer' (Stables *et al.* 1999: 454), and the case study reported here certainly substantiates the efficacy of this approach. Davis *et al.* (1996) also emphasize that education 'plays a vital role in the continual re-configuring of individual and collective identities' and contend that knowledge is formed where 'child, teacher and subject-matter engage interactively in the production of new understandings' (p. 167). The study of adolescents' reading of pre-20th-century texts reported here can be seen as an example of 'curriculum co-emergence' because the readers did not merely 'repro-

duce' or 'report on knowledge', but were able 'to generate knowledge' (Davis *et al.* 1996: 167) as a result of their interaction with texts and with each other. There is a need for the pedagogy employed with pre-20th-century literary texts to be informed by the understanding that knowledge is formed as readers and texts interact. Then, as readers attend to and engage with one another's readings of texts from other times, fresh understanding develops in the present. Consequently, indeterminacy or gaps may not be quite the objective phenomenon existing in texts that Iser supposes, and if indeterminacy is, in fact, more subjective, and is located within the reader (as a 'horizon' in Jauss's terms) as well as in the text itself, there is a compelling reason for readers to read each other's readings (Pike 2002d).

Iser (1971: 5) has also noted that, 'when reading works of past ages', what happens is that 'we are actually transported back into those times and moving in historical circumstances as if we belonged to them or as if the past were again the present'. For the adolescent readers in the study reported here, meaning was invariably sought in relation to their present situation. Adam's interpretation of 'A Poison Tree' by reference to conflict in school, Peter's memories of plotting in a rage stimulated by the same poem, and Anna's and Josie's application of Clough's view of competition to music and dance in school are all examples of this. Arguably, a work is fitted into a present situation via a reader's existing 'horizon'. Subsequently, however, the study of an author and the historical situation of a work are beneficial, and can result in a further change of horizon because they compel the student 'to re-configure (re-read) what is already known' (Davis *et al.* 1996: 163). Students in this study only seemed to be keen to engage with history and literary biography when a transaction of sufficient quality existed in the present to sustain movement into the past. Indeed, this initial personal transaction had to provide the motivation for further exploration. Consequently, 'a major criterion of the usefulness of background information' is that 'it will have value only when the student feels the need of it and when it is assimilated into the student's experience of particular literary works' (Rosenblatt 1970: 123). Many adolescent readers do not appear to read the text in their first encounter as historically situated. In fact, readers appear only to be transported into the past through contact with other people (Pike 2002d) in the present, after a personal transaction with a text is established, and they read 'as if the past were again the present' (Iser 1971: 5).

Foucault pointed out that examinations can yield "truths" about candidates by "placing" them in social hierarchies and shaping their expectations of themselves and others' (Schrag 1999: 377). Yet, the sort of examination questions answered by students in this case study gave them access to other truths about human nature. Anna's views about her own society and the people within it certainly have moral significance (Pike 2000d, 2002b), and pre-20th-century works in the *Anthology* were rewarding for students because such literature often possessed sufficient indeterminacy and forced, in Jauss's terms, horizontal change. Reflection concerning the way readers in different times possess differing horizons of expectation to readers today should accompany students' evaluation of their own horizons and that of the world in which they live (Pike 2000c). The chronological, social, cultural, and linguistic difference between a pre-20th-

century work and a modern reader can provide the 'aesthetic distance' that enables the text to become the reader's own. Consequently, adolescents may be more likely to have their horizons changed in diachronic transactions than in synchronic ones.

While establishing a canon for schools represents a reduction in 'teachers' freedom to determine their own curriculum', it is also true that 'a centralized curriculum still allows teachers to play a significant part' in any decisions about 'what should be learnt, and how that should be learnt' (Davies 1996: 11). Ensuring that learning is a 'significant event' is a highly skilled task, but, as this case study demonstrates, it is still possible to study pre-20th-century authors from the canon through 'a dynamic series of learning experiences with a sense of cumulative purpose' (Stables *et al.* 1999: 450). In making decisions about how learning should occur, educators need to ensure that 'the reading of literature becomes a collaborative venture in the re-making of meaning through personal, and shared, responses to a text' (Webb 1992: 101). In this way, students' horizons are broadened by the study of canonical texts, and any cultural difference between readers within a class or between readers and texts can be conceived of as a resource for aesthetic reading. Such reading broadens horizons and is necessarily relevant to readers' own lives and situations.

Although reservations have been expressed about the social consequences of establishing a canon of classic works to be read in schools, studying pre-20th-century texts has been seen, from this study, to provide readers with valuable experiences that could not have been gained from later works. Engagement with the canon and the act of diachronic reading brought about through 'responsive teaching' (Pike 2000b: 20) can 'transform our senses and consequently our very conception of ourselves' (Egan 1999: 263). Paradoxically, justification for a canon of pre-20th-century literature in today's classrooms lies in its power to enable 21st-century readers to understand themselves and others in the present. In this way, literature from the past can play an important role in all our futures.

### Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to my colleague Andrew Stibbs at the University of Leeds for his comments on an earlier draft of this paper, to Michael Benton of Southampton University for supervizing my doctoral research into adolescents' responses to texts from other times, and to the Economic and Social Research Council in the UK for funding my research.

### Notes

1. All names are pseudonyms.
2. The relation between grades and levels from one phase to the next in UK secondary education is not exact, but a level 5 at the end of KS3 (Year 9) is analogous to an E grade (one of the lowest awarded) at GCSE. Any progress in excess of roughly two National Curriculum levels between KS3 and KS4 is deemed to be 'value-added', because pupils 'are expected to move through the levels fairly slowly (just over one a year)' (Fleming and

- Stevens 1998: 45). In this way, it is reasonable to expect children with a level 6 (analogous to a grade D) in Year 9 (aged 14) to attain a B grade at GCSE (aged 16) and those reaching level 7 (analogous to a C grade) in Year 9 to attain an A grade 2 years later in Year 11. All the readers in the Bournemouth study showed significant 'valued-added' progress. In fact, four readers (Peter, Steve, Rob, and Anna) gained the A\* grade, one (Josie) gained an A grade and one (Adam) gained a B grade. Such an improvement in attainment occurred over the relatively short period of time between the KS3 test and GCSE as the students matured between the ages of 14–16.
3. Over 2 years, five poems by William Blake were studied for GCSE English: 'The Tiger', 'The Lamb', 'A Poison Tree', 'London', and 'The Human Abstract'. Ten poems by various pre-20th-century authors were studied for GCSE English literature from different thematic sections: 'The Despairing Lover' (William Walsh) and 'The Lowest Trees have Tops' (Sir Edward Dyer) from the section 'Hearts and Partners'; 'The Twa Corbies' (Anon) and 'I am' (John Clare) from 'Caught in Conflict'; 'Jordan' (George Herbert) and 'Nuns Fret Not' (Wordsworth); 'The Daffodils' (Wordsworth) and 'The Sick Rose' (William Blake) from 'Dancing in the Breeze'; 'What is our Life?' (Sir Walter Raleigh), and 'The Latest Decalogue' (Arthur Hugh Clough) from 'The Way we Live'.
  4. Among those were 'Daily London Recipe' (Steve Turner), 'Life doesn't frighten me at all' (Maya Angelou), 'Gutter Press' (Paul Dehn), and 'Where Is It Written?' (Judith Viorst).

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## Honors English 12 Summer Reading Guide

### Part 1: Background knowledge from the supplemental texts in the packet

1. According to Matthew Clark, what is the difference between prescriptive and descriptive when describing language?
2. What is your understanding of synchronic and diachronic approaches to studying language?
3. What is transactional reader response theory?
4. What is the difference between determinate and indeterminate meaning of language?

### Part 2: Help with annotating and understanding the texts

**Don't forget to annotate the articles: highlight and put keywords and symbols in the margins.**

1. As you read and annotate the journal article "The Canon in the Classroom: Students' Experiences of Texts from Other Times," be sure to highlight unfamiliar words and look them up. **Put stars next to at least five unfamiliar, significant words in the text (not the terms listed in the questions above) that you think contribute to the overall meaning of the text.** Be ready to discuss them when school starts.
2. The journal article "The Canon in the Classroom: Students' Experiences of Texts from Other Times," is divided into four main sections, such as "The Canon and Power: Culture and Identity." Write one paragraph for each of the four sections summarizing the main points. This should help you understand the overall argument. Write this summary on the back of this page. If you need more space, use loose leaf or another piece of computer paper.

