Writing poetry – and beyond

DOUGLAS McCLENAGHAN
Viewbank College
Monash University

ABSTRACT: *This article examines a piece of writing produced by a year nine student in a Literature elective class. This student text challenges conventional understandings of "writing" "poetry" and "text", and offers an example of how one student has used multimodality to create a distinctive text.*

KEYWORDS: *Writing, text, poetry, multimodality, adolescent culture, English curriculum, popular culture, action research.*

INTRODUCTION

This article examines a student work sample produced as part of a unit of work on poetry with a year nine Literature class. In Victoria the subject "Literature" has long occupied a position as a specialist English subject in the senior secondary years including the VCE where it is studied in years eleven and twelve. Many English teachers would have studied English Literature in their final secondary year before going on to continue the study at university. Some secondary schools, including the one in which I work, have introduced Literature as a single semester elective subject in years ten and nine to cater for students who show ability in English and who have a particular interest in literature.

As the teacher of the year nine Literature elective I have sought to make space in the classroom for the literacy practices that students engage in outside of school. This has meant that students' text responses can take different forms – they are not limited to conventional text essays (although these are a part of the course). There is a substantial body of professional literature telling us that teachers need to acknowledge the sophistication of students' out of school literacy practices and to broaden our understanding of the term "literacies" to encompass a more rich and diverse range of semiotic understandings (Beavis, 2001; Mackey, 2002; Sefton-Green & Nixon, 2003).

A UNIT ON POETRY

A component of the year nine Literature elective class is a unit of work on poetry. The first task set was for students to choose a poem and read it to the class, then to talk about their response to the poem, discussing themes and ideas as well as language features such as imagery, rhyme, rhythm. Following from that task, students were invited to use a poem (not necessarily one studied in class) from which to create another text, which might be a poem, a song, a story or a visual text. Students might, for instance, write a reply to a poem, or use a similar theme in a piece of their own. Or they might simply write a poem. I encouraged students to present their poems or other texts to the class, although this was not compulsory. The writing task was presented as open-ended so that students could negotiate how they would fulfill the requirement.

I noticed when first teaching the poetry section of the course that some students found their poems on the internet. Others had received poems in emails. The next semester when I taught poetry again, I set aside some time to surf the net looking for poetry. Some of the poems students found were simple multimedia texts, using animated headings and illustrations. I suggested creating a multimedia poem as a possibility for the writing task bit no one took it up. We had looked in class at "The Highwayman" by Alfred Noyes and the accompanying illustrations by Charles Keeping and had discussed how the pictures portrayed the artist's interpretation of the poem as well as how the pictures might influence a reader's interpretations (Benton & Benton, 1995). The option to illustrate a poem is occasionally taken up by students who create illustrations for a poem; others write their own poems and illustrate them.

Sue wrote this:

> It's too late now, you can't run, you can't hide.
> I've got you where I want you, you need me to survive.
> You live for just one sip, it's out of your control.
> Don't deny it, don't fight it, you know I own your soul.
> Alone you are weak, but I make you strong.
> If it feels so right, how could it be wrong?
> I permeate your thoughts, let you be all you can be.
> You can't eat, you can't sleep, you can't breathe without me.
> Sip away your problems till you're passed out on the floor.
> Sip away your life till you can sip NO MORE.....

Even without the contextual knowledge that the class had been studying poetry and had been invited to write poetry, a reader would instantly recognise this text as a poem. At first glimpse it looks like a poem and one reading confirms this. The poem portrays alcohol addiction, even though alcohol is not specifically mentioned – the "sip" makes it clear. Sue uses the first person to create a distinctive voice, mockingly triumphant. It is directed at an anonymous addict, helpless and doomed. She creates a contrast between the all-powerful alcohol and the implied – silenced and powerless – victim. Sue's strong rhyme and rhythm reinforce the image of alcohol as menacing and the victim's ultimate fate as inevitable. One could also note Sue's clever use of personification in giving alcohol a voice and personality; and irony in describing alcohol as both conferring strength but also enslavement.

So far in this discussion I have presented Sue's poem as a printed text on a page, and looked at it in conventional terms, the way an English teacher might respond. That is, I have used the kind of language suited to explicating a poem, drawing attention to "poetic" features which Sue has skillfully used. What I have written would be an appropriate response and assessment given to her. A teacher might even frame their reading and word their assessment in the language of the Curriculum Standards Framework (*English Curriculum and Standards Framework II*, 2000), the mandated curriculum outline used in Victorian state schools, and claim that Sue has shown the capacity to produce a piece of writing which "…reflect(s) on values and issues in ways that are interesting and thought provoking for a specified audience" (p. 82). These are conventional and appropriate responses to an ostensibly conventional and recognisable student text produced in conventional, unexceptional circumstances.

However this straightforward situation is disrupted when we examine the text that Sue actually submitted as her "poem". On a piece of 27 by 31 cm. cardboard, this is her text:
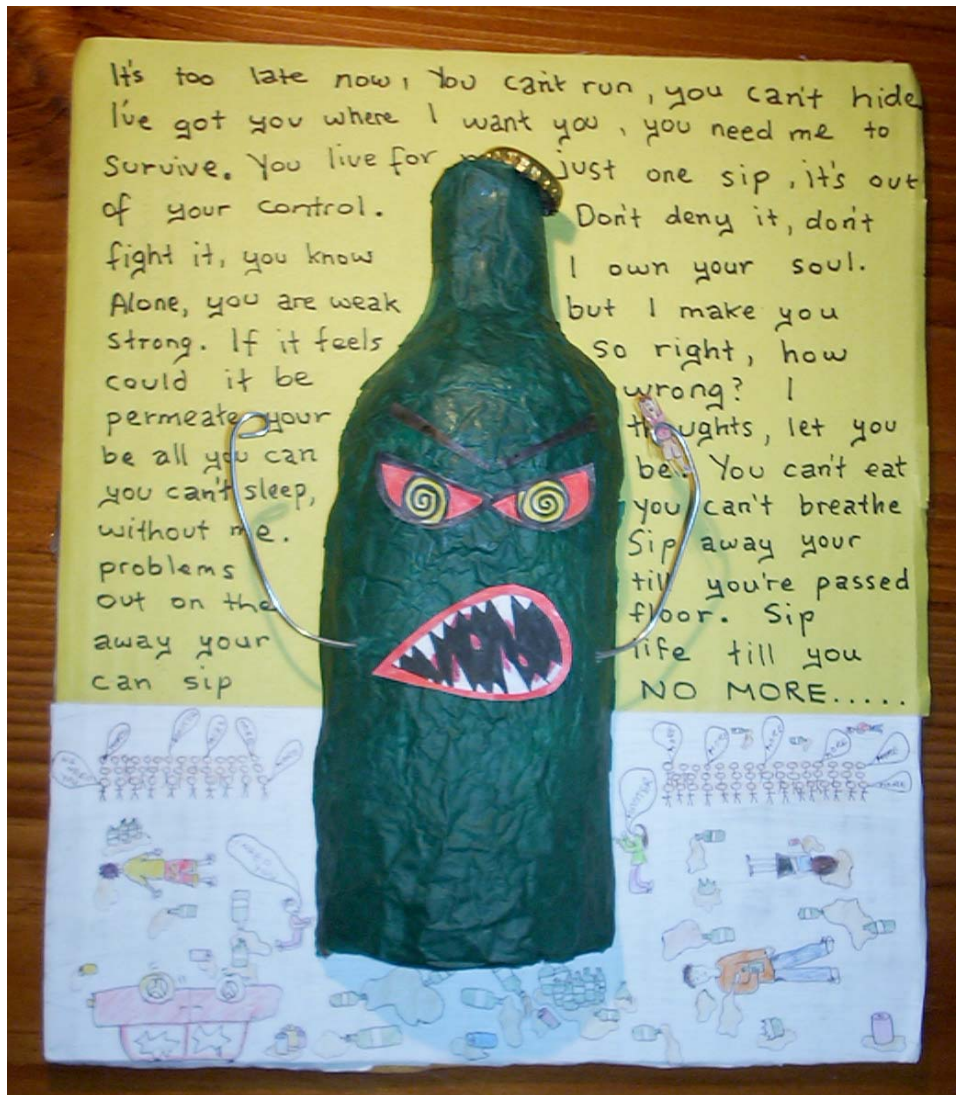

Figure 1. Photograph of Sue's poem (complete)

The bottle is made of paper maché and is glued to the cardboard to give a 3D effect.

As a text this is far more striking and complex than the printed text on its own. Sue has taken up the idea of writing and illustrating a poem and created a hybrid text in which the visual elements contribute significantly to its meaning. The visual elements do more than simply illustrate the printed text; they are integrated with it to convey meaning in a multi-modal fashion, offering the viewer a greater range of ways to interact with the text and to create meaning from what is being examined.

The text is dominated by the bottle, symbolising alcohol in a far more confronting way than is done by the poem. The maniacal face conveys madness and cruelty with its crazed eyes and fearsome, blood-spattered mouth, and the 3D effect thrusts the bottle into the foreground. Its arms are raised in triumph and the hapless victim in its

left hand is held up as both trophy and warning. The poem's words sit in the background, and the "voice" in the poem is given a face, even a persona, by the bottle. Reading, or re-reading the poem's words, is enhanced and elaborated on by the bottle's presence and how it strikes the reader. Note the care and detail with which this text has been created. The bottle's victim/trophy is a teenage girl.
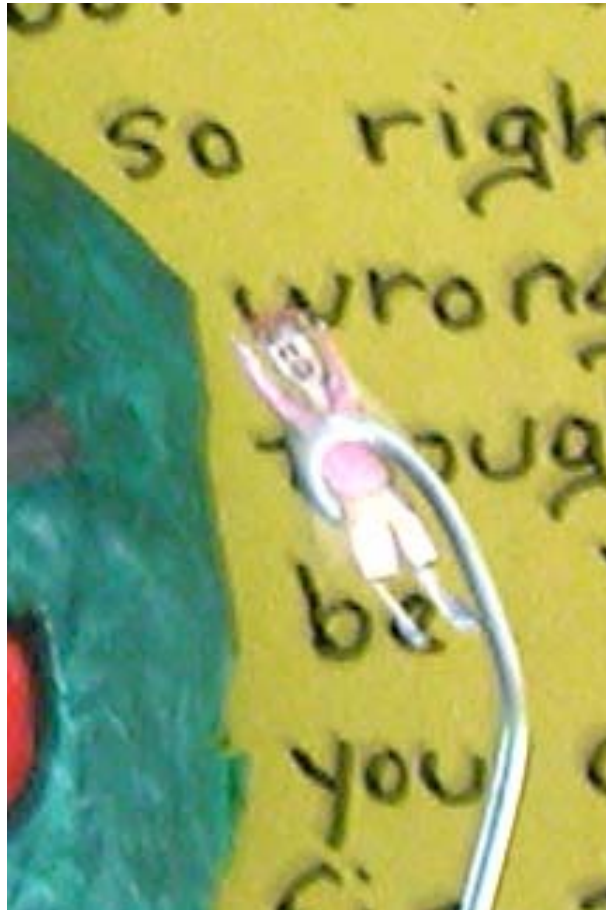
Figure 2. Photograph of Sue's poem (detail)

This image could be read as a pointed warning to teenagers, Sue's peers, about the dangers of alcohol abuse. It is an image that a reader can perhaps identify with or it may evoke a reader's pity for another's suffering. It also serves to complicate the "you" of the poem by visually dramatizing an individual in the grip of alcoholism. If Sue had used, say, an old alcoholic as the victim this could have weakened the poem's impact. Lower down she has drawn other characters in relationship to alcohol.

Figure 3. Photograph of Sue's poem (detail)

These small pictures litter the lower third of the text. We see images of people lying insensate among spilt and broken bottles, and what looks like their own vomit. Two figures on their knees worship at the giant bottle's base – one says "I need you", the other says "Master". In the background, ranks of humans, reduced to a mass of anonymous, featureless stick figures, cry "More" and "We need you". We can see from this how different elements of the text modify and elaborate each other and contribute to the text's impact as a unified whole. An example is how the stick figures are arrayed in the background like an army or a gang, or perhaps a congregation, suggesting that alcohol wields the kind of power a cult leader does – an interpretation supported by the worshipping attitudes of other figures in the picture.

Seen as a whole, as well as in the detail, the text is sophisticated and complex. It seems to draw intertextually on the TAC and other confronting public service advertisements that appear regularly on Victorians' television screens and in newspapers and magazines. So, one could read the text as a persuasive text, designed to shock the viewer, with the words and images constructing a complex argument. Sue has also made effective use of intertextuality , drawing on her knowledge of different modes of communication – it is "in your face" as teenagers say. She understands "writing" and "illustrating" as multimodal processes and is comfortable creating a text that communicates multimodally. Although the text's visual elements might be seen to be more properly the province of the art class, for Sue the boundaries which might be assumed to exist between school subjects or between text-types, don't exist. This tells us that Sue, like many other teenagers, draws on rich semiotic resources, only some of which have been the school's or her teachers' province.

IMPLICATIONS

I have not referred to the complete text as a poem, not because of any reticence based on notions of textual purity but because poem seems a reductive term for such a hybrid text. It is a kind of multimedia text, but not in the way that term usually applies – to digital texts or those mediated by a screen. Too often multimedia is conflated with ICT, but Sue's text shows us that it is not necessary to use ICT to create a multimedia or multi-modal text. Indeed, her text has particular and compelling qualities not replicable by digital multimedia. As a physical object to hold and look at, it has a different "presence" to a text communicated via a screen (the photographs here unfortunately diminish this physical aspect). While multimedia offers possibilities of sound and animation with a text, Sue's old-fashioned cardboard, paper maché, paint, and her hand drawing and writing convey a sense of originality compared to, say, the visual effects used in Powerpoint presentations; we are closer to the writer – a "hands on" experience, in the vernacular.

I mentioned earlier that Sue's poem was confronting to her peer audience. But it is also confronting to another audience, English teachers. The English curriculum continues to be dominated by circumscribed notions of what is legitimate, what counts as competence, knowledge, culture, and to privilege essay-text literacy (even when dealing with non-print texts). Texts like Sue's are subversive of all this, and by implication of the power and control invested in the teacher's position as expert (King & O'Brien, 2002). Classroom contexts need to be created where students' out of school cultures can be understood and used, but not appropriated, for meaningful purposes. Much of the power of Sue's work derives from this subversiveness and from the fact that it is *her* response to a set task. We need to create space for such fresh, surprising, unpredictable practices. Part of the problem with essay-text literacy is not the practice itself, but that it is ossified and ritualised. There is a danger that a similar fate would befall literacy practices that became mandated or a form of sanctioned knowledge – if it's Tuesday, period 5, it must be multiliteracies – as Allan Luke says, "…a repressive tolerance…" (Luke, 2002 p. 202).

Sue's text is another example of how the "areas of overlap" between popular culture and schooling (Sefton-Green, 2000) can be used. It is particularly significant that the student, not the teacher, has explored the possibilities of using popular cultural practices. Sue took up the opportunity to bring out-of-school experiences and knowledge to bear on a simple school task in ways that have enabled her to produce a complex and confronting text. Much of the literature which examines students' intertextual knowledge does so in the context of response to texts (Hurrell & Sommer, 2001). Sue has used her intertextual knowledge to produce a text of her own. This text offers a challenge to conventional notions of "writing" in its multimodality and its generic ambiguity. The "…tension between media and print literacy…" (Sefton-Green & Nixon, 2003, p. 247) is not evident in Sue's text. Indeed, to conceive of her print and media literacies as separate or distinct seems an oversimplification of a complex interaction among a range of different literacy practices. It is more generative to think about how the English curriculum can embrace the potential of multi-modal texts and the intertextual knowledge that students bring to the classroom.

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