

## Getting “meta”: Reflexivity and literariness in a secondary English literature course

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*ABSTRACT: This paper investigates how the study of English literature at senior secondary level might be construed in ways that are congruent with current poststructuralist understandings about texts, reading and writing. As an example we analyse an innovative English literature course, whose students develop a theorized understanding of a range of reading practices, which they apply in undertaking a series of readings of literary texts. Students thereby develop a reflexive understanding of their reading and meaning-making and are enabled to critically interrogate the reading positions texts invite readers to adopt. In the current historical moment, when a retreat from theory is being stridently advocated by reductive media-political campaigns, this paper contributes to debates concerning what knowledge about literary texts and reading is valuable and what capacities students can and should develop as readers and writers. By investigating the character of this distinctive English literature course and the kinds of development each task makes possible, we argue for the value of a critical poststructuralist reflexivity in helping students understand the constructive and often contested nature of texts and reflect on their own shaped and shaping role in meaning-making.*

*KEYWORDS: English literature teaching, poststructuralist literary theory, reading practices, reflexivity*

### INTRODUCTION

The study of literary texts has been central to secondary English classrooms from the time of its first emergence as a school subject (Bacon, 1998; Court, 1992; Graff, 1987; Hunter, 1988; Peel, Patterson, & Gerlach, 2000). In recent years, however, in many jurisdictions and curricula the time allotted to it has been reduced. Literary study has had to compete with a broader range of texts, including everyday, media and popular texts, and the capacity to read and write essays and reports about literary texts is no longer deemed sufficient for a world that demands students develop a greater range of functional communicative skills (Jewitt, 2006; Kress, 2003; New London Group, 2000).

Nevertheless, in most English curricula in the English-speaking world, literature is still mandated for study, for a range of reasons. Indeed, given the conservative restoration in a number of Western countries (the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia, among others), some educational and political leaders and members of the media commentariat (for example, Slattery, 2005; Donnelly, 2007) have called for a return to more traditional study of the “classic” texts of English literature and assessment of students’ responses to these by the traditional means of the essay of

literary criticism. As a corollary, a number of critics of more contemporary forms of English literature study at secondary and tertiary level have dismissed as fashionable “postmodern”, “poststructuralist” or “critical literacy”<sup>1</sup> nonsense current literary theories about texts and reading (Abbs, 2003; Bloom, 1987). These critics argue that the core business of teachers is simply to help their students develop a deep enjoyment in literature and an abiding, discriminating interest in appreciating its aesthetic and ethical qualities.<sup>2</sup> These debates have been particularly strident and polarised in the news media in Australia over the last few years (Doecke, Howie, & Sawyer, 2006; Donnelly, 2007; Turner, 2007).

In this paper, rather than engaging with these debates directly, we provide one response to the critique of poststructuralism by investigating how literary study might be construed in poststructuralist terms, and the value to students of such study. To do this, we analyze a uniquely innovative English literature course in Queensland, Australia that is available to students in the final year of their secondary schooling as a more demanding optional extension of their ongoing English course.<sup>3</sup> Certainly this “cutting edge” extension course goes well beyond what is possible in mainstream senior secondary English curricula; nevertheless, our examination of it usefully identifies what can be done in literary study at the farthest reaches of secondary schooling, and thereby shows a direction that other courses may follow to a greater or lesser degree.

The *English Extension (Literature)* course is founded on several poststructuralist premises. In brief, these may be characterized as follows:

- *textuality, or textual constructedness*: literary texts are situated within historical, cultural and intertextual contexts that have shaped the meanings that can be made of them; readers may reshape those meanings by bringing new discourses and new stances to the texts;
- *discursive / ideological / ethical positioning*: literary texts engage readers with human, social experiences and invite them to take a stance towards those represented experiences and affective responses, which readers may resist in part or in whole, depending on the values privileged in the text;
- *subjectivities*: literary texts help diversify readers’ subjective repertoires by offering particular ways of perceiving, thinking and valuing; readers may develop a meta-level understanding of textual and reading practices and subject positions.

The course not only questions the traditional view of the status and value of literary texts as unquestionably “Great Books”, it also makes “speakable” the silence customary in secondary English about how readings of such texts are produced. Indeed, its founding premise is that

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<sup>1</sup> In Australia the terms are often used interchangeably, as slurs, by media commentariat and politicians. In this paper we use the term “poststructuralism” as defined on the following page.

<sup>2</sup> For a sustained argument concerning a poststructuralist understanding of the aesthetic and its role in the critical literacy classroom, see Misson & Morgan, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> The Extension English (Literature) syllabus is available at [http://www.qsa.qld.edu.au/yrs11\\_12/subjects/english\\_lit/syllabus.html](http://www.qsa.qld.edu.au/yrs11_12/subjects/english_lit/syllabus.html)

Of the 69 787 Years 11 and 12 students who studied the mainstream English course in 2006, 596 students in 59 schools across the state chose to study the Extension English course in their final year – almost 12% of the cohort.

... whatever literature is, it is dependent on how, when, where, by whom, and for what purposes it is read. That is, this subject is about the different approaches available for reading literary texts rather than a study of literature per se (Queensland Studies Authority, 2003, p. 1).

Consequently, students are required to develop an explicit, theorized understanding of a range of reading practices which they apply in undertaking a series of readings of texts deemed literary. Thus “students should be able to examine their own assumptions about texts and reading, evaluate these, widen their repertoire of reading strategies, and develop a meta-knowledge of textual and reading practices” (Queensland Studies Authority, 2003, pp. 7-8). Through developing such reflexivity, which we refer to here as “getting meta”, students are enabled to interrogate the reading positions texts invite readers to take up, and to contest dominant subject positions that support socially inequitable ideologies.

We have two purposes in analyzing this course. The first is to consider what students gain from their study – that is, the different ways of knowing about texts and selves that this course uniquely opens up. Our focus is particularly on their dialogue with theorists as they generate readings and examine these, and on the reflexivity they develop thereby. As defined in the Extension English course, *critical reflexivity* involves students reflecting on how they read, how they have become the kind of readers they are and how they can expand their repertoire of reading practices. The point of reading from a range of approaches is to discover that “how you see is what you see” (Queensland Studies Authority, 2003, p. 31). Thus readers and writers who reflect on their own shaped and shaping role in meaning-making exhibit reflexivity.<sup>4</sup>

Our first intention in this paper, then, is to investigate the character of reflexivity as it is manifested in the tasks students undertake in this Literature course and to a lesser extent in the texts generated by students in response to each task. A fuller linguistic analysis of these texts is currently being undertaken; in the present paper we provide a broad overview of the course tasks, examine the invitations they offer for reflexivity, and present some brief examples of these linguistic features in students’ work.

This brings us to our second, consequent, purpose. In the current historical moment, when reductive media-political campaigns stridently advocating a “retreat from theory” are influencing English curricula and teaching practice, our paper contributes to contemporary debates about how and why to engage students with literary texts, what knowledge is valuable about such texts and reading, and what capacities students can and should develop as readers and writers about literature. We argue for the value of such reflexivity in helping students to understand the constructive and often contestatory nature of language in text and to reflect on their own shaped and shaping role in meaning-making. And we argue for the potential of a critical poststructuralism to engage students more deeply not only with literature but with

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<sup>4</sup> The term *reflexivity* has a complex theoretical provenance within post-structuralism. It was imported from philosophy and psychology into theories and practices of literary study. It originally referred to the mind’s capacity to be both subject and object to itself within the cognitive process. The term has been extended metaphorically in the arts to evoke the capacity for self-reflexion in any medium or language. Thus, in literary study, reflexivity refers also to the process by which texts foreground their own production, their authorship, their intertextual influences, their textual processes or their reception (Bartlett & Suber, 1987; Hunt & Sampson, 2006; Lawson, 1985; Stam, 1992; Woolgar, 1988).

literariness itself and to understand their capacity as knowing subjects and ethical agents.

As authors we need to declare the bearing of our particular interests to this account of reflexivity as manifested in the course itself (the potential) and in students' negotiation of this (the uptake). Wendy Morgan is currently the State Panel Chair of this course, charged with ensuring that the study programs developed by teachers conform to the spirit and letter of the law of the syllabus; that, through external moderation of assignment folios, students are awarded achievement levels (grades) that match the criteria and standards as published in the syllabus; and that these levels are consistently assigned across the state. (It should be noted that in Queensland in the post-compulsory years all assessment that contributes to students' achievement in the Queensland Certificate of Education takes the form of externally moderated, school-based common tasks.) Wendy Morgan was until recently an educator of secondary English, pre-service teacher-students, and has authored books on literature teaching (for example, Misson & Morgan, 2006). Mary Macken-Horarik is also a secondary English pre-service teacher educator, and a functional linguist with an interest in the linguistic character of students' struggles and achievements in subject English. Her comments in this paper relate to the linguistic character of reflexivity as it is manifested in students' responses to each task.

## **THE LITERATURE COURSE: A STUDY OF READING PRACTICES**

### **Theorising reading**

As noted above, the central problematic of the course concerns “the ways in which reading practices, seen as sets of strategies that readers draw on when making sense of texts, have opened up the ways that texts may be read” (Queensland Studies Authority, 2003, p. 1). Contexts and conditions, theories and practices of reading are the focus of investigation, rather than “the text itself” (which the course deems an impossibility). In order to undertake these investigations, at the outset of the course students are introduced to four sets of reading practices generated from a range of recent and current theoretical understandings about how meaning is made. These are author-centred, text-centred, reader-centred, and world-context-centred approaches. As the syllabus notes, each is “characterized by particular assumptions and values and therefore places greater or lesser emphasis on the interactions that occur between author, text, reader and the world context as we read” (Queensland Studies Authority, 2003, p. 1). These approaches are used to introduce students to a range of associated theories. For instance, via the reader-centred approach students become acquainted with the concepts and arguments of Iser (1978) Jauss (1982), Ricoeur (1969), Fish (1980), and Holland (1968), among others, and consider the implications for how one conceives of the literary text and a reader's role in making sense of it.

By the end of their year's study, students are expected to engage with particular bodies of theory of their own choosing that go beyond the four broad-brush approaches. Some students may be exploring postcolonial theories, while others draw on varieties of (post)feminism or queer theory, and others yet investigate cultural materialism or New Historicism or eco-criticism and so on. It should be noted, however, that, as the syllabus reminds teachers, “the emphasis in this subject is not on

building knowledge of literary theory for its own sake" (Queensland Studies Authority, 2003, p. 1), but on students' applying that knowledge in such a way that they are enabled to "critically reflect on the reading practices they have used, and how they have produced different readings" (p. 5). In this way, the student reader is "companioned" by the theorists s/he chooses to provide a perspective on the text and the readings made of it.

### The tasks

In a conventional essay of literary criticism, a student shows how she can read a text. In the three written and spoken or signed tasks undertaken in this course, the student demonstrates capacities of a different order: she has to read a theorist's theorising, and also read the theorist's reading both of the text and of the student's approach to reading that text. The following descriptions of these tasks indicate just how this is achieved.

#### Task 1

Here the students produce four short texts, totalling 1600-2000 words, in two stages. In the first stage, they generate two different readings of the one focal text, usually a novel or film by an "auteur", in the form of a report or short essay. One reading focuses on what the student reader brings to the text and makes of it (a reader-centred reading); the second enacts a view of the author as source and guarantor of the meaning, usually following Foucault's (1977) arguments about the "author functions" of classification, attribution and valuation (an author-centred reading). These readings do not examine the theories associated with the reading approach but rather demonstrate or perform a reading in alignment with a particular approach. In the second stage students review their two readings and provide two accounts and justifications ("defenses"), each analysing the strategies used to produce one reading. These defenses are explicitly theorized readings of a reading. Thus in each of their readings, and in the defenses, the students must take up a different stance. And in both the readings and the defenses they must cultivate different kinds of self-consciousness about the reading and the theory. The theoretical and reflexive sophistication required by this first task is already demanding in ways very different from what is required in conventional literature courses.

Two brief excerpts from students' work exemplify aspects of theorized reflexivity they are developing early in the course. In the first example, Student A<sup>5</sup> is analysing her reader-centred reading of Nick Earls' novel, *Zigzag Street* (1996).

... Intertextuality refers to "the network or web of relationships linking all texts produced by a culture" (Moon, 2001, p. 78), so here the emphasis is on the meanings which circulate through culture via texts. [In my reading] I recalled three main points of reference made between *Zigzag Street* and *Cinderella*, which, "for me [as a product of my culture] were inescapable textual allusions". These were the use of the "shoe", the references to glass, and finally I pinpointed the "readily identifiable plot". I noted too that that the plot was inverted to "struggling guy meets powerful girl". For me as

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<sup>5</sup> The students whose work is quoted in this paper have given written permission for its use in research and publication, provided neither they nor their teachers nor their schools are identified in any way.

a female reader and one who is reading across the text, this inversion merely “represented a token role reversal”.

In this example, the student takes up a theoretical discourse concerning intertextuality in order to review her reading. She makes connections between fairytale elements in *ZigZag Street* and Cinderella – allusions to the lost shoe, the glass and the generic features of the plot. She stitches these textual elements into a summary statement about plot inversion in Earls’ novel – “struggling guy meets powerful girl” – thus getting “meta” to her own reading. In so doing she reads both with *and* against the grain of the novel (it is, for her, only a “token reversal”). The “same” phrases from her performed reading are now embedded in a different discourse, and thus become available for new understanding. A first-order description of response in the reading now becomes abstracted in a second-order analysis. By this means the reading subject shifts her position, to become a reflexive critic.

In the second example, Student B is analysing their author-centred reading of Alfred Hitchcock’s film, *The man who knew too much*.

... Accepting that an author is inextricably tied up with their work was central to the construction of my author-centred reading and allowed me to understand “it is not the biography which explicates the work, but rather the work which sometimes enables us to understand the biography” (Poulet, 1970, p. 6) as I addressed the presence of Hitchcockian preoccupations in *The man who knew too much*, making links from experiences in his life to those in the film. As a reader operating from this position, I had an interest in how the author actually exists, what comprises an author’s work. Rather than the author, Poulet concludes, it is their work in the form of the text which forces on me a series of mental objects and creates in me a network of words, which, from one end of the reading to the others, presides over the unfolding of the work, of the single work which I am reading (Poulet, 1970, p. 62). The projection of the author’s self in their work demanded my consideration and was the clear inspiration for me researching what Hitchcock and others have said about his personal experiences in life and his career as an auteur.

This excerpt demonstrates the same capacity for managing different orders of reading referred to above. The viewing subject’s stanced (author-centred) reading becomes the object of theorized examination: the reading is represented as a process of engagement and a site where discourses are at play, and both of these are rendered knowable in abstract theoretical terms. This awareness of reading as both dynamic and synoptic is linguistically manifested in the first sentence, where the student frames reading as a process – “Accepting that an author is inextricably tied up with their work” – and then relates this to nominalized rendering of reading as abstraction: “central to the construction of my author-centred reading”. Both are then related to the understanding made possible by her reading of Poulet, “that the work sometimes enables us to understand the biography”. In this way, the subject who has viewed the film, and the subject who has taken up Poulet’s work on authorship, are brought together in the space of re-reading.

## **Task 2**

This task has three phases. In the first, students read a substantial literary text (the “base text”), adopting the reading position the text invites them to take. By so doing they identify the meanings and attitudes the text encourages them to take towards

characters and events and the “world-view” it endorses, with its attendant discourses and ideologies.

The term *discourse* is used in the syllabus in a broad socio-cultural and political sense (Gee, 1990) to identify the particular kinds of language used by members of a social group and hence the sets of beliefs, values, attitudes and behaviours that define that group in relation to others. A literary text, for instance, will have traces of two kinds of discourse: it will articulate the discourses of speakers and characters, and it will draw on the discourses within which the writer is situated. The reader also brings to the reading his/her governing discourses too. In the task being described here, students must also learn the key features of the selected theoretical discourses, and then put them to use in their response to the task.

Thus in the second phase of the task, students determine which discourses and ideologies promoted in the text they would challenge or oppose, given their own values, attitudes and beliefs. Given this agenda, they identify some aspect of the base text and transform it by rewriting (part of) the text (or creating a visual text). They do this in such a way that their transformed text invites readers to take up a position that diverges from or resists the reading that the original invited. For example, a student might make changes to part of the structure of the base text by having a minor character, who inhabits a non-dominant discourse/ideology, intervene in a scene in such a way that a new direction is opened up for a major character. Another student might substitute a different set of metaphors and images for those given in the text, and so offer a different way of seeing the subject that is being represented. Such interventions are called “complex transformations”, in that the transformed text is to bring about a “discursive shift” (Queensland Studies Authority, 2003, p. 41) from the base text.

In the third phase, students offer a spoken/signed defense of ten to fifteen minutes length, in which they justify their transformation. This defense

should explain how the base text successfully positioned the reader in this instance; how the reader took up a particular alternative and/or resistant reading position, and how that alternative and/or resistant reading position was realized in written and semiotic changes in the structural and textual features (Queensland Studies Authority, 2003, p. 42).

A similar criticism might be levelled at this task as at the first: students’ reading is theoretically driven in ways that preclude untrammelled engagement and enjoyment, and their re-creative writing is similarly harnessed in so programmatic a way that there is no scope for the “free” exercise of their imaginations. “Re-creative writing”, or “dependent authorship”, has long been part of the repertoire of English teachers (for example, Adams, 1995; Pope, 1995). It has often been used to encourage students to enter imaginatively into the world of the text in their writing of lost chapters, epilogues, recounting of episodes from the viewpoint of a minor character, and the like. Here the task is used explicitly for a very different agenda: to enable students to develop a theorized understanding of two further approaches to reading (text and world-context centred approaches), and to use re-creative intervention in a text in the service of that understanding. Thus theory is here a form of practice – and this too contributes to an important point of theoretical understanding.

How does reflexivity work in this task? The dialogue with theorists and with the base text takes a similar but not identical form to that of task 1. While in reading the text the students are to adopt an aligned reading position (whatever their own thinking and feeling responses), they cannot be naively immersed in the text. They are in effect to keep a finger on their pulse as they read, in order to understand just how they are being invited to respond. They might for instance notice specific textual features (details of description, choice of lexis and so on) and structural features (selection of episodes, plot devices used to build up tension, movement to narrative resolution and the like) that the text uses to encourage readers to align themselves with it. This entails taking a “text-centred” approach. In their reading and in their defense the students will therefore be drawing on a range of relevant theories – for instance, contemporary forms of narratology or linguistics, and poststructuralist understandings about a text’s silences, its inherent (and unacknowledged) contradictions, the potential excesses of meaning in metaphor, and the like.

One instance from the work of Student C must suffice to characterise something of the reflexivity at work in the defense.

I created meaning from David Knowles’ *The third eye* (2001) without difficulty, as I believe I am the implied reader. However, I did resist one element of the story, specifically how it concluded. Identifying what I did not agree with allowed me to intervene and make an opposed reading of the text. World-context-centred theory accepts that “it’s possible to read signs resistantly” (Preston, 1998, p. 78) and by intervening in the text in this way I formed an alternate conclusion for the narrative.

...[W]orld-context-centred theory says that “texts portray marginalized social groups” and therefore “literature can be seen as masking the real nature of society and reflecting only selective and often privileged versions of the world in ways that conform the status quo to the detriment of those excluded groups” (Preston, 1998, p. 78). [The character] Maya Vanasi’s views and culture are in some ways dismissed throughout the text as simply a mystical “dot” that is believed to be “special” in some way. This portrayal of her Bindi is presented through the narrating character’s voice, as it is only his views that are heard and therefore Maya becomes a member of a marginalized social group...

My opposed intervention transformed the terms male/female and reality/image. By subverting the conclusion of the novel I switched the roles of male narrating character and that of Maya Vanasi, they became female/male. By changing her character from quite polite, religious and mysterious, to that of a spiteful dobber [tell-tale], I changed the relative status of the two characters, therefore recreating an alternative resolution. The central narrating character being arrested has broken up his image, his belief, that what he is doing is only for art; his image has been differentiated into reality.

This student did not attain the same high achievement level as did Students A and B; nonetheless, Student C, like others in the cohort, is engaging with theorists in undertaking a critical intervention, which usually takes the form of a “world-context-centred” approach, such as postcolonial, feminist, neo-Marxist or other form of politically engaged theory. As in the previous task, theory accompanies practice, in reading and in two forms of writing (here, imaginative and analytical / discursive). Practice – both reading and writing – is thereby rendered theoretically defensible, and is thereby also a site for the further development of reflexivity. As students craft their interventions, they consciously take on a stance as creative writer, as authorial



“subject” “speaking back” or “speaking otherwise” to the text. And in their defense, they legitimate the intervention theoretically. This is revealed in a distinctive pattern of voicing in which bodies of work are animated and made to speak. Linguistically, this is clear in their use of projecting verbs (underlined in the following examples): “World-context centred theory accepts that “it’s possible to read signs resistantly” (Preston, 2005, p. 78) and, later, “World-context theory says that “texts portray marginalized social groups”. The movement from the intervention to the defense of this signals a shift from the stance available to an “author” to that of a theoretically informed critic.

### **Task 3**

In this final task towards the end of their year’s study, students undertake an independent investigation of a topic of interest. They may have an idea about a literary text or texts they want to explore. Or they may begin with a particular issue about reading and texts that interests them, and select texts suited to their inquiry. In either case they identify a particular body of contemporary theory or theories that they anticipate will help them tease out their problematic, and they research these theories in some depth, moving in many cases from secondary accounts in overviews to selected primary sources.

In Part A of the task, students present a spoken proposal of ten to fifteen minutes duration, in which they outline to their peers the conceptual focus of their inquiry and explain and justify why they have selected particular text(s) and theories in order to carry out their investigations. Part B takes the form of a written analytical exposition of 2500 words. Here the students undertake a reading of the text(s) by applying their theories, and thus attempt to tease out their problematic and arrive at some conclusions about it. More able students will also be teasing out the strengths, weaknesses and gaps in their selected theories and may then attempt a new synthesis.

This task entails several requirements that make it very different from the genre of traditional literary-critical discussion. Students’ questions are to be framed and defined in theoretical terms. The principles of text selection must be articulated. Bodies of theory must be determined as appropriate for pursuing the question. The readings of texts are explicitly theorized – indeed, are situated within often contested accounts. And the argument of their paper is to bring together the problematic, the reading and the theories. That is, this third task builds on the previous two but is unlike them, not just in the students’ independent choice of focus, but in requiring a different kind of integration of a reading of the text(s) and a theorized analysis of that reading. It thereby entails a new practice of reflexivity – though one that builds on the demands of previous tasks.

The following excerpt from the spoken seminar given by Student D should exemplify this point.

... *Pride and prejudice* is valued by my interpretive community<sup>6</sup>, this class, for its strong female heroine and study of human behaviour. Yet my problem is this: at the time it was written, *Pride and prejudice* was blueprint fiction. It had motifs and narrative structure used in all Austen novels, and was therefore considered

<sup>6</sup> This term derives from the work of Stanley Fish (1980).

“unoriginal”. That text has not changed, yet it is now valued. I understand that this would be attributed to differing interpretive communities with different values. However, the interpretive community of literary theorists and critics do not value blueprint fiction<sup>7</sup> – think of the reaction to *The Da Vinci Code* – yet we value this text. Why does my interpretive community value something of a type it rejects? I know this happens, but I don’t know why. Unfortunately, due once again to the exclusion of textual or narrative structure that is the definitive component of blueprint fiction, Stanley Fish has not answered this for me.

This student, like others, is articulating a theoretical discourse and attempting to appropriate it in undertaking the reading. Student D is not only demonstrating an understanding of the theory but is using it to construct an argument about the texts. Indeed, the concept of interpretive communities is itself the source of the problematic. Linguistically, this is reflected in a preference for questions in this final piece. In this text, the student asks: “Why does my interpretive community value something of a type it rejects?” The answers have to be hammered out (“I don’t know why”) via theory but some theorists prove wanting (“Stanley Fish has not answered this for me”). Here, the student is becoming an apprentice theorist who is engaging with the theorist (Fish) on his ground. The student takes on and knows a new self, and a new authority, in this company.

## STUDENTS AS SUBJECTS: DEVELOPING REFLEXIVITY

It is now time to build on our previous scattered observations about the development of students’ reflexivity through their engagement with literary theories, and to consider the risks, and rewards, for students.

As in any program of study, some students who undertake Extension English may show weaknesses that are peculiar to the course and perhaps a sign of its dangers. Students who have not already developed a capacity for subtle and discriminating discussion of literary texts may produce work that is thin in substance. Those who have misunderstood or only partly understood complex theories can apply them in inappropriate ways. And other students may present dubious arguments when they play for high theoretical stakes. It should, however, be noted that these students – who are awarded only a “Sound” or “Limited” level of achievement – are a small minority of those who complete the course.<sup>8</sup> The majority demonstrate high levels of achievement and are enabled by the course to explore literature in ways not possible in traditional approaches.

More fundamentally, it could be argued that when students are required to articulate literary theories and produce readings and critiques in accordance with those theorized discourses, they may be little more than ventriloquists’ dolls – in the sense that they are only mouthpieces for the “real” speakers who stand behind them. Certainly the theories of reading that underpin the course do not allow the sole,

<sup>7</sup> Student D’s topic addresses the problematic of differing valuations of two works of “blueprint fiction” – defined as “that which follows a certain narrative structure, through its plot, characterizations and narrative techniques” in a rather formulaic way.

<sup>8</sup> In 2006, 32.55% of students were awarded a Very High Achievement (A or Distinction standard), and a further 40.44% were awarded a High Achievement (B or Credit standard) (figures available from [http://www.qsa.qld.edu.au/yrs11\\_12/statistics/2006/QS1123C\\_2006.pdf](http://www.qsa.qld.edu.au/yrs11_12/statistics/2006/QS1123C_2006.pdf)).

ultimate source of meaning to be located naively in the students. And certainly the students have to take on discourses that are not their own “natural” voice. There is a risk, not always avoided, that students may seize on the shiny bright phrases of a theorized discourse to incorporate into their own text without understanding the principles of the theory that underlie expert linguistic and theoretical performance. (By principles is meant the core understandings of a theory which amount to a gestalt that renders unspeakable and unknowable other concepts and practices.)

However, when students take on other discourses this does not mean that they are merely parroting what they do not understand. They are learning a discourse and its way of thinking by doing it – self-consciously, from the first task of the course, where, as we have seen, the students have first to work backwards from the theories to perform two readings, inhabiting for a time those reading positions with the subjectivities that are entailed, and then have to move outside their performances to conduct a theorized, analytical reading. The deliberate, reflexive shifts of subject position and discourse required of students in both tasks 1 and 2 mean that they are not simply being inducted into a discourse, as they might be in acquiring a literary critical capacity in a more traditional literature course. That is, the reflexivity required by these two tasks makes it impossible for students to be merely wooden puppets. And in the third task, the students’ reading of their self-selected text(s) through the lens of their chosen theories in the pursuit of their own problematic prevents them from simply parroting the generalities of a theoretical discourse.

This raises the question of how “personal” the students’ work can be, given the deliberate contrivances of the tasks to promote such reflexivity. English teachers have long valued the signs of personal (affective and intellectual) response in their students’ talk and writing about literary texts. On the evidence of our analyses (which unfortunately we cannot adequately demonstrate here), students’ writing in this Extension English course is very different from the norms of naïve personal response because of their reflexivity. Their responses to literary texts are “personal”, in that the student is self-consciously situated in the reading practice, but they cannot be merely individual, given the premises of the course. Meanings and responses are taken to be produced by a range of factors: cues in the text, negotiations between text and reader, the reader’s personal history, cultural contexts, sets of beliefs, values and theories – and so on. In this course students inquire into the conditions of response in a disciplinary, theorised way; the personal becomes interpersonal, as the students engage in dialogues (diverse, divergent, discrepant) with a range of theorised communities of practice. Ultimately, then, the syllabus could be said to be underpinned by a radically different view of the self. Not a self that is always the same to itself, not a self that speaks “sincerely” from a core of individuality – but one that can try on different theoretical dresses and walk around in different discourses. Not only are meanings of texts malleable; readers and writers are also plastic.

Informal feedback given to district and state panel chairs suggests that many of the teachers and students who have taken the course have come to know different kinds of engagement and pleasures, different satisfactions and achievements – and have become different, as learners, in the process. To theorise the sources of one’s engagements and the conditions of one’s pleasures in texts can itself be a source of additional pleasure. That is, students come to know not a naïve, untheorised pleasure but a more knowing range of enjoyments. Of course, at times they may know

discomfort in puzzling over strange new theoretical discourses and struggling over how meanings and responses are made. Nonetheless, the demands of the course and its tasks enable them to produce different insights into their texts and their interactions with them than are available in other more conventional English literature courses. The following testimony from Student E (who did not attain a Very High Achievement grade) corroborates our point about the value of this course, with its focus on critical reflexivity:

Standing on the summit of Mount Theory, I can see a whole new horizon of ideas and theories about how we read that I did not know of before I began my long climb. As a now critically informed reader I have the knowledge to be aware of the double possibility of all language, the power to make whatever meaning I choose from a text and the ability to decide how it will affect me. *To kill a mockingbird* is a canonized literary text that provokes its readers to universal themes of morality, class issues and racism, and has the power to “question us and who we are ... and gives us the chance to be part of a richer, denser, more all-embracing understanding not only of the text, but of ourselves” (Dagwell, 2006, p. 69 [Reference not located]).

In this paper we have described the poststructuralist premises of this highly innovative senior secondary English literature course and have analysed the consequent assessment tasks designed to enable students to develop “a meta-knowledge of textual and reading practices” (Queensland Studies Authority, 2003, p. 8) and thus attain a theoretically reflexive understanding of the historical and cultural conditions of reading and meaning-making. We have argued that such reflexivity is valuable in helping students to understand the constructed and often contested nature of language in texts, to negotiate the reading positions texts invite readers to take up, to interrogate dominant subject positions that support socially inequitable ideologies (cf. tasks 2 and 3), and to reflect on their own shaped and shaping role in meaning-making. And we have argued for the potential of poststructuralism to engage students more deeply not only with literature but with literariness itself and to understand their capacity as knowing subjects and ethical agents as readers and writers.

The potential of the course and its uptake by students surely challenge syllabus writers, curriculum planners and teachers to rethink what English literature studies can be at senior secondary level, and to give new attention to the value of developing this kind of reflexivity in students. Such reflexivity is all the more important at a time when forces within and beyond education are encouraging acquiescence before traditional forms of authoritative knowledge. One of the charges the conservative commentariat and politicians make against poststructuralism is that in arguing that knowledge and beliefs are relative to their contexts, it holds fast to no positive values. (It is of course a fallacy that recognizing the relativity of all forms of knowledge means subscribing to the belief that all are equal in value.) Developing reflexivity does mean acknowledging relativity. This entails the ability “to see one’s own knowledge, as well as that of others, as a personal and social construction, capable of being interrogated, reframed or reconstrued” (Claxton, 1997, p. 194). Certainly, giving up the belief in the certainty of knowledge (about “the” meaning of a literary text, for instance) may not be easy. Still, as the eighteenth-century, French thinker, Voltaire, put it, “doubt is an uncomfortable condition, but certainty is a ridiculous one”. An intellectual and cultural climate that is hostile to ambiguity and uncertainty can foster not civilized values but the easy solutions of oversimplification, dogmatism and the like. In such a climate, all the more does literary education need to advocate

and encourage the value of the relative perspectives texts take and readers take in engaging with them. And to see how reflexivity – the consciousness of such relative perspectives – can serve democratic interests.

We conclude, as we should, with a student's words. Here is Student B reflecting on the value of reflexivity at the end of the task 3 (b) essay:

So, while we read, there should be a constant tension between "the hermeneutic spell that encourages identification, and the critical mindset that is potentially suspicious" (Poulet, 1970, p. 1214), and through reading self-reflexively the dynamic nature of one's involvement in the meaning-making process can be explored and defended.

Thus, it can be seen that the combination of freedom and determinism bears heavily upon the intensely personal process that is reading. Ricoeur (1969), in particular, allows for the double possibility of all language to be realized by the reader, and, most importantly, allows for self-reflexive readings of literature – whatever that may be. As Marcel Proust said, "the voyage of discovery is not in seeing new landscapes, but in having new eyes."

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