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Creative Writing in A level English Literature

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Abstract

This is a time of change and real development for creative writing at A level. Whilst it has been an important part of English Language and English Language & Literature A level specifications for some time, its presence within English Literature (EL) has been marginal, and is an option that has rarely been adopted by teachers of the subject. Recent changes to EL specifications, however, mean that creative writing now exists in a much more formalised way on all A level EL specifications. As the largest of the three A level 'Englishes', this is a significant development. The advent of creative writing in EL makes this an important issue in teachers' Continuing Professional Development (Green, 2008) and raises important questions for the teaching body in schools and lecturers in further education. What is the role of creative writing in teaching literature? How do creative and analytical writing relate to each other? What is the relationship between creative writing and reading? This paper offers an initial response to these and other issues, and suggests some of the ways in which creative writing can be used both in its own right and to enhance the study of EL at A level.

Introduction

Imagine, if you will, Sherlock Holmes and his trusty sidekick Dr Watson pursuing the investigation of their latest case in the wilds of Devon. To preserve their cover, they are camping out on Dartmoor. Having pitched their tent, they both fall to sleep quickly, but in the middle of the night Watson is woken by Holmes prodding him sharply in the ribs.

'Watson!' says Holmes.

'What is it, Holmes?'

'Look up, Watson. Tell me, what can you see?'

'Stars, Holmes. Thousands of them,' replies Watson.

'And what do you deduce from that, Watson? Apply the methods I have taught you.'

Watson thinks for a moment and then begins. 'Well, Holmes, meteorologically it tells me that it is a fine and cloudless night. Horologically speaking I calculate that it is approximately 3-15 a.m. Theologically, it suggests that we are small and insignificant creatures within the universe God created. Astronomically, it tells me that we live on one of thousands of planets and other heavenly bodies all circulating in the universe. And astrologically, it raises the possibility that we may be under their influence.'

'You're a blithering idiot, Watson,' replies Holmes angrily. 'It shows you some bugger's nicked our tent!'

Many teachers of EL when faced with the teaching of creative writing at A level (the post-16 qualification taken by the vast majority of students in the UK) may find themselves in a similar predicament to the hapless Dr Watson. Unsure quite what

they are looking for, they may well miss the point entirely, or find themselves uncertain of how to make appropriate choices when thinking about using creative writing both on its own terms and as a tool in their teaching of EL.

Suspicion of creative writing

Although this may not be the case in other national contexts, in the UK creative writing is often regarded with some suspicion within academic circles. The following discussion is specifically not to denigrate the validity and importance of creative writing in its own right, nor to suggest that creative writing should exist only as an adjunct to EL – it is simply to establish the particular UK context and pertaining views of the subject.

Comparatively few teachers of English in secondary school or in higher education write creatively themselves. This is likely to increase teachers' sense of uncertainty and personal discomfort in teaching creative writing in a meaningful way to A level students. In addition to this – and probably arising from it – many teachers in schools (like many academics in university English departments – Green, 2005a) may well have suspicions surrounding the value of creative writing. Such doubts are amply illustrated in this letter from an Oxford alumnus, published in *Oxford Today*:

> A Master's degree in Creative Writing? At Oxford? You must be joking! In 50 years, a latter-day Gibbon will note this nonsense as a milestone in the Decline and Fall of Oxford.
>
> Writing is a craft well within the normal compass of every Oxford student; indeed it is a *sine qua non* of scholarship. The addition of the adjective 'creative' is hogwash, and does nothing to legitimise this programme,

> unless Oxford also intends to offer a PhD in Non-Creative Writing. And, by heavens, anything is possible in a university where the Chancellor trundles around in a four-wheeled sandwich board. It is absurd to argue that writing is a craft worthy of scholarly study and a university degree. The only useful route to authorship is to read widely, write often and learn something of the grammar and syntax of English, although, today, one may get by on remarkably little.
>
> These craft degrees debase the credibility of all other degrees, and bring the University into disrepute.

And it is not only teachers, academics and old Oxfordians who harbour such suspicions – similar opinions are sometimes also voiced by students (Green, 2007). Here is a first year undergraduate:

> I wanted to do creative writing, but I didn't want to do ***just*** creative writing. I wanted a ***proper subject*** along with the creative one. English Literature was something that I enjoyed and I think is a core subject. It's sort of ***commendable*** to have a degree in English Literature rather than ***just*** creative writing. (My emphasis)

This student's feeling that she needs to justify her choice to study creative writing as part of her degree is in itself evidence of the innate suspicion of the value and worth of the subject, a suspicion which interestingly does not attach to the study of the creative productions of others within the context of literary study. In spite of her wish to pursue creative writing, the student nevertheless proceeds to verbalise a

pejorative view of the subject (as in the repeated ‘just’), and conversely elevates the study of EL through her use of words like ‘proper subject’ and ‘commendable’. The uneasy relationship between the study of EL and creative writing is obvious.

It is against this background of uncertainty that the presence of creative writing within the new A levels in EL needs to be read. Therefore, if the teaching of creative writing is to be anything more than lip service, and if students are to be genuinely enthused and extended through creative writing experiences and through their creative responses to literature, this kind of attitude needs to be challenged, and teachers need to think constructively about how the teaching of creative writing can be an integral, even essential part of teaching literature at A level.

Where does creative writing fit in A level Literature?

Under the new specifications, all A level examinations boards now offer the opportunity (not yet the requirement) for students to undertake creative responses to the texts they are studying in EL. Often these will be recreative tasks – in which students are required to make something new out of something old (Pope, 1998) – or transformative tasks – in which they are required to transform a text out of one genre into another. In all cases, the creative response must be accompanied by a written commentary analysing the students’ work and relating it to the source text:

- AQA(A) Unit 2: Creative Study – two tasks: 2,000 – 2,500 words in total:
    - a personal informed response to the chosen prose text, either a creative interpretation or creative transformational writing. (AQA (A), 2007)

- AQA(B) Unit 2: Dramatic Genres – a portfolio of two pieces of written coursework. (One may be re-creative):

    - an aspect of dramatic/tragic genre with regard to a Shakespeare play. 1200 - 1500 words.
    - an aspect of dramatic/tragic genre with regard to another play. 1200 - 1500 words. (AQA (B), 2007)

- AQA (B) Unit 4: Further and Independent Reading – a portfolio of two pieces of written coursework. (One may be re-creative):

    - a comparative study of an aspect of two texts. 1500-2000 words.
    - an application of an aspect of critical anthology to a literary text (1200 – 1500 words). (AQA (B), 2007)

- Edexcel Unit 2: Explorations in Drama – two responses are required:
    - an explorative study;
    - a creative critical response.

Tasks should allow students to produce informed, analytical responses which consider playwrights' crafting of the text(s), the ways texts can be compared and the students' own and others' critical response in a creative treatment. (e.g. Creative critical response: Write two letters to

the editor of *The Times Literary Supplement*, one praising a recent performance of *King Lear*; the other criticising it). (Edexcel, 2007)

- Unit 4: Reflections in Literary Studies – the creative response, such as text transformation, may focus on one or more texts. The commentary must include reference to the full range of texts studied in this unit. Students should be advised that the majority of the marks for this activity will be awarded for their commentary. Whilst the element of creativity represented by their own piece of literary writing is important, the reading and research and the critical responses to their chosen reading should form the greater part of the activity and the final work presented for assessment. (Edexcel, 2007)

- OCR Unit 2: Post-1900 Literature – an item of re-creative writing based on a selected passage of their chosen text or of their chosen poem, with a commentary explaining the links between the candidate's own writing and the original passage selected. (OCR, 2007)

- WJEC Unit 2: Prose Study and Creative Reading – this section requires a creative response to wider independent reading and a commentary on the response, equally weighted and of approximately 750 words each. (WJEC, 2007)

It is clear that the steps towards creative writing within the specifications are modest in scope, embodying no doubt the particular scepticism about creative writing

identified earlier. Although these opportunities represent a significant and formalised attempt to integrate creative opportunities within A level EL, they nevertheless still strictly locate creative writing within EL rather than allowing it a life of its own. As such, Literature is still used as a justification for creative writing, rather than the creative seen as valid in its own right. The old suspicions seem as rooted as before.

Benefits of creative writing in teaching and studying literature

Recognising these limitations, however, there are obvious benefits to involving students in the texts they are studying for EL through creative writing. By writing creatively 'into', 'out of' and 'parallel to' texts students can gain extensive insights into the texts they are studying and into the choices authors make (Pope, 2005).

By creatively adopting a writer's language, for example, they can engage in detail with issues of narrative, character, imagery, lexis, and so on. Such creative engagement with text will, if properly prepared for, involve students in deep personal response to their reading. Teachers working with the genuine creative spirit will move beyond this, however. Where creative writing experiences are carefully structured and given autonomous value, allowing students to reflect not only on the literary work in question and to reflect on their own creative processes as writers, students can gain significant insights in both critical and creative dimensions of their writing.

As suggested, the benefits of writing creatively are often overlooked in the study of EL at A level (and in most EL degrees), where the primacy of the 'set text' and often narrowly text-centric approaches to literary experience are adopted (Green, 2005a; Green, 2005b). The act of reading becomes limited to response and analysis. If the tables are turned, however, it is important to recognise that the study of literature

is centrally concerned with acts of individual creativity. And this is so not only in the act of writing. Reading, the individual or shared experience of constructing meaning from text, is essentially an act of creation or recreation (Kress, 1986; Bloom, 1973; Green, 2004).

Larkin (1983, 80) addresses such ideas in ‘The Pleasure Principle’:

> It is sometimes useful to remind ourselves of the simpler aspects of things normally regarded as complicated. Take, for instance, the writing of a poem. It consists of three stages: the first is when a man becomes obsessed with an emotional concept to such a degree that he is compelled to do something about it. What he does is the second stage, namely, construct a verbal device that will reproduce this emotional concept in anyone who cares to read it, anywhere, any time. The third stage is the recurrent situation of people in different times and places setting off the device and re-creating in themselves what the poet felt when he wrote it.

The stages of inspiration, creation and recreation Larkin identifies can and should be explored by students through their own writing and reading.

The central importance of understanding and engaging in creative processes is also explored by Bakhtin (1981, 280), who reflects on the nature of language as vehicle between addresser (author) and addressee (reader):

> every word is directed towards an answer and cannot escape the profound influence of the answering word that it anticipates.

He outlines here what he calls a dialogic relationship between the reader and the author and the text they share, a relationship in which the boundaries between author and reader are somewhat blurred (the issue of 'boundaries' in English is fascinatingly explored by Evans, 1993). Bakhtin points out the mutual responsibility of writer and reader in constructing the meaning of text, and the notional reader has a 'profound influence' on the linguistic creation of the text. It is clear, then, that acts of creative or re-creative response are at the heart of reading and developing understanding of texts (Knights & Thurgar-Dawson, 2006), whether of the students' own composition or by other authors. In adopting the locus of the writer, students are brought into a creative interaction (Bakhtin's 'dialogue') both their writing and reading processes. These creative 'dialogues' happen in unique ways through the processes of creative writing which, therefore, has a central role to play both in its own right and in EL.

Formalising students' thought processes about their creative dialogue with texts throu8gh the act of writing also enriches the act of reading. To demonstrate the point, think about each of the following types of interaction with text:

- prediction;
- visual imagination (of locations, of places, of people, etc.);
- reference back to previous events;
- empathic responses (laughter, tears, sighs, etc.);
- responding to what is said or not said;
- imagining what is not described;
- attributing emotions, motives, etc. to characters/events.

Whenever students apply these strategies in their reading, they are in effect engaged in writerly acts (Green, 2009; Pope, 2005). Here teachers may need to challenge the notion that writing always necessitates the use of pen and paper or a word processor. When, for example, we predict that Hamlet either will or will not summon up the determination to kill Claudius (and it very little matters which of these potential outcomes we do predict), we mentally begin an act of writing that runs alongside and interacts with Shakespeare's. Again, when we visualise Victor Frankenstein's account of his processes in creating the monster, we use abilities as writerly readers to construct what the monster actually looks like. And when Cordelia receives the unwarranted rebukes of King Lear in silence, we mentally write in all the things she does not say and store them away to help us read the events of the play as they unfold. By taking such responses to texts and formalising them within creative writing, where they can also experiment with authors' lexis, tone, form, imagery and so on, students can be provided with extended opportunities to develop sophisticated readerly and writerly interactions with texts and with the processes of creative writing.

As Kress (1986, 198) suggests, writing and reading are obversely related processes. The inter-relations between reading and writing are firmly established but not straightforward:

> Reading and writing are functionally differentiated aspects of one system, and of one set of processes. An exclusive concern with either overlooks essential characteristics shared by both. Most importantly, reading and writing are both activities that draw on the forms, structures and processes of language in its

> written mode … Hence neither the process of reading nor that of writing can be understood in isolation from the other.

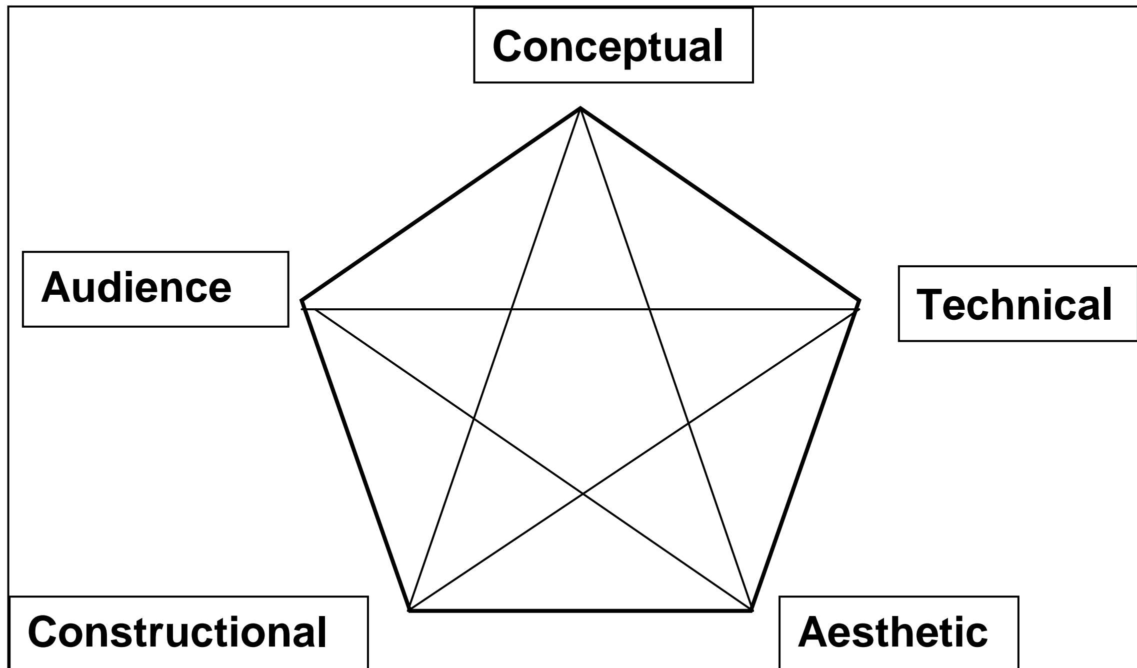
Writing and reading thus operate together to create bridges between what are often taken to be paradigmatic conflicts: creativity and receptivity, affectivity and analysis, personal engagement and public expression (Green, 2007). Such philosophical conflicts between creative writing and Literature do not need to persist. By engaging students within the creative processes of textual creation, in other words, teachers can encourage them to read like writers and to write like readers.

Creative production

As teachers of literature and as teachers of creative writing it is, therefore, essential to develop robust means by which students can engage in meaningful acts of literary creation. The model at Figure 1, adapted from Barlex (2007), may provide a useful way in to considering what constitutes effective creative production in creative writing.

This model provides a useful basis for discussion between teachers and students. How, for example, can and should teachers of creative writing teach concept, audience, technique, construction and aesthetics, and what are the interactions between them? What are the issues that students need to address within their writing generally and within specifically targeted creative writing? What are the specific needs of the target audience? What does this demand in technical and constructional dimensions? What are the key aesthetic and conceptual concerns of the writer, and how are these presented?

Figure 1: Adapted from Model of Creative Production (Barlex, 2007)



It is then important to consider how students' writing experiences should be structured to enable them to develop as writers. This requires thoughtful construction of teaching at the level of small tasks, leading on to the emergence of work at the large task level (see Figure 2) through processes of mediated risk and creative gestation. Teachers need, as a priority, to allow time and space for students to develop as writers and need the confidence that creative writing is valuable in its own right. Beyond this, though not as its exclusive purpose, they can also be sure that such activities will enhance their literary studies. These outcomes require structured, individualised and appropriately varied teacherly intervention at the point of writing.

Figure 2: Small task to large task writing

Conclusions

In their often damning evaluation, Hodgson & Spours (2003, 109) note the damaging narrowing of focus at A level, observing:

> …the sheer amount of content to be tackled and assessed has, so far, in our estimation, made Curriculum 2000 a tedious and uninspiring curriculum that encourages instrumentalism and game-playing to maximise qualification outcome rather than experimentation, creativity and preparation for lifelong learning.

It is to be hoped that with the inauguration of a new A level curriculum this situation may change and that students of Literature will gain an altogether more creatively fulfilling experience. Creative writing requires creative teaching, and what

better way to enable students to learn about literature than to become creators of literature themselves?

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