

CULTURAL IDENTITY IN LITERARY RESPONSE: STUDYING A POLITICAL POEM IN DIFFERENT TERRITORIES

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Abstract

This paper presents research examining the cultural knowledge students draw on when they discuss literary texts. The data suggests the significance of literary study and literary classrooms as spaces where cultural identities are articulated and explored, and that manifestation of cultural knowledge is an essential part of collective literary study.

The research project involves senior students (16-18) in schools in England, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The research used the poem 'Easter, 1916' by W.B. Yeats as a focus for classroom discussions. The poem is studied in each of the three territories, though each has its own curriculum and its own relationship with the Irish Easter Rising. The theoretical model that has dominated literary study in England for several decades is strongly influenced by I. A. Richards' Practical Criticism [1]. In practice, this has led to teaching and assessment that diminish reference to the context of a text's production or to the cultural context of the students considering it. A poem such as 'Easter, 1916' highlights the limitations of such a model. The transcripts in this study point to the fallacy of decontextualized literary response, showing where and how cultural knowledge informs students' responses and when teachers choose to activate it.

The paper introduces a project still in progress, presenting data from its first stage conducted in Northern Ireland. It presents transcripts arising from sixth-form (age range 16-18) classroom discussions of the poem drawn from two schools. The transcripts allow consideration of what students say but also how they build responses and interpretation collectively, and with their teacher. The poem's detail is highly specific to Irish history. Questions relevant to the data include: What part, if any, does the tacit cultural knowledge of students play in their initial engagement with the poem? What do students already know and bring to the discussions? How do teachers guide and develop students' responses, and when do they deem it necessary to supply contextualising detail? To what extent are national perspectives apparent and to what extent do they shape interpretation?

The methods described in the paper continue the author's innovative application of Conversation Analysis to classroom study of literature, which has focussed on the structure of students' discussions and the ways in which they construct interpretations of texts collectively [2,3]. In particular, the transcripts afford examination of how the presentation of a poem influences students' responses. A new area of interest arising from this study concerns the strategies teachers use to activate and organise the cultural knowledge of students relative to the text. What techniques do teachers use to elicit students' cultural knowledge? Once that knowledge is articulated how do teachers use it to develop the responses of students across the whole class? The transcripts indicate that teachers' deploy a mixture of strategies. These include direct questioning, overt presentation of contextual information, humour and parody, use of multimodal texts and management of remarks offered by different students. Conversation Analysis supports examination of how these strategies work in combination, and how they are tailored to the specific requirements of the immediate text for study – in this case 'Easter, 1916'.

Keywords: literary study, cultural knowledge, Conversation Analysis

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 The origin of this research project

My research interest in students' literary response in school classrooms follows directly from my experience as a secondary school teacher of English literature. In my first years of teaching, I guided my senior class (aged 16-18, 'Advanced Level' in the UK) in reading an anthology of poetry by

W.B. Yeats. At the end of the two-year course they faced an examination, where they had to answer an unseen question about Yeats' work. I was struck by the challenge presented by Yeats' poetry, especially in terms of the range of knowledge needed to understand various highly specific cultural, historical and political allusions across the collection. In some cases, the challenge was significant even in individual poems. In this paper I will focus on a poem that can be considered 'historical'. For students to understand the poem an awareness of the historical context of the poem's creation is essential, by which I mean history as the course of national politics. For my students, growing up in Suffolk (an eastern county of England), and for me (born and raised in Yorkshire), the history relevant to 'Easter, 1916' was an unfamiliar history. We had not grown up with a knowledge of modern Irish history, nor of the personal history of Yeats. We knew little of his biography, important here because of his own relationship with the historical moment described in the poem and because of his links with the people named in the text.

'Easter, 1916' is a poem that combines personal and political histories. In this it is like others by Yeats, and it would not be difficult to find examples by other poets that share similar traits [4]. It is possible to deduce some facts about historical events from the lines of the poem, though there remain details that can only be understood with some metatextual knowledge. In terms of pedagogical judgement, related considerations for a teacher might be, respectively:

- a) What can my students find in the poem that elaborates the historical event described?
- b) What further texts should I select and present to my students, and with what rationale?

In England, however, there is a tension between the demands many poems make of students' historical knowledge and the assumptions behind literary study. These assumptions extend to the sort of questions posed in examinations. While examination specifications often refer to students' understanding of social, historical and cultural context, in the examination process students must respond to previously unseen questions, and for some modules, to unseen texts. The influence of I.A. Richards and his approach of 'practical criticism' is strong. There is a tendency to assume that literary texts can be understood with little or no background knowledge. It is as if poems float, decontextualized, apart from things that happened to the poet or in the poet's world. 'Easter, 1916' suggested to me that this was a fallacy. I would have to support my students in understanding some details that are not overt in the poem, and decide how to balance lesson time addressing these with time spent analysing the poem.

1.2 Curricula contexts

Changes to the National Curriculum for England and Wales [5] make history and related cultural knowledge particularly salient issues for teachers of literature. In 2010 the Secretary for Education, Michael Gove, introduced significant change, stating:

We need to reform English – the great tradition of our literature - Dryden, Pope, Swift, Byron, Keats, Shelley, Austen, Dickens and Hardy - should be at the heart of school life. Our literature is the best in the world – it is every child's birthright and we should be proud to teach it in every school [6].

He invoked a canon, narrowing its composition from a curriculum that included diverse global writing in the English language (and including many Irish and Anglo-Irish authors). He simultaneously promoted a core cultural knowledge as 'birthright', a phrase hinting at the influence of E.D. Hirsch [7] on government policy. This also coincided with unprecedented attention to 'British Values' [8] in the curriculum, with the government inspectorate scrutinizing schools' promotion of them even though there is little consensus about what they are. Parallel obligations to promote them are embedded in the statutory competences to be met for the award of qualified teacher status [9]. These changes were presented by the Coalition government (2010-2015). Under the majority Conservative government (elected May 2015), the new curriculum is in force and students aged 14-15 are starting two year courses in preparation for examinations in 2017 [10]. They will study literature in this revised canon, and will be the first cohort for nearly thirty years assessed entirely through examination assessment without coursework. Students' literary responses comprising summative assessment will be presented in writing and in silence, often reacting to texts they have not seen previously. Where they are asked to respond to texts studied over their course, questions focus on how authors present characters or themes, with no explicit reference to the circumstances of a text's production. In summary, the changes to the curriculum seem to embed a notion of literary tradition and define a core of cultural

knowledge. It is a prescriptive model, without the critical engagement with contexts of production we might find accommodated in other approaches to literary study [11].

Concurrently, examination courses for Northern Ireland encompass Irish and Anglo-Irish authors too, the CCEA board's list comprising Goldsmith, O'Casey, Synge, Wilde, Beckett, Behan, Friel and Heaney [12]. The Yeats poems *An Irish Airman Foresees his Death* and *The Cap and the Bells* are also included, in a system where coursework makes 25% of the assessment. The differences signal that in the United Kingdom, the curriculum students and teachers work with is fragmented – with evident cultural differences according to territory. These variations and my attention to 'Easter, 1916' led me to wonder about the approach to literature in the Republic of Ireland. I was intrigued to find examination assessments markedly different from those found in England. Questions are frequently explicit invitations for students to comment on texts relative to their own context and their country's modern history. This was a compelling example:

Many of Eavan Boland's poems observe our violent history in a vivid and moving way; in spite of this, she does not take sides except to mourn the hurt. Discuss [13].

With a little amendment, a similar question could be asked about the poems of Yeats and 'Easter, 1916'. The very direct acknowledgement of the interplay of history and text, and furthermore the expression of a perspective on that history, is very different from the neutralizing presentation of texts found in the English examination system.

1.2 The poem at the heart of the research

Yeats wrote 'Easter, 1916' some months after the event in the autumn of that year (September 25). Numerous high-quality performances can be found online, including one recording of a Dublin schoolgirl reciting the poem as part of an Irish television celebration of Irish poetry [14]. This research entailed teachers and their students encountering the poem for the first time in lessons, and developing their early responses to it. Here is the poem:

I have met them at close of day
Coming with vivid faces
From counter or desk among grey
Eighteenth-century houses.
I have passed with a nod of the head
Or polite meaningless words,
Or have lingered awhile and said
Polite meaningless words,
And thought before I had done
Of a mocking tale or a gibe
To please a companion
Around the fire at the club,
Being certain that they and I
But lived where motley is worn:
All changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

That woman's days were spent
In ignorant good-will,

Her nights in argument
Until her voice grew shrill.
What voice more sweet than hers
When, young and beautiful,
She rode to harriers?
This man had kept a school
And rode our wingèd horse;
This other his helper and friend
Was coming into his force;
He might have won fame in the end,
So sensitive his nature seemed,
So daring and sweet his thought.
This other man I had dreamed
A drunken, vainglorious lout.
He had done most bitter wrong
To some who are near my heart,
Yet I number him in the song;
He, too, has resigned his part
In the casual comedy;
He, too, has been changed in his turn,
Transformed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

Hearts with one purpose alone
Through summer and winter seem
Enchanted to a stone
To trouble the living stream.
The horse that comes from the road,
The rider, the birds that range
From cloud to tumbling cloud,
Minute by minute they change;
A shadow of cloud on the stream
Changes minute by minute;
A horse-hoof slides on the brim,
And a horse plashes within it;
The long-legged moor-hens dive,
And hens to moor-cocks call;
Minute by minute they live:
The stone's in the midst of all.

Too long a sacrifice
Can make a stone of the heart.
O when may it suffice?
That is Heaven's part, our part
To murmur name upon name,
As a mother names her child
When sleep at last has come
On limbs that had run wild.
What is it but nightfall?
No, no, not night but death;
Was it needless death after all?
For England may keep faith
For all that is done and said.
We know their dream; enough
To know they dreamed and are dead;
And what if excess of love
Bewildered them till they died?

I write it in a verse -
MacDonagh and MacBride
And Connolly and Pearse
Now and in time to be,
Wherever green is worn,
Are changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

2 METHODOLOGY

The research reported here is scheduled to involve secondary phase schools in England, Ireland and Northern Ireland. The first recordings were made in Northern Ireland, with transcripts presented below. They were made by teachers of literature volunteering to participate in the study. I set out guidelines to ensure some consistency across each of the research sites, but chose not to be too prescriptive about the approach taken in classrooms. I asked participant teachers simply to 'lead a discussion of the poem with a group of pupils for about one hour's duration. I also ask that you make a digital recording of the lesson using the recorder provided'. Further guidance advised on arranging the group of students:

'Please identify one post-16 A-level group that could participate and provide them with details of the research and the consent letter. It need not be a whole class - the size of the group that actually participates will depend on how many pupils wish to be involved and additionally whether their parents give consent. I will seek from you details of these numbers and the classroom layout for the discussion. An ideal group size is probably 6 to 8 pupils, so that the discussion can be held around one table'.

I provided teachers with a pack that included the poem and a book chapter detailing approaches they might adopt if they wished, but specifying that they ‘follow principles consistent with approaches **a** and **b** described in the enclosed chapter [15], and keep to a minimum the contextual information you provide for pupils, introducing it only where you feel it is essential to the momentum of the discussion. Please also try to keep the lesson based around shared discussion and exploration of the poem’. Teachers received digital voice recorders to make the recordings themselves.

Once recordings were returned to me I made transcriptions using Dragon Naturally Speaking software, a dictation application. Rather than simply listening to the lesson recordings and typing out the transcript, I listened to the recordings pausing every few seconds to repeat what I had heard. The dictation software presented this mediated speech in writing, though some occasional conventional typing was necessary to edit some details. The process of uttering the recordings aloud increased my sensitivity to the accents of teachers and students. It also made me very alert to the varying pitch, tone and volume of speakers. Though these aspects are not considered in detail in this paper, they are relevant to the methods of the later stages in the project, which will develop transcripts according to the conventions of Conversation Analysis. In this paper, the transcripts are presented without CA annotation. The discussion of results is focussed on the content of utterances, rather than the structure of discussion.

3 RESULTS

3.1 School 1

These transcripts derive from a recording made in a girls’ school, in a class led by a female teacher. The class listen to the teacher reading stanza two of ‘Easter, 1916’, which opens with ‘that woman’. Bracketed items in the transcript show words or phrases that were difficult to hear clearly, each one guessing the utterance. The teacher’s first prompt for students is this:

Teacher: ... so we aim to get the kind of listing of the kind of people involved now you were saying you thought it was Maud Gonne

Student: I th- think it's like like a almost a metaphorical approach to like Ireland I (suppose)

Teacher: right

Student: on the whole kind of like a classic (mirror) image of Maud Gonne cos that's was always (unclear) always had it in somewhere in any poem so I think like he's actually like personifying Ireland as a woman

Teacher: that's very interesting because that was done at the time yeah

Student: hmm a lot

Teacher: lots of her iconography erm if we before I do tell you who I think this is and there are links as well to the same classic Maud Gonne (unclear) what other things would give you clues in there as as to who this is does anybody know who this is

Student: is it Countess Markievicz

Teacher: yeah it's Countess Markievicz what do you know about her

Student: erm I know that she was involved in the Easter Rising

Teacher: yeah

Student: and then she was arrested

Teacher: yeah

Student: and they wouldn't try her because she was a woman and that she was also involved in Daughters of Ireland

Teacher: good yeah and do you know how how Yeats knew her

Student: no was she was she not just from the same social circle of Belfast

Teacher: she was absolutely and she grew up

School bell rings

Teacher: she grew up as a child she was called Constance Gore-Booth so the double-barrelled name Anglo Irish in beautiful Lissadell House in Sligo has anybody have any of you visited Lissadell it's open to the public again it was closed for a long time and Yeats spent a lot of time there and er she and her sister Eva again he was kind of fascinated by these two beautiful young women I'll show you a picture of her she went on to become involved in Irish revolutionary politics and actually took part in the Rising

Movement of teacher away from recorder, finding pictures, shows one

In this transcript from School 1 we can see that in exploration of the poem students introduce details not described in the text. This begins with the hypothesis (an incorrect one) that the woman described is Maud Gonne, and develops with reference to what one student calls 'kind of like a classic ... image' of her. To make this assertion, students need to be aware of the existence of Maud Gonne as a figure in Irish history and in the social circles shared by Yeats. It is significant that students can attribute particular traits to her personality. When one student proposes that Yeats is 'personifying Ireland as a woman' through her, she invokes what E.D.Hirsch terms the 'cultural commons' [16]: there is a shared knowledge in the background here that allows the proposal to be accepted as reasonable. It is endorsed by the teacher too, echoing the student's assertion that Yeats deployed similar strategies in other poems ('always had it somewhere in any poem') in her own comment, 'that's very interesting because that was done at the time'. The teacher's next turn opens up the possibility that this figure is *not* Maud Gonne ('...before I do tell you who this is'), and the invitation is taken by the student who offers 'Countess Markievicz'. When prompted with the overt request to share 'what you know about her', the student offers information with an impressive level of specificity. She knows of Markievicz's part in the Rising, of her 'arrest' and its outcomes. 'Daughters of Ireland' (in Gaelic, Inghinidhe na hÉireann) – which Markievicz joined in 1908 - was an organisation solely for women, founded by Maud Gonne in 1900:

its agenda was political, social and feminist: it opposed the Irish Parliamentary Party and Home Rule, opting instead for full independence, but supported the Irish-Ireland movement, the concepts of self-reliance later preached by Sinn Féin, free meals in schools and women's suffrage. It organised programmes of distinctively Irish cultural activities and promoted national self-awareness. The stated objectives of Inghinidhe na hÉireann were: to re-establish the complete independence of Ireland; to encourage the study of Gaelic, of Irish literature, history, music and art, especially among the young (by organising and teaching classes dedicated to the above aims); to support and popularise Irish manufacture... [17]

Neither teacher nor students seek any elaboration of the student's introduction of 'Daughters of Ireland'. Again, it is possible to interpret this as an indication of shared knowledge, and knowledge which permits a depth of understanding of Yeats presentation of 'that woman' in the poem that could not be accessed by readers unfamiliar with the context.

The transcript is also interesting because of the strategies used by the teacher both to activate students' existing knowledge of the Rising and its participants, and to develop their knowledge. We have already seen instances of direct questioning and prompts seeking elaboration. The teacher's final turn in the transcript above shows her supplying further information, then using a photograph to consolidate the identity of this participant in the Rising. This overlaps with another strategy, the use of personal anecdote prompted by the setting for the image, and drawn from the experiences of herself and her husband:

There she is when she's younger (*shows photograph*) err when she was at Lissadell as a young woman you can see the size of her waist one of those Victorian tiny tiny waists and dressed as if for a ball so she was very much part of that ascendancy kind of culture in Ireland and these are some of the nam- the lines that he famously wrote about her the light of evening Lissadell great windows open to

the south two girls in silk kimonos both beautiful one a gazelle and that was her that was that was Constance and when I was a child before Lissadell was closed and reopened her aunts were still living there and you could go and you could talk to them about her and one time my husband visited and being mischievous he said cos the aunts were awfully awfully (old by then?) they were very erm you know they were very (ladylike and everything) and he said do you think Constance ever shot anybody

Students: laughs

Teacher: and they went oh no no no Constance (unclear) things

Students: laughs

Teacher: she didn't actually carry arms whether she shot anybody or not (unclear) and here she is she's changed changed utterly

Students: Uhuh hah ! laughs

Teacher: what's that

Student: that's the way images have (immense power / men's ?)

Teacher: that's right it's such a transformation into a uniform you know and she is commemorated beautifully in Sligo the fantastic kind of statue to her so this is the first name this is the first person.

The strategy achieves a great deal. First, the image makes the figure more real, confirming place and social status in dress (supported by the teacher's reference to the 'ascendancy kind of culture'). It evidently has a resonance with one student's earlier point about personification and iconography, when one seems to remark on 'the way images have' immense power. Students respond to the anecdote with laughter – they are relaxed, unguarded – and laugh again as the teacher puns on the poem's refrain. While important in sustaining engagement, this is a strategy that also supports learning. The humorous pun about changing clothes parallels the transformation of all figures presented in the poem, in a movement from their everyday lives to martyrdom – from casual dress to military uniform, to 'where motley is worn'. The teacher also refers to a statue of Markievicz, once again an apparent echo of the poem where martyrdom 'enchanted' hearts 'to a stone'. Knowledge is activated and then consolidated skilfully and with subtlety. A potentially challenging poem is addressed with what seems like enjoyable ease.

3.2 School 2

This transcript also derives from the recordings made in Northern Ireland. Recorded in a mixed gender class, it demonstrates different teaching strategies to elicit students' response but concentrates on the same figure, 'that woman', in the same stanza of the poem:

Student: he uses like another antithesis like describing her actions he says ignorant goodwill

Teacher: mmm

Student: which I think kind of shows that she thought that she was maybe fighting for a good cause but in reality it was ignorant and just concentrated on like politics and stuff and not actually on the bigger picture

Teacher: very interesting according to whose point of view though

Student: in his point of view it was probably ignorance but in hers it was goodwill

Teacher: really good what else do we learn about her any other details

Student: erm it's like she's kind of the person in the day like a really good kind of person and then at night she's like she changes cos she's she spends her nights in argument he says

Teacher: that's right that's funny I never noticed that before so what does that say about her character do you think

Student: that she is changeable kind of like her personality... can change

Teacher: that's really interesting we're going to come back to that as well erm how else is she described imagine she was just a character in a novel how else is she described

Student: well it says her voice grew shrill so it might show that someone like may not be listening to her something like that

Teacher: mmm very good and then we've got young beautiful as well and she seems to be a horse rider as well so that'd maybe fit in with what you were saying as well somebody with a little bit of money middle-class or more...

The teacher's prompt for students to 'imagine she was just a character in a novel' captures the distinction between this exchange and the one drawn from School 1. This prompt orientates students to the text very clearly as a literary construction. Consistent with this approach, students assemble a sense of a 'character' through the connections between other textual details. The first student turn identifies a literary device and matches it to a quotation, 'ignorant goodwill', which is then elaborated such that it represents duality of perspective. The student posits a perspective of possible disapproval on the part of Yeats (or at least his persona as the voice of the poem) and naïve good intention on hers. Her character is further developed in the suggestion of symbolic antithesis of day and night, her actions varying according to the common associations of good and bad with each. A prompt from the teacher orientates the student to the concept of 'change', and in this respect the outcome of the teacher's guidance is similar to that evident in the School 1 transcript, though the process is quite different. Here too the exchange serves to underline a central concept of the poem, that of the refrain and once again that of 'changed, changed utterly', though the connection is not made explicit at this point in discussion. The exchange presented here does not make reference to historical details so concrete, possibly because there is no point at which a name is given to the woman. As in the poem, she remains anonymous, and attention is primarily on what can be deduced. Even so, the student alludes to a broader context in general terms: 'she was maybe fighting for a good cause but in reality it was ignorant and just concentrated on like politics and stuff and not actually on the bigger picture'. To what extent is that contribution informed by unvoiced knowledge of the Easter Rising and of Ireland's political divisions in 1916?

4 CONCLUSIONS

The transcripts drawn from two schools, each one in Northern Ireland, suggest emerging themes for consideration in the next stages of the study. There are instances in each transcript of students drawing on their knowledge of historical detail and shared culture, certain information tacitly understood perhaps because of their common heritage and context. Some of these details are striking to me because some are unfamiliar or of a kind I can know only through study. This is especially true of details shared by students in the School 1 transcript, for instance with regard to the Daughters of Ireland. The students in these transcripts offer information that the students I taught in Suffolk did not, and could not. As a result, the nature of discussion and the pathways it takes are entirely different. The development of analysis differs too. There are lines of the poem that these students interpret uniquely, such as the lines about the woman being a personification of Ireland, perhaps as a consequence of their shared cultural knowledge and experience.

Another dimension of response here concerns the teachers. The questions they ask and the resources they use are key to activating students' contributions, to prompting individuals to share knowledge that supports the collective and developing interpretation of the poem. In some instances, skilful use of anecdote and humour supports students' understanding, indeed it can be essential to emphasising a subtle aspect of the poem. It is far more than a technique to engage their interest. In other data, the exchanges build interpretation by tracing links between precise details in the texts. I am uncertain at this point how far this process represents one of decontextualized literary analysis, as noted in discussion of the School 2 transcript. How quickly would students with more distant cultural histories come to focus on the issue of a good cause or to speculate on the motives for taking a particular course of action?

I anticipate that closer attention to these same transcripts and others using Conversation Analysis will yield further insights, especially concerning the interpretation of each contribution by other students as far as it is suggested in the structure of the conversation. If their turns function as if to seek further detail, we might assume that the details shared are not common knowledge. Conversely, where there are no turns to seek elaboration, it is possible that knowledge is shared by participants and absorbed in the development of collective response and interpretation.

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