

Using classical reception to develop students' engagement with classical literature in translation

by Shane Forde

Motivation for the Study

While observing A-level students at my PP2 school, I noticed that their responses to classical texts largely consisted of the identification of stylistic tropes. The students could identify a text's stylistic features but they struggled to articulate and develop their own personal reactions to the text. They had been well-trained in this sort of 'feature-spotting' and therefore their reading experience was narrowly mechanical rather than genuinely exploratory. Every passage they encountered was put through the same analytical process with the unsurprising result that every classical author ended up sounding much the same. This seemed to me to be fundamentally passive way of engaging with literature. I was struck by Muir's contention that 'the pupil should not be a passive recipient in the study of literature' (1974, p.515). Hence, I wanted to devise a teaching strategy that would enable my students to be more active in the formulation of a personal response to the text.

On the one hand, I wanted the students to develop a more sophisticated and nuanced appreciation of the ambiguities and ambivalences of the poem. On the other, I did not wish the students to merely regurgitate my interpretation of the poem or that of another scholar. I thought it important that each student feel sufficiently confident in their own reactions to the

text to respond to it personally, but in a way supported by evidence.

Classroom Context

I made my year 12 Classical Civilisation class the subject of this study. Since the beginning of the current academic year, this class been working on the AS level module *The World of the Hero* which requires the students to read abridged versions of classical epic. I took over the class at the beginning of the second term (January 2018) and read the remaining prescribed section of the *Odyssey* with them. Over the course of the term the students had acquired an excellent knowledge of the plot of the poem and could readily recall the sequence of events for each book. However, their interpretations of the characters often tended to be simplistic and two-dimensional i.e. Odysseus is courageous; Penelope is faithful; the Suitors are evil. A consensus had developed in the class whereby the elements of the poem that did not fit into these narrow categories were overlooked.

The Students

This study focuses on a top set class consisting of three pupils, each of whom has a target grade of A. None of the students study another classical subject or

a 'literary' subject (i.e. English or a modern foreign language). Student A has an excellent facility for extemporisation and contributes willingly and intelligently to class discussions but is less articulate in his written work. Student C, dissimilarly, is very reticent in discussions; however, this reticence is more a sign of thoughtfulness and intellectual fastidiousness than ignorance or ill-preparedness. Student A mostly does not read classical texts outside of class; Student C has read widely within classical literature and has read the *Odyssey* in translation several times. Student B occupies a middle ground between the two, both in terms of her expressiveness and the extent of her prior reading.

Whole School Context

This study took place at an independent, co-educational day and boarding school where, in 2017, 87% of the students achieved A* to C grades at A-level and more than 34% of all results were at A* or A grade.

Literature Review

Reader Response Theory

One of the challenges of this research project was to extend my students' perception of what constitutes a valid

form of reading and interpretation. Two literary theoretical approaches implicitly dominated my students' attitude to reading: historicism and new criticism (the latter is often known as 'formalism').

Historicism is a style of literary criticism that attempts to locate the meaning of a text in its context. A historicist interpretation essentially treats the text as a historical document. So, for example, reading the *Odyssey* in a historicist manner yields information on the cultural practices of eighth-century Greece such as guest-friendship, ritual sacrifice and slavery and can tell us how the Greeks of Homer's day lived in religious, civic and military terms. In this mode, Kahane argues that 'poetry is never detached from its historical surroundings and Homer's poetry, which tells the story of heroes and war, standard topics of historical writing, must also be seen against the background of historical, social and material contexts' (2012, p.18). Reading in this manner, my three Classical Civilisation students frequently tried to find examples in the text of where the Ancient Greek laws of *xenia* ('guest-friendship') were violated or upheld. This had become the dominant concern of their reading. Van Nortwick suggests that a historicist pedagogy inculcates in students a sensitivity to anachronism (1997, p.188). Similarly, Said argues that the works of Homer are best interpreted as manifestations of historical reality (2011, p.77). In other words, the student is reading Homer in order to find out about Homeric Greece.

A consequence of this approach is that students need a substantial amount of historical knowledge in order to be able to engage with the text in the first place. This historicist approach to the text erects a barrier between the student and the text. One may accept Finley's thesis that the Homeric poems are narratives that describe a concrete, historical reality (1954, p.15) but, when teaching my small group of Classical Civilisation students for this research project, I found it necessary to take into account the potential for this view to inhibit, at least initially, the students' engagement with the text. Within this pedagogical approach, students are not encouraged to derive a meaning from the poems in the absence of historical information. Effectively, the students' task becomes assessing the text for its historical insight

rather than reacting to the text in a personal or individual way.

An alternative theoretical framework is found within so-called new criticism, which takes a strictly formalist approach to literature, arguing that it exists in a domain that transcends history. One of the chief proponents of this approach, Cleanth Brooks, argues that 'form is meaning' and that one should not appeal to information outside of the text to interpret the text (1951). New critics view the text as an autonomous, artistic construction rather than as a historical product.

From this perspective a poem is considered to be a formal verbal object whose meaning is construed through 'close reading'. In other words, the text rather than its context is treated as primary rather than secondary. Reading through the lens of new criticism involves identifying a text's stylistic features. Brooks suggests that a literary text is a 'pattern of resolutions and balances and harmonisations' (1947, p.203) Under this model, the students' task becomes a matter of acquiring the knowledge necessary to discern this unity. Fundamental to the new critical approach is the notion that a text has a unified meaning. Tyson argues that a new critical reading must, by definition, identify the formal features of a text and describe how they contribute to its 'organic unity and theme of universal significance' (1998, p.448). Franzak has argued that the new critical focus on unity and resolution has resulted in the dissemination of the notion that there is 'a single correct way to the text' (2008, p. 331). In a diametric contrast to the historicist approach, students practising new criticism must be able to analyse the text on a formal level without appealing to contextual information.

Franzak argues that both of these approaches have been profoundly influential on literary pedagogy (2008, p.331) and both arguably inhibit students from developing a personal response to the text. Among my own students, there was a tendency to focus either exclusively on historical or stylistic matters. A third literary theoretical approach with a different and perhaps more pedagogically efficacious emphasis is reader-response theory which argues that a text has no meaning before a reader experiences it. Reader-response criticism views readers'

reactions to literature as vital to interpreting the meaning of the text. Murfin suggests that it 'focuses on what texts do to - or in - the mind of the reader, rather than regarding a text as something with properties exclusively its own' (1991, p.253). Furthermore, Tucker has argued that this approach involves students in 'an active, not passive, encounter with the literature...[and] validates them as critical readers who are capable of determining meaning in texts' (2000, p.199). Both Murfin and Tucker argue for what could be termed hermeneutics of ambiguity.

In other words, if the meaning of a text is latent and opaque until activated anew by each successive reader, this implies that students are free to make interpretive suggestions. The coherence rather than the correctness of the suggestions is what matters. Students who read under the rubric of reader-response theory do not need to master a body of knowledge in order to read the text. Putting the case extremely, Harold Bloom has argued, 'the individual self is the only method...for apprehending aesthetic value' (1994, p.23). As long as they can render their viewpoint in the form of a coherent, internally consistent argument, the interpretation of the student is valid and admissible. Woodruff and Griffin argue that this method enhances the direct engagement of students with literature (2017, p.113). Moreover, my A-level Classical Civilisation students, when unburdened by the strictures of historicism or formalism, seemed more readily able to comment on the text and offer even tendentious opinions, though always supported by textual evidence.

However, reader-response theory does have a significant potential shortcoming. As Johnston has argued 'it can ensnare us in our own values, the values of our culture, rather than giving us a perspective from which we can examine and criticize these values' (2000). This is a salient critique of reader-response theory. Both Bloom and Hammond argue that one of the fundamental features of classical literature is its strangeness, the extent to which it is not like our own lived experience and therefore needs to be translated in myriad ways in order to be fully understood (Bloom 2011, p.16-24; Hammond 2009, p.1-13). With my own A-level students, I have found that encouraging them to develop a personal

response makes the text appear more accessible. Nonetheless, I was conscious of the fact that an interpretation predicated upon reader-response theory could result in the students only highlighting the parts of the text that were familiar, relatable and 'modern'. To counteract this problem, I guided the students to react to some passages that I considered to be ostensibly unfamiliar and decidedly uncontemporary.

However, Seranis implicitly addressed Johnston's critique, when he argues that 'naive interpretations need to be taken as the starting point for helping students strengthen their enjoyment and understanding of literature and become aware of the reading activity as a process that they have to engage with in order to further their aesthetic schemata'. (2004, p.77). A reader-response pedagogy invites interpretations that are potentially wrong-headed in order to get the students engaged by the matter of the text. Once the students' have become engaged, other critical faculties can be honed.

One problem I find with Seranis' work and that of reader-response theorists more generally is their arguments are predicated on the presumption that the students will indeed have a personal reaction once presented with a text. Muir suggests that 'most ancient literature does not awaken an immediate response in pupils...there are barriers of remoteness, sophistication [and] means of expression' (1974, p.515). I have found that my A-level students needed a catalyst of provocation beyond the text in order to be able to identify and articulate their responses. I thought that classical reception material might provide the necessary provocation.

Classical Reception Theory

Though a pedagogy predicated upon reader-response theory may make it easier for students to respond to texts by obviating the need for a mastery of a prerequisite body of knowledge, the problem remains that students may still find the text inaccessible and opaque. One possible approach to ameliorating this problem may be the use of classical reception material to provoke a student response. Rather than requiring the students to form an opinion of the primary text, they are asked to respond to a potentially more accessible secondary

text which responds in some way to the primary text.

Hardwick and Stray define classical reception study as the analysis of 'the way in which Greek and Roman material has been transmitted, translated, excerpted, interpreted, rewritten, re-imagined and re-presented' (2008, p.1). Crucially, this definition can include any literary composition that responds to a text. Hardwick has also said that 'reception studies...focuses critical attention back towards the ancient source and sometimes frames new questions or retrieves aspects of the source which have been marginalized or forgotten' (2003, p.4). Though Hardwick is referring to the use made by the scholarly community of classical reception material, this remark can be given a pedagogical application. When reading a classical text, the reader may fail to observe crucial elements of the composition. Being relatively new to classical studies, my A-level students had not yet necessarily developed the critical capacity to know what to look for or what to comment on. Telling the students what to look for was counter-productive in that these students merely sought out what they have been instructed to find. They were then not forming their own opinion but were merely substantiating that of their teacher. Reading an ancient source through the prism of a reception text meant that that students were implicitly guided in their reading rather than instructed in what to think.

In other words, the *modus operandi* of this way of reading is to investigate how responses to a source can yield insight into the source itself. One of the chief concerns within classical reception study is the response of the imagination to the classical past; an imaginative response is deemed as valid a mode of engagement as a scholarly one. Martindale neatly sums up the aesthetic preoccupations of this approach when he declares that 'we need artists from the past as well as the present to help us see' (2013, p.181). By reading a classical reception text, the readers' vision is sharpened. However, the reception text merely aids this process; it does not govern it. The reader is free to accept or reject or qualify the interpretation provided by the classical text. In the process, they may start to develop their own. As Beard has argued 'the classical tradition is something to be engaged with,

and sparred against, not merely replicated and mouthed' (2013, p.3). This creative, pugnacious means of reading the classics is codified with the tradition of classical reception. Deacy has argued that once students see the diversity of possible interpretations of a given classical text, they are generally more liable to venture an interpretation of their own (2015, p.4). By engaging with the classics in this way, my own students become part of the chain of responses to seminal classical texts.

Pedagogical Approaches to Fostering a Personal Response to Classical Literature

In the classical pedagogical literature of the 1960s and 1970s which I have consulted, there is significant disagreement about what the desired goal of literary study is and how this goal, however conceived, is best brought about.

Both Doughty and Muir (Doughty 1966; Muir 1974) argue in favour of the central importance for the teacher of fostering a personal response to classical literature in their students. Though neither offers a full definition of what constitutes a personal response they each outline approaches that inhibit its development. On the one hand, Muir suggests that it is 'neither the repetition of received authority nor the mechanical application of a procedure; the pupil must play an active role in discovery and explanation' (1974, p.522). In essence, Muir contends that a personal response does not merely involve teaching students how to recount the argument of another scholar in their own words or to reiterate some or other technique of literary analysis. In other words, he has observed the problematic effects of historicist and new critical pedagogies. Doughty, on the other hand, defines the barrier to fostering a personal response as 'an aesthetic approach that is consistently emotive [which]...can do no more than point to 'beauties' in the text, and develop a language of elevated sentiment' (1966, p.32). This often is no more than a variation on the feature-spotting previously mentioned: 'I like it when Homer uses X feature to depict character Y'. The student puts forth no argument; they do not use their critical faculties. They merely identify a poetic technique and praise it. This pedagogical approach fosters anodyne veneration of the poet

rather than critically-informed personal experience of the poem. Muir emphasises the shortcomings of an oppressive insistence on objective fact; Doughty condemns it as an excessively subjective interpretive free-for-all. Though it may be legitimate to say that the relative difficulty of classical texts makes it difficult to respond to them personally, neither Muir nor Doughty offer any clear strategies on how to overcome such a hurdle.

Addressing this lacuna, Smith has argued that students can engage with a literary text most effectively when they do so imaginatively rather than critically (1973, p.297). He describes a student who wrote an essay on the character of Odysseus in which the student did not recount the story of Odysseus' returning home, but rather described how he himself would have felt in the imaginary situation of returning home to a houseful of unknown men trying to persuade his mother to run off with them. Smith says that the student 'probably got further into Odysseus's situation than many other pupils who appeared firmly located in Ithaca' (1973, p.298). Smith argues that this particular student's sympathetic understanding of Odysseus was enhanced by being given the freedom to respond imaginatively rather than by being required to take account of more empirical matters. In this respect, he is a reader-response theorist *avant la lettre*. Though his article is merely the anecdotal evidence of an individual case, rather than a more fully-substantiated case study, it nonetheless suggests a potentially fruitful means by which a personal response could be prompted.

Kenney and Balme also suggest additional ways in which a student's imagination could be stimulated and their critical faculties engaged (Balme, 1963; Kenney, 1964). Both suggest that reading classically-influenced English literature can enable the student to better understand classical literature. In effect, they are both advocates, albeit unwittingly, of classical reception theory. Kenney recommends his classics students to spend as much time as they can reading English literature while Balme argues that 'parallels in English poetry often throw light on what the ancient writer really means' (1963, p.100). Both writers agree that reading later literature enables students to reach a superior understanding of ancient literature. Balme

argues that a 'detailed comparison of [ancient and modern] poems' (1963, p.100) enables his students to develop a better response to ancient texts.

Pedagogical Approaches to Fostering a Personal Response to English Literature

Even a brief perusal of some of the scholarly literature concerning the fostering of a personal response to English literature reveals a distinct variety of approaches. Zabka has argued that it is lamentable 'aesthetic experience has been displaced by an emphasis on supposedly more scientific or analytical approaches to literature' (2016, p.230) as it prevents the students from developing interpretations that are 'personally meaningful' (2016, p.230) to them. Similarly, Vischer Bruns argues that 'an experience capable of facilitating self-formation or carrying...personal significance' (2011, p.65) is denied students when teachers adopt an excessively analytical approach to literary engagement. Both Zabka and Vischer Bruns argue for the importance of allowing the students to become swept up and engrossed by the text. The emphasis each place on the concept of 'experience' is analogous to the importance Smith attaches to 'imagination'. All three writers put forward a pedagogical approach founded on a view of literature as a trigger for subjective experience rather than a domain for objective analysis. I agree with this judgement as I noticed that the three students whom I taught for this research project needed to have a personal experience of the text in order for it to engage them imaginatively. This appeared to be a necessary precondition for them to generate a more cogent response to the text.

Nevertheless, Wood adopts a more critical attitude towards approaches that initially emphasise a creative and personal response to texts (2017). When observing a group of Y9 students being taught Shakespeare, she found that requiring them to engage in creative activities 'as a means of exploring an unfamiliar text... can lead to resistance and disengagement' (2017, p.308). She noticed that students who were encouraged to dramatise certain Shakespearean scenes or respond to the text in imaginative ways floundered because they had not been given thorough instruction in the intricacies of Shakespearean language, plot and cultural context. Wood argues that a personal response cannot effectively be fostered

without the teacher first equipping the students with a basic knowledge of the text. A consequence of this view is that if a student finds the text impenetrable, imaginative empathy is difficult to accomplish. Implicit in Wood's argument is the notion that a student must be able to orientate themselves in the world of the text as a precondition of any kind of more personal response.

All of the scholars I have referred to agree that a teacher should provide some manner of context for the text to be comprehensible. Nonetheless, this begs the question which Wood does not address; namely what is the optimum amount of contextual material? I have observed lessons at both my PP1 and PP2 schools where context was emphasised to such an extent that it displaced the text and inhibited the latent capacities of those particular students to respond imaginatively, personally and ultimately with understanding.

Conclusion

While observing my A-level Classical Civilisation students at my PP2 school, I found that the historicist and formalist methods to literary interpretation were dominant. These approaches had what I deemed to be an inhibiting effect on the students' willingness to develop a personal response to what they were reading. Reader-response theory offered an approach that was not only more adaptable to the needs of my individual students but also allows for a multiplicity of diverse responses. Nonetheless, even with such barriers removed, the students still struggled to identify and develop the responses they were having to texts. This made me want to investigate the hypothesis that reading poems about the *Odyssey* (i.e. classical reception material) would enable them to better articulate their own personal responses to the poem.

Research Questions

My research questions are as follows:

- 1) How do students respond in class to the use of classical reception to help them develop a personal response to the *Odyssey*?

- 2) To what extent does the students' writing show the deepening of their response to the *Odyssey*?
- 3) How do the students say they value the way in which classical reception material helped them develop a personal response to the *Odyssey*?

My data collection methods for the first research question were the observations I made of the students' responses after I had conducted the classes. To answer the second research question, I primarily relied on two essays written by the students for homework in response to the material covered in class. I address the final research question by interviewing the students about their experiences of and reactions to the classical reception material.

Teaching Sequence

I taught two pairs of lessons over the course of two weeks. The overall theme of the first pair of lessons was the character of Odysseus while the theme of the second pair was the role of female characters in the *Odyssey*. By this stage, the students had finished their first complete reading of the prescribed sections of the *Odyssey*. The first lesson focused on determining what the image of the oar in Book XXIII indicates about the character of Odysseus; the second focused on the life of Odysseus after the action of the poem; the third focused on the character of Penelope; the last focused on major female characters in the poem, in particular those of Circe, Calypso and Athene. In order to gain insight into each of these themes, the students read later poetic interpretations of them. They read the following poems:

Lesson 1

Wolfe Tone by Seamus Heaney
Oar by Moya Cannon
The Oar by Michael Longley

Lesson 2

Ulysses by Alfred, Lord Tennyson
Inferno XXVT by Dante Alighieri [trans. Clive James]

Lesson 3

Reunion by Louise Gluck
Penelope's Despair by Yannis Ritsos
An Ancient Gesture by Edna St. Vincent Millay

Lesson 4

Circe by A.D. Hope
Circe's Power by Louise Gluck
Calypso by Derek Mahon
Love of Odysseus and Athena by anonymous

Each of the lessons involved interpreting the views manifested in the various poems and trying to see to what extent they differed or accorded with what the students deemed to be the Homeric presentation.

Methodology

This research project contains elements of two research methods, namely case study and action research. During this research project I asked the students to reflect on different elements of the *Odyssey* by using poems inspired by the text to sharpen or question their perceptions. In essence, I wanted to see whether reflecting on poems inspired by the *Odyssey* would enable the students to better understand the *Odyssey*. Yin defines the case study research method 'as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used' (1984, p.23). Given that I was trying to determine the qualities of the students' responses rather than the quantity of their recall, I determined that a case study was the most potentially efficacious methodological approach.

However, Verma and Mallick suggest that one of the defining features of action research is that 'the desired outcome is an improvement in the teaching/learning situation' (1999, p.93). Given I was also trying to effect a change/improvement in the quality of the students' response to the text, this research project is classifiable as action research. In addition, Verma and Mallick argue that action research is undertaken by someone who 'is normally both the researcher and practitioner' (1999, p.93). For this project, I not only observed the students' responses but was also partly responsible for prompting them. My knowledge of the students' interests and abilities enabled me to ask them questions in such a way as to maximise the likelihood of a response that would be fruitful for the student;

nonetheless, I was not as objective as an impartial observer would have been because I was, in effect, a participant observer. Therefore, any of my conclusions must necessarily be tentative.

This research project also displays others features of a case study in that it is idiographic, naturalistic and interpretivist. Broadly speaking, educational research can be conducted according to two broad paradigms, namely nomothetic research and idiographic research. Nomothetic research is concerned with 'general patterns and rules that once discovered will be expected to be widely applicable' (Taber 2013, p.45). My class consisted of three students so it was not possible to extrapolate patterns or formulate rules based on such a small sample size. However, even this group of three presented significant differences from one another in terms of their command of and interest in the *Odyssey*. Despite being small in number, they nonetheless resisted a homogenous characterisation. Hence, idiographic research (which 'recognises value in exploring the idiosyncrasies of the unique individual case' (Taber 2013, p.45)) seemed like the research paradigm most likely to produce a worthwhile result.

I have been teaching this particular class since the beginning of the term and began my case study in the last two weeks of the term. I was trying to preserve a sense of continuity with the previous classes, save for the fact that we were now trying to reflect on classical reception materials in order to develop an understanding of the text, as opposed to conducting a close reading of the text. My case study was naturalistic insofar as it rejected 'the technology of manipulation (i.e. randomisation, matching and replication) that is the defining attribute of experimental social research' (Hamilton 1980, p.78). I wanted to explore the impact of classical reception material on the students' thinking as unobtrusively as possible in the usual classroom context. My case study is also, by definition, a form of interpretivist research in that it 'relies upon the (inevitably somewhat subjective) interpretation of a particular human being who will necessarily bring his or her own idiosyncratic experiences and understanding to the interpretations made' (Taber 2013, p.45). In other words, my determination as to the success or

otherwise of this research is based on qualitative rather than quantitative analysis.

Research Methods

In order to answer each of my research questions I adopted three distinct approaches to gathering the necessary research data.

In respect of my first research question, I have relied primarily on my own observations of the students' responses in class. These observations are based on notes taken by me on the same day I conducted the classes and on my subsequent reflections on these notes. One of the chief problems associated with this method of data-collection is that it is based on my own admittedly subjective impressions of the students' responses. There were no audio or visual recordings of the class nor did a third party formally observe the lessons. I did not take notes of the students' responses during the lesson but I did record as much as I could remember immediately afterwards. I did not wish to disrupt the flow of the lesson by note-taking or to inhibit the students' responsiveness by recording them.

To address my second research question, I required the students to write an essay in response to each pair of lessons. The questions were as follows:

Lessons 1 & 2 'Odysseus is a selfish liar who has neither compassion for human life nor the capacity for real change. Though he may return to Ithaca, he has no real desire to stay there.'

Lessons 3 & 4 'The female characters of the *Odyssey* are little understood, especially by Odysseus'.

For each essay, they were asked to say to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the statement. They were also asked to substantiate their points with close reference to the text and to subsequent creative interpretations of it. This method of data-collection is more tangible than for the first research question. Student C in particular expresses himself much more confidently in writing than orally so it allowed me to capture his reactions in a format than was more amenable to him.

To investigate my third research question, I interviewed the students within a week of the final lesson about their experiences. Student A is much more

articulate in conversation and in his classroom contributions than in his written work so an interview seemed the best method of capturing his reactions to the project. Student B showed an equal facility with both speaking and writing.

Qualitative Data and Findings

Students' Initial Attitudes to Homer

My primary aim during these lessons was to facilitate the students' development of an appreciation of the ambivalence of the poem. The students associated the apparent clarity and directness of Homeric style with two-dimensional simplicity. A discussion with the students during the first lesson of their understanding of oral composition revealed that they associated orality with a kind of crude primitivism. As student B put it, 'Didn't he [Homer] just use the same language over and over again to fill in the metre when he was singing the poem on the spot?'. Their misunderstanding of the role of epithets resulted in the students reading with the latent assumption that the complexity of Homer's characters was no deeper than their most common epithet i.e. Odysseus is intelligent, Penelope is faithful and so on. The students did not view even the main characters of the poem as having depth. As student A said, 'They're all fairly straightforward'. The difficulty of the poem, as far as my students were concerned, lay at the level of diction rather than meaning. The needed to be told what a brazier or a winnowing-fan is; why Odysseus, Penelope and the rest behave as they do is self-evident. This attitude extended towards all of the poems' characters: the suitors are 'just evil' (in the words of student B); Circe, Calypso and Polyphemus are 'savage monsters' (in the words of student C). In effect, the students considered the poem to be a clear, dualistic allegory of good versus evil. As a consequence, the students often neglected the more opaque or symbolic parts of the poem. I wanted to problematise this reductive interpretation and consequently enrich their own response.

Allied to this viewpoint was the presupposition that there can be only one valid interpretation. The students implicitly viewed the poem as a puzzle for

which there is a right answer which the teacher will provide. It is the students' task to divine what this right answer is and faithfully reproduce it in an exam. This led to a staid consensus developing in their responses where the students were reluctant to pursue or develop any nascent feelings of dissent. Prior to delivering the lessons for this research project, I tried to address this problem by giving the students some provocative comments from the scholarly literature to reflect upon. The students wholly adopted these views rather than subjecting them to critical scrutiny. Admittedly this is made all the more challenging by the fact that the scholarly literature is written in a persuasive register that is designed to be unassailable. The students lacked the confidence in their own knowledge to mount any sort of refutation. As student C said 'it's hard to remember what I thought beforehand after reading the scholarship'. Reading the scholarship inhibited the students' responsiveness rather than enriching it. Nonetheless, I wanted them to begin to engage with the responses of others in a way that caused them to reflect on their own views rather than adopting the views they were reading. Therefore, I suspected it may be easier for the students to engage with poetry inspired by the text rather than scholarship analysing the text. A comment made by student A at the end of our sequence of lessons was indicative of the previously reductive attitude of the students: 'Sir, there is much more going on in this poem than you might think at first reading. Homer is cleverer than I thought'. Similarly, student B commented 'So, most things in this poem could be interpreted in a few ways?'. The class had begun to understand the artifice, nuance, sophistication and hermeneutic indeterminacy of a text they had previously thought of as an engaging but nonetheless straightforward story.

The Image of the Oar and the Character of Odysseus

I began the sequence of lessons by asking the students to reflect on the symbol of the oar in *Odyssey* 23. They found it to be a deeply inscrutable image and could not understand the significance of its inclusion in the poem. As student B put it, 'I can see what Homer's doing with Penelope and the bed – he's saying that

Penelope is cunning like Odysseus – I have no idea what’s going on in the oar bit. What’s the point of it?’ Students A and C were similarly baffled by the image. It seemed to strike them as a non-sequitur. I asked the students what they thought Odysseus would do after returning to Ithaca. Would he be content to remain there? All the students responded in the affirmative. Student B summed up the view of the class by saying ‘That’s all Odysseus has wanted for the whole poem – to get home’. We read together Cannon’s brief lyric poem on *The Oar*. Initially the students were quite confused by the poem. Its brevity seemed to be the chief obstacle the students had in engaging with it. While I read the oar section of *Odyssey* 23 aloud, I instructed them to read Cannon’s poem and to look for any similarities to or differences from the *Odyssey*. Student B quickly cited the passage which shows that Odysseus is commanded to return home, whereupon she became quite dismissive of the poem saying that ‘It gets the details wrong’. I asked the student to consider how the poet might be offering an interpretation of Homer’s character and not merely committing an error which prompted her to write, following reflection: ‘When he goes to plant the oar, he will build his house showing his resistance for [sic] going home. But also, how the oar can’t be planted because the sea/world is incapable of being fully explored – so much to see. Planting the oar symbolises the end of a journey and his voyaging life. I agree with the view of Cannon. He [Odysseus] is constantly wanting to go away’. This reflection shows that reading a classical reception text brought about not only a transformation in student B’s thinking. It also gave her the platform upon which to construct a nuanced and personal response to the text.

A poem with a similar theme to that of Cannon is Ni Chuilleanain’s *The Second Voyage* where Odysseus’ oar ultimately connotes his restlessness and dissatisfaction with remaining on Ithaca. Student C understood how to interpret the poem but was not convinced of its interpretation of Odysseus. He wrote in reply: ‘Odysseus may have a yearning for new voyages but I think he is more interested in heaping up his *keleos* and going back to organise his house’. In particular, student C mentions Odysseus’ yearning for home in *Odyssey* I. These two

poems on a similar theme managed to engender two wholly different, but nonetheless legitimate, responses in the students. Though each student was initially confused by the language of the poetry (as they confirmed to me in interview), their views of Odysseus’ character were ultimately challenged. Student B changed her view by virtue of reading Cannon; student C clarified his own convictions about Odysseus by reading, understanding and finally rejecting the view espoused by Ni Chuilleanain. The students defended their differing views in discussion, with student B representing Odysseus as a dauntless, romantic voyager and adventure-seeker while student C viewed Odysseus as courageously striving to be reunited with his family and take up the responsibilities of home once again. Reading the poetry had a significant impact on how the students responded to the poem and led to the class having nuanced debates with one another rather than merely lapsing into incurious consensus.

Each of the students noticed that Heaney’s *Wolfe Tone* and Longley’s *The Oar* used the similar images but drew entirely different conclusions about Odysseus’ character. Student C found this difference very difficult to justify: ‘How can they even be reading the same poem? They surely can’t both be right?’. I then asked the students to collaborate in creating a spider-diagram of Odysseus’ character traits. Their suggestions ran the gamut from ‘courageous’ to ‘sneaky’. At this point, student C said, ‘Maybe the fact that so many people think so many different things about Odysseus tells us something about Odysseus’. By reading mutually contradictory classical reception texts, student C had arrived at a deeper appreciation of the nature of Odysseus’ polyvalent identity. He ceased to think of Odysseus as a kind of cartoon figure and was able to think of him in a more profound way.

Odysseus after the *Odyssey*

One of the difficulties the students had in deepening their engagement with the text is that they often thought about the story in quite abstract terms. For example, an abiding concern for all three students when I took over the class was whether or not various characters upheld or violated

concepts like *xenia* (guest-friendship) or *dike* (justice). While these are crucial concepts for understanding the world of the poem, the students’ ‘intellectualised’ mode of reading the poem stymied the development of their own responses to the situations of the characters.

The students tended not to consider the often-unstated psychological motives of the characters. Homeric silences were left unexplored. In order to prompt the students to reflect on what Odysseus’ ultimate motives are, I asked them to read Tennyson’s *Ulysses* and the Ulysses section from Dante’s *Inferno*. In the former poem, Odysseus is depicted as a romantic voyager who becomes restless upon his return to Ithaca and therefore resolves to set sail for the edge of the known world; in the latter, Odysseus is condemned to hell for enticing Ithacans to join him on an adventure that he knows will bring about their deaths. Neither Tennyson nor Dante think that Odysseus will be content merely to remain on Ithaca. The interpretations suggested by these poems genuinely seemed to come as a revelation to students A and B. Prompted by Tennyson’s *Ulysses* student A wrote: ‘Odysseus will not be content when he comes back to Ithaca because he is someone who craves and lives for adventures and guests. ‘How dull it is to pause, to make an end.’ Odysseus is saying how we would not enjoy settling in Ithaca and I agree with this because just after he reveals himself and kills all the suitors, he is back out leaving Ithaca with Athene by his side on a new adventure’. Reading Tennyson made student A look at Odysseus in a new way and crucially made him go back to the poem to find evidence to verify this new insight. Student A does not merely regurgitate Tennyson’s argument. He deciphers the meaning of Tennyson’s poem and goes back to Homer to test this newfound interpretation. This is the process by which student A is able to make this interpretation his own. Deconstructing the meaning of a poetic response to the *Odyssey* meant that the student felt in greater possession of the insight it yielded.

Student B responded to Tennyson by writing as follows: ‘Life on Ithaca is boring and somewhere Odysseus will never be happy. In comparison to the adventures, journeys he goes on and the infinite sea there is to explore. I agree with

Tennyson, throughout his journey he has changed and wants the thrill and adrenaline'. Student B's view of the poem changed decisively by reading Tennyson and her readings of Odysseus' motives have since been filtered through the Tennysonian perspective.

Student C responded to Dante's Ulysses by observing as follows: 'Inferno XXVI shows Odysseus is a foolish, manipulative, selfish liar. Indeed, in Book 9, he insisted to stay in Polyphemus' cave and let many of his men lose their lives. At last, he revealed his real name and got cursed by the Cyclops, risking his whole crew's safety'. Student C had previously described Odysseus as class as 'virtuous'. Engaging with Dante's ideas changed his view of Odysseus; however, he did not merely assimilate Dante's views untested. He went back to the poem to find the evidence that would lend credence to Dante's viewpoint, by examining episodes from earlier in the epic.

The difficulty of Dante and Tennyson's language presented a significant challenge for the students. At least a third of the lesson had to be spent glossing unfamiliar vocabulary items and turns of syntax. In future this problem could be mitigated by the provision of a simple glossary with the poems.

Reinterpreting Penelope

By requiring the students to read poetry inspired by the figure of Penelope, I aimed to move the students' responses to Penelope beyond the simplistic. Each student asserted prior to these lessons that they believed that Penelope did not recognise Odysseus until book 23 and that there is no evidence that she does not love him without reservation.

Ritsos' poem *Penelope's Despair* implies that Penelope immediately recognises Odysseus despite his disguise and is disappointed by her husband. Ritsos goes on to suggest that Penelope may have had a subconscious affection for the suitors. Student C wrote in response that 'Penelope has to show loyalty to her husband although she had aspirations in those suitors who Odysseus had just killed... It is hard to interpret her true feelings with the book not showing her reactions. Penelope used to call Amphinomus the 'man of principle', but expressed her hatred to the insolent suitors like Antinous many times'. Student

C's previous certainty about the faithfulness of Penelope was brought into doubt by reading Ritsos' poem. More importantly, however, is the fact that this doubt sends the student back to the text, with the result being that his view of Penelope has become more nuanced.

Student B was initially quite insistent that Penelope never wavers in her love for Odysseus and her loathing for the suitors. She regularly cited the views of Daniel Mendelsohn that the relationship of Penelope and Odysseus is marked by *homophrosyne* (like-mindedness). However, in the lesson following our discussion of Ritsos' poem, she drew attention to the significance of Penelope's dream in *Odyssey* 19 where she grieves at the slaughter of geese (representing the suitors) by an eagle (representing Odysseus). She suggested that 'maybe this is what Ritsos is getting at? Maybe Penelope liked the suitors on some level'. The interpretive adventurousness of Ritsos encouraged the student to be more adventurous in her reading of the poem. She was willing to countenance the possibility that the relationship is represented as being ambivalent in certain respects. A similar development of student B's views was observable in her reading of Gluck's poem, *Reunion* when she suggests that 'Penelope is little understood by Odysseus because she knows what he has been doing over the past years he's been away. This is shown when they met and all night they were talking about small things, suggesting they were talking about nothing. Odysseus leaves out information about his affairs but because of their *homophrosyne* [like-mindedness] and her cunning she knows what went on. Penelope is a character that is misunderstood by... Odysseus as he doesn't tell her the truth or his plan'. In other words, student B has reinterpreted *homophrosyne* as an emblem not of the strength of the characters' marriage but as the explanation for Penelope's capacity to see through her husband's deception. Student B re-evaluated the *Odyssey* in the light of her reading of the poems inspired by it and recalibrated her own views accordingly. Her opinions of the text as a consequence became more personalised and better argued.

Student A also wrote in response to Ritsos' poem that Penelope's dream 'would suggest that she has developed a bond and feelings for the suitors which

argue that Penelope is little understood, especially by Odysseus, as she is seen as the epitome of a perfect wife; when it is clear some of her actions lead to us questioning this'. Having previously thought of Penelope as a paragon of uncomplicated fidelity, student A's reading of a classical reception text has made him see more subtlety and ambiguity in the source text. Student A's opinions have become less conventional and, as a consequence more personalised.

Reinterpreting Other Female Characters in the *Odyssey*

The students took a view of unalloyed negativity towards many of the female characters in the poem, in particular Circe. When I asked the students to come up with words to describe her before reading some classical reception material they suggested 'witch', 'evil', 'monstrous' and 'destructive'. Hope and Gluck in their Circe poems each take a rather different view, with Hope depicting Circe as lovelorn and pitifully woebegone while Gluck depicts her as an admirably mighty agent of justice.

Student B once again changed her view on Circe after engaging with Hope and Gluck. She writes that Circe 'doesn't keep Odysseus on Aeaea against his will, unlike Calypso, as she volunteers to let them free – which is also emphasised in Gluck's poem. Circe is hugely misunderstood throughout the epic'.

Student C, in his interview with me, took the view that both Hope and Gluck offer a distorted interpretation of the character of Circe that is unsupported by Homer. In his essay, he wrote that 'Homer didn't mention if she really fell in love with Odysseus'. Student C here demonstrates a capacity to subject the views of others to critical scrutiny.

Student A adopts yet another view of Circe when he suggests that 'it is in fact Circe who is in control and has all the power... Odysseus has very little understanding of female characters because he generally believes he has outsmarted a female demigod and sorceress when, in reality, Circe has just let him think that that is the case'. Each student has taken something slightly different from the poems. They have come to think of Circe in a new way or, in

the case of student C, have had their views challenged and had to respond with a substantiated refutation.

Conclusion and Implications for Future Teaching

Firstly, these three students responded well to reading poetry inspired by the *Odyssey*. They each agreed that they found it a useful way to revise the primary text and said they would willingly do the activity again. Most of the poems my A-level students read are written from a character's perspective. In their interviews with me, each student said that they found this element 'very appealing' and engaging. The sheer oddity of some of these interpretations encouraged the students to think about the characters in ways they would have otherwise been unlikely to.

Secondly the vividness of poetry makes it potentially more easily engaged with than scholarship which is persuasive in intent and logical in argument. Though the language of some poetry can be unfamiliar, this ultimately proved to be a relatively superficial obstacle for this group of students. While the exam specification requires that students be able to cite scholarly argument, my students said they found it easier to engage with a poem rather than a scholarly article. Admittedly, the small size of the class makes it difficult to extrapolate generalities from this research project. Nonetheless, in future I will consider getting my students to read poetic/artistic interpretations of a text before they engage with scholarship. They seemed more willing to debate the apparently tendentious argument of a poem rather than the seemingly unassailable logic of a scholar.

Before I undertook this research project all three students had a very simplistic, almost cartoonish view of the poem's characters. They nearly always ignored the moments of ambiguity in the original text which serve to subvert their straightforward assumptions. However, much of the poetry we read problematised the students' previously superficial assessment of the poem. Before this project I would have been reluctant to emphasise ambiguity so as to avoid confusing my students. I am now

more inclined to risk introducing elements that would challenge the students and encourage them to develop a nuanced personal response.

Winner of the 2018 Roman Society PGCE Prize for The University of Cambridge. Shane Forde is a teacher in the East Midlands shanemforde@gmail.com

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