

A cloze encounter of the poetic kind

Year 12

STELLA

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Many of the best moments in my teaching centre on words, their shades of meaning and discovering ways of making sense, whether the focus be metaphors and allusions in Year 12 or Greek derivations in Year 7. In so many ways, words underpin for me what English teaching is about, for it is through our focus on words and their patterning that we are able to shape and refine our sense of meaning.

In this narrative, I discuss one small episode that reflects the close focus on textual detail which characterises much of VCE Literature, and indeed, work on all kinds of texts as I explore the ways in which meanings are created for us in texts. In this Unit 3 and 4 class, there are 18 students (16 girls and 2 boys), all Year 12 students, out of a College Year 12 cohort of just on a hundred. Literature is a popular subject. At the beginning of the year, I had mentally described this year's class as diligent and highly capable, but perhaps a little too narrowly-focused, even dependent, in contrast to the previous year's group which was feisty but erratic, and unfortunately somewhat irregular in attendance. In part my anticipation has been borne out, for we do not have clashing debates, although they are all prepared to question my readings and defend their own. In general, these students are hardworking and highly keen to succeed, but some of them, even the very capable ones, have sometimes been reluctant to trust their own judgment or to take risks.

At the time this example occurs, I had already begun teaching Gwen Harwood's poetry, one of their examination texts, to the class. I had prepared a detailed set of notes on each of the poems, modelling ways of discussing the poetry, and had introduced some background on the formal qualities of the poetry, in particular Harwood's use of the sonnet form. We had discussed the group of poems that represent the conflict between personal growth and domestic responsibilities experienced by women, and were embarking on an exploration of the poems dealing with significant moments from childhood. I felt, however, that I needed to increase the students' engagement with the poems, in essence, making them do more of the work. I wanted them to take risks, to 'make mistakes' and in so doing, focus on the precision of Harwood's language and its effects. Their capacity to respond in this way was, in fact, not in doubt, given their detailed and specific responses to earlier poems we had discussed.

In order to focus the students' attention on particular word choices, I prepared a cloze version of 'Slate' in which certain words were deleted. 'Slate' forms part of a quartet of poems, collectively known as 'Class of 1927', in which Harwood adopts a dual persona, a young child who is both participant and observer in a series of classroom events, of a sort that still resonates with contemporary readers, and a mature adult who looks back on these crucial moments with a wisdom, self-criticism and a regret born of hindsight. In 'Slate', the 'doctor's son, a clever skite' engages in torturing a mouse, using his father's medical instruments, in class, while 'Sir' is oblivious. The students know, however. The bright students cower in fright, the 'undistinguished middle' section, 'the fairly-bright', 'saw but pretend not to look', and it is only the 'Bonehead', the poor boy 'condemned to go from year to year in the front row' who reacts with moral indignation at the callous treatment of a poor helpless creature and takes swift action. The ironic contrasts between arrogant cleverness and amiable dullness, moral outrage and moral cruelty are beautifully understated, as Bonehead becomes the hero, liberating all the students in the class.

There was no single pattern to the deletions, except that, where possible, I focused on significant or striking lexical choices, in order to challenge students' understandings of Harwood's use of poetic form and her verbal play.

I began the class by explaining the notion of the cues we use in reading, linking this with an earlier lesson, and explaining cloze procedure, distinguishing between regular random deletions and strategic deletions. (My classes are used to having me 'digress' to give an account of the theory that informs the way I do things.) Whilst acknowledging their scepticism that 'if the word isn't there you can't read it', I explained the notion of constraints, that because of the way our language works there is only a limited set of possibilities. In asking them to provide substitute words for the deletions I had made, I was requiring them to make judgments about the imagistic, tonal and formal qualities of the poems; the rhyme scheme; the metre of given lines; their knowledge of Harwood's poetic and linguistic preoccupations; and the effects of certain word choices.

Semantic cues:

- Does it make sense?
- Does it sustain the meaning already established?
- Is it consistent with the vocabulary, tone, mood or feeling of the poem (or this segment of the poem)?

Syntactic cues:

- Does it sound like language?
- Does it fit with the rhythm of the verse? How many syllables are needed? What stress or accentuation is needed?
- Is it the right part of speech, right tense? (e.g. Is a proper name or a pronoun needed here? Singular or plural? Past, present, future – or some other tense?)
- Where does it fall in the sentence? What possibilities are there for this place in the syntax?

Grapho-phonetic cues:

- How does it fit with the rhyming pattern (What is the rhyme scheme)?
- Are there any limitations on whether this word begins with a vowel or consonant?

Working in pairs, the students engaged in a lively discussion of the possibilities, in which I stalled their requests for 'answers'. 'Use the cues I have listed on the board.' 'What do you think it might be?' 'What are the possibilities?' and 'Which one do you think fits best?' were my stock responses. Before I allowed them to measure their suggestion against the original, I again stressed that we were engaging in an exploration of meaning, not simply striving to find the right answer. When they compared their suggestions with the original, our discussion was focused on the different effects created by Harwood's choices and their own.

Harwood's evocative depiction of school life is evident in this small example:

We sat, ranked by examination,
Those with the best marks at the back.
In undisguised discrimination
at the front sat the dim, the slack
where they could not converse or fiddle:
and in the undistinguished middle
the hard triers, the fairly bright
laboured to get their set work right
not out of any love of study
but simply to escape the cane.
Somehow the teacher knew whose brain

Was cleared by stirring, whose was muddy.
One vacant lad, condemned to go
From year to year in the front row

In my cloze version, the words 'discrimination', 'fairly', 'cane', and 'year' were deleted. 'Year' was obvious; 'cane' also proved, after some examination of the whole poem, quite easy for the students to suggest; it rhymes with 'brain' in the following line, and there are later references to 'Sir' bearing his cane and stroking it in his uncertainty at what has happened. 'Fairly' was more difficult; they all grasped the sense, evident in their suggestions of 'half-bright' and 'semi-bright' (and 'semi' has the right rhythmic feel to it) but they knew that these didn't quite ring true. Their recognition of the condescension implied in 'fairly bright' was quite exciting: 'Oh, yes, that's better!'

There was an even greater challenge in 'discrimination', yet some of the students settled on this suggestion, others coming up with 'condemnation', but all recognising that the word was multi-syllabled and ending in '-ation'. Whilst acknowledging that 'discrimination' was better in its iambic rhythm (my term, not theirs) some of the students rightly defended their choice of 'condemnation', arguing that what was implied was a kind of life sentence, as we later see with 'Bonehead'.

So much talk over a few words. Why do I think this was successful? First of all, it required the students to take the risk of being wrong. It required them to articulate their knowledge of Harwood's language and poetic form, in ways that I could not have ensured merely by explicit teaching or notes. It required some struggle, in proposing options, debating and choosing what they thought was the 'best' word, on the basis of their reading of the poem. It was highly appropriate that they should give such consideration to language at the time that they were working on the Creative Response Common Assessment Task, a task which demands for success just such a close focus on language.