

# The social construction of meaning: reading *Animal Farm* in the classroom

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## Abstract

The novel, it has generally been assumed, was from its very beginnings a literary form designed to be read by solitary, silent individuals. One consequence of this assumption is that the class novel, read amid all the noise and sociality of the classroom, tends to be treated as a preparation for more authentic, private reading, or even as a poor substitute for it. This essay argues that the history of novel reading is more complicated and more varied than has been assumed; it goes on to explore, through the story of a single lesson, the possibilities for meaning-making that are the product of particular pedagogic practices as well as of the irreducibly social process of reading the class novel.

**Key words:** class novel, reading, role play, collaborative learning, pedagogy

In what follows, I want to consider one kind of narrative, the class novel, partly by providing another kind of narrative, an account of a single English lesson. The place of the class novel within the secondary English curriculum has been threatened within the last decade or so by the increased emphasis on objective-led teaching and the attendant attitude to texts as little more than vehicles for the transmission of isolable skills. Even before the advent of the National Literacy Strategy (DfEE, 2001), however, the class novel's position in accounts of reading and reading development was an uncertain one. If the shared reading of a book-length text has always posed practical difficulties – questions of how to organise the reading and how to get through it all in the time available – these were (and are) compounded by underlying theoretical uncertainties, stemming from the assumption that the novel is a literary form to be consumed by silent, solitary readers.

This view informs, for example, Early and Ericson's essay, 'The act of reading'. For all its openness to reader-response theories and to notions of a community of readers, the conclusion to which the essay drives is that, "For all students, the ultimate goal must be: 'I can read it myself – and I will!'" (Early and Ericson, 1998, p. 42). On this basis, the reading that is accomplished in the classroom becomes merely preparation for something else – the stabilisers, as it were, that can be removed once the tyro reader is sufficiently competent

and confident to go it alone. Or, to take a second, more recent instance, Chris Richards' *Young People, Popular Culture and Education* (2011), a subtle, reflective account of work in and around cultural studies over the past four decades, paying careful attention to the complexities of culture and pedagogy, provides sympathetic, properly theorised vignettes of situated textual practice. Richards' discussion of Melvin Burgess' *Doing It* (2003), however, reveals an acceptance of one reading practice as the default:

*"Reading, and perhaps especially reading novels, has a history strongly anchored in individual privacy (Watt, 1957/1979). The reception of a novel has not been primarily a social act, conducted in the presence of others. Reading a novel is mostly something done alone or, if in the presence of others, at least silently".*

...

*"Transposed to a school classroom, the reading (aloud) of a novel is further entangled with the social relations of that site. Relations between students, but also between the student and the teacher, become the context of reception, a context absent when the novel is read alone and, most often, in silence" (Richards, 2011, pp. 127, 128).*

For Richards, one context for, and way of, reading (a novel) has assumed a normative status: this is the familiar image of the solitary, silent reader. Thus, the collective (noisy) reading of the classroom is represented in Richards as abnormal, as, in effect, interference, the interposition of a context that gets in the way of the normal, direct relationship of text and individual reader. Here, then, the class novel appears, at best, as a substitute for the authentic experience of private reading.

I want to contest this view of the class novel as merely preparation for, or an ersatz version of, the authentic experience of the solitary reader. To begin with, I want to suggest that the history of the novel is more complex than Richards, following Ian Watt, allows. Martyn Lyons (1999) has pointed to the continuing prevalence of 'oral reading' in the 19th century, even in the heyday of the classic novel: evidence from Mayhew and Kilvert, a contemporary journalist and diarist, respectively, suggests that such reading practices were common across classes, in the cities as well

as in rural areas (though Lyons does also argue that the increasing frequency of paintings in which women are represented reading alone is an indication of gendered differences in reading). In the same period, the modes of production and distribution were such as must complicate our picture of reading. Novels such as *Jane Eyre* were first published in the standard three-volume set favoured by the powerful circulating libraries:

*"The separate volumes made for convenience of fireside reading, and for sharing among members of a family; though it would be exasperating to finish volume I, which ends at the point where Jane rescues Mr. Rochester from his blazing bed, when one's elder sister had not quite finished volume II. For the three-volume form matched a formal literary design: in many novels the structural divisions are as clear as the three acts of a play"* (Tillotson, 1954, p. 23).

If this is not Lyons' 'oral reading', neither is it quite the same as the isolation in which *Jane Eyre* herself takes pleasure in Bewick's *History of British Birds* (Brontë, 1948 [1847]). Tillotson's image of shared – sequential – reading is an intriguing one, in which the line between the private and the social might have been somewhat blurred, to say the least. On the other hand, Dickens' favoured form, the serial publication that competed with, and largely replaced, the three-volume sets of the circulating libraries, also cannot readily be accommodated within the paradigm of private reading. The fact that the first parts of novels such as *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840–1841) and *Dombey and Son* (1846–1848) were being read while Dickens was still writing the later sections meant that the development of plot and the fate of individual characters became matters of public debate, among readers and in correspondence between readers and the author. Dickens, it would appear, was acutely sensitive to such dialogue, prepared to shape his narrative in response to indications of readers' interests (Tillotson, 1954; Tomalin, 2011). Such evidence disrupts assumptions about the reader's role, since readers were less the passive consumers of already-finished texts than active – often demanding – correspondents, keen to offer views on and contribute to the shaping of the novel as it was being produced. Such conditions of production and reception might make us want to question whether the history of the novel was ever quite so securely anchored in individual privacy as Richards believes.

An adequate account of reading, then, even in relation to the novel, might involve attending more carefully to the social dimension, historically located and culturally specific, of those practices. That said, the reading of the class novel involves, necessarily, a different kind of practice. It is distinct from other reading practices by the mere fact that it is accomplished, at least in part, in the classroom, a place largely inhabited by people who have not chosen to be there; and it is a text read by a group of people all but one of whom, generally speaking, have not chosen to read it. Even the teacher may

only have exercised choice in a very limited sense: the text may have been selected by someone else (a head of department or an exam board) or it may have been the only text available in sufficient numbers for a shared reading to be practicable (Sarland, 1991). These constraints are real – though not entirely unprecedented: it is perfectly possible that the elder sister in Tillotson's imagined family might have preferred to be reading *Fanny Burney* rather than *Charlotte Brontë*. But the existence of such constraints does not mean that we should view the practice itself as a series of deficits. I want to suggest that reading the class novel is a practice that should be taken seriously in its own right, as neither a substitute nor a preparation for private reading. And I want to suggest that it is precisely the fact that the reading of the class novel is, as Richards observes, entangled with the social relations of the classroom that offers the most rewarding perspective on this practice.

Support for this claim comes from a somewhat unexpected quarter. *Mixed Ability Work in Comprehensive Schools* (DES, 1978) is a discussion paper produced by Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI). Its brief chapter on English contains the passing observation that "English is not a linear or sequential subject in the way that a modern language or mathematics is" (DES, 1978, p. 95) – an acknowledgement that was submerged, a decade later, by the unstoppable tide of National Curriculum levels and assessment frameworks. HMI also provide a rationale for the class novel:

*"Moreover, in English, a shared experience and the development of a wide range of individual responses are perfectly compatible, and the very width of the response which mixed ability grouping facilitates can be turned to the advantage of those involved. As for the experience to be shared, happily it is often the finest literature, that which has the strongest human appeal, which will make the deepest impression on pupils of all abilities and allow them to meet on common ground"* (DES, 1978, p. 95).

The argument that the inspectors were making – an argument for placing whole texts and rich, rewarding literature at the centre of work in English – was directed against the poor, thin diet of decontextualised comprehension exercises. For the Inspectorate, it is the quality of the text that matters: the right kind of text has the effect on individual sensibilities, and hence produces the common experience that is the basis for a sociability that transcends differences in individual abilities.<sup>1</sup>

What does not feature in the inspectors' argument is the question of pedagogy: what do teachers and students do with these texts, what are the social relations of the classroom and how are these managed in the process of reading? These are questions that I want to address as I turn now to my second narrative, the story of a lesson, as a way of exploring what can be involved in, and produced by, the shared reading of

the class novel. I would want to locate this account within a narrative-based tradition of inquiry into practice, a tradition of research that, in contrast to the dominant discourses of standards and testing, attempts to inquire closely into the specificity of classrooms, into the lived experiences of teachers and their students (Doecke and McClenaghan, 2011; Parr, 2010; Van de Ven and Doecke, 2011).

The lesson is one that was taught by Heather Wood, at the time a student on an initial teacher education course. It was observed by me as her university tutor.<sup>2</sup> Before telling this story, though, I should make it clear that I am not making large claims for the representativeness of the lesson. There are many ways of 'doing' the class novel, and many class novels. Reading *Holes* (Sachar, 2000) is not the same experience as reading *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* (Haddon, 2003), and neither is the same as reading *Animal Farm* (Orwell, 1989 [1945]). My decision to focus on one lesson is motivated, then, by a methodological commitment to the particular, to finding out what particular teachers and particular groups of students do in reading a particular text together (Freebody, 2003).<sup>3</sup> Equally, my decision to focus on this lesson in particular is a motivated one: my claim is that this pedagogic practice is worth attending to.

It is an English lesson in a north London comprehensive, Heather's first practicum school: mixed ability 11- and 12-year-olds on a blustery January morning. The class is in the middle of *Animal Farm*. The classroom is organised cafe style, with six tables. Before the students arrive, Heather places a very large piece of sugar paper on each table; on each piece, she has drawn the outline of an animal: one hen, two horses and three pigs.

Heather allocates each student to a group, then reminds the class that at the end of the previous lesson she had asked them to think of questions to ask Squealer. Before we move into the main activity, though, she wants to make sure that everyone is familiar with the genre, so she plays a short video clip of *Youth Question Time* (BBC, 2009). Students respond in a variety of ways: some announce that the footage was boring or unintelligible or both, others offer comments on the target audience and the kinds of question that elicit interesting answers. Heather asks if in *Animal Farm* the animals have the opportunity to question Squealer. She emphasises that this is something she wants students to continue to think about during the lesson, not something that demands an immediate response. (This emphasis is important, in that she is positioning the activity in relation to the world of the novel and in relation to her students' reading of the novel.) Then she draws attention to the image of the animal that she has outlined on the sugar paper – a different animal for each table. She explains that each group is to be the animal/character represented on their table – and that they will have the chance to question Squealer

(the character who has been allocated to one of the six groups).

Before the *Animal Farm* version of *Question Time* can begin, though, the groups must prepare. In the guidance that Heather provides, what is envisaged is a logical, linear sequence of activities: first the students are to record on their sugar paper the main events of the novel so far, then to consider what they know of their character, and finally to formulate questions to put to Squealer. In practice, there are different approaches to the task. In the Boxer group, next to me, Adam<sup>4</sup> and Noreen are writing questions to Squealer while Jasmine and Maria seem to have responsibility for recording the key events. Nonetheless, there is dialogue across the group: Noreen and Adam read out their questions, facts are checked, Maria suggests further questions. In other groups, there are variations in the order in which tasks are being addressed and how this work is assigned to different individuals. This may be slightly different from what Heather had envisaged, but in every group all members are involved fully in the activity – and students are thinking about the novel in interesting, complicated ways.

In all groups, there is genuine collaborative engagement; in nearly all groups, there is close sympathetic identification with their allocated character (the one exception, from the evidence of what is written on the sugar paper, is the group that has been allocated Major's ghost). One material factor that supports and encourages such collaboration is, I think, the size of the sugar paper: because it is so big, it is possible for all four group members to have direct access to it as writers, more or less simultaneously – and this really does have a demonstrable effect on how the groups go about the task.

"What would Major do in your shoes?" asks Maria, before she writes the question on the sugar paper. It is a wonderfully probing question – a question that will create difficulties for Squealer. It is, therefore, evidence that Maria's group is preparing well for the next part of the lesson. That it comes at this moment, a good 10 minutes into the activity, is, I think, a sign of the productivity of the activity – of the thinking that is going on, and of the potential of such collaborative activity. Is it a question that Boxer would ask? Perhaps not, given the extent to which Orwell's representation of the non-porcine animals denies them interiority or rational thought. I wonder, though, if this might be a strength of the activity, in that students are able simultaneously to explore what they know of the novel and its characters and to go beyond it, to brush it, in Walter Benjamin's phrase, 'against the grain' (Benjamin, 1970 [1955], p. 259).

Heather brings the class back together – and it is a bit of a struggle to achieve quiet, simply because there is so much energy being devoted to the group task. She gives students 30 seconds to allocate questions

to each member of the group. They do this, very efficiently. The Squealer group take their seats at the front of the room. Heather brings the class to order, going into role as presenter of *Animal Farm Question Time*.

The first group to pose questions is the one representing Major's ghost. I remarked above that this was the one group where, on the evidence of the sugar paper, students were not showing any sign of identifying with their allotted character: the questions they had posed in writing were all those of a detached observer. But as Joe enters into dialogue with the Squealer group, he *becomes* Major's ghost – he enters into the role, and speaks with remarkable conviction and authority. The responses he receives from the Squealer group are equally remarkable. Each of its members adopts a formal register and a tone that is both superior and dismissive – somewhere between a head teacher and a politician, perhaps. They do not answer Joe's questions so much as lecture him on the virtues and glories of Comrade Napoleon.

We move on to Maria as Boxer, then Adam, also as Boxer. They ask apposite, searching questions. What is slightly scary is how dismissive the Squealer group is of other animals: their performance shows just how much they understand of the power relations on the farm and of how these inequalities are enforced in and through language. What is wonderful is the manifest enjoyment of all in inhabiting their roles. Next, it is the turn of the Hens, who are very angry at the way they have been treated. Again, something slightly miraculous happens here. Students in the Hens' group develop a collective identity in the process of their confrontation with Squealer: they become visibly more supportive of each other, more prepared to argue their case, more involved in the story – and more articulate.

Heather orchestrates the debate very deftly, insisting on the rights of all to be heard. We hear from the Snowball group: Onur is magnificent – combative, aggressive and contemptuous towards Napoleon and Squealer as his lackey. What the Squealer group are very good at doing, *inter alia*, is refusing to answer the question – chiefly by attacking and undermining the questioners; but Sara, who is part of the Mollie group, has noticed this and is not prepared to let them get away with it. Mollie is the white mare whom Orwell represents as obsessed with her own looks, and with sugar. Sara-as-Mollie, on the other hand, has more pressing, more political interests. And this is another wonderful moment – a moment of learning: because Sara is involved in the role, because suddenly this argument matters to her, she expresses very clearly her analysis of what the Squealers have been doing – or failing to do. There is a profound understanding here of an aspect of language and power – of the enactment of power in the refusal to provide an answer.

With 5 minutes of the lesson remaining, Heather opens out the questioning to all comers. There is general outrage when one of the Squealers accuses Boxer/Noreen of being lazy. Heather brings the discussion to a necessary halt (necessary only because of time, not because of revolutionary activity among the animals). She asks each group to write a question that they would have liked to ask Squealer and did not have the chance to ask, and the answer that they think Squealer would give. Then, almost as a sort of coda to the lesson, she asks how many of the animals that have been discussed today are still part of the farm (at the point that they have reached in their reading of the novel). Thus, the final move that students make, as the lesson ends, is a return to the text, the text that they can now explore from a different perspective. Heather's question invites the students to engage with the text as linear, developing over time (a series of events) while also considering it in a kind of continuous present, each moment of it simultaneously available to us.

Readers of this essay may feel that they have been lured here on false pretences. I promised to focus on the reading of the class novel, yet I have described a lesson in which little or no reading took place. Was not this something else entirely – a drama lesson, perhaps? What I mean by reading, however, is the process of meaning-making that is accomplished by people engaging with text(s). The students in Heather's lesson were actively engaged in making meaning: collaboratively, they were making sense of *Animal Farm*. My argument, therefore, is that this was a lesson in which a great deal of very sophisticated reading was accomplished – reading that was of both the word and the world (Freire and Macedo, 1987).<sup>5</sup>

In the lesson, students explored Squealer's role in the novel, the characters of the other animals, the social relationships of the farm. They knew more about the novel – they understood it differently and better – at the end of the lesson. They were involved in an exploration of how language operates to maintain, enforce and contest power relationships, both in the novel and in the world. But I want to make a further claim about the students' reading, a claim that the activities in which they participated involved them in a rewriting of the novel – and that it is this aspect of their work that is most exciting as a demonstration of their collective power as readers of complex texts (Barthes, 1977). This dimension of the activity was introduced at the start, when Heather asked the class whether the other animals had the opportunity to question Squealer. Implicit in Heather's question is the recognition that the central activity of the lesson invites the students to go beyond the text and in doing so to interrogate it, to tease out the silences and absences in Orwell. This rewriting of the text is what happens when Maria-as-Boxer asks Squealer, "What would Major do in your shoes?", when Onur-as-Snowball answers back to Napoleon, when Joe-as-Major's ghost berates the pigs for their

betrayal of the revolution, when Sara-as-Mollie analyses the slipperiness of the Squealers' answers. Most poignantly and wonderfully, it is there when the Hens find a voice, when they, most unlike Orwell's poultry, speak truth to power.

*Animal Farm Question Time* challenged the unequal distribution of power on the farm. At the same time, it enabled the students to explore and interrogate their own relationships and identities, the social dynamics of the class. What enabled them to do both these things – and to do them safely – was that they were working in role. The question of what happens when students adopt roles, of how the process enables them to access resources of language, and also of thought and feeling, that might otherwise have seemed fairly remote from them, is worth dwelling on. The Vygotskian idea of the zone of proximal development is frequently encountered as a justification for particular forms of intervention (such as 'scaffolding') and to support arguments for the importance of 'more experienced others' in children's development.<sup>6</sup> In 'The problem of play in development,' an essay that is included as chapter 7 of *Mind in Society* (1978), Vygotsky returns to the idea of the zone of proximal development; this time, though, the term is used in a context that does not seem to have much to do with questions of instruction. Instead, it appears in a remarkable passage where Vygotsky argues for play as a centrally important contributor to development:

*"play creates a zone of proximal development of the child. In play a child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behaviour; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself. As in the focus of a magnifying glass, play contains all developmental tendencies in a condensed form and is itself a major source of development"* (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 102).

Vygotsky's claims for the productive possibilities of play, for what play enables children to do and to learn, seem to me to be directly relevant to what was going on in Heather's classroom. What enables her students to meet on common ground is not, as the inspectors proposed in 1978, a product of the literary quality of Orwell's novel. When Joe's group was exploring the character of Major, the students were assembling information from the text; they did this with varying degrees of diligence but without any particular commitment to the activity. When, on the other hand, Joe starts to question the Squealer group, he enters fully into the role of Major's ghost – and inhabiting the role gives him both access to different linguistic registers and a new kind of ownership over the text. Likewise, it is when the Hens enter into dialogue with Squealer that they construct a role for themselves, not as headless chickens but as mutually supportive mother hens. Their work in role seems to me to function as a penetrating interrogation of Orwell's tendency to represent the non-porcine inhabitants of the farm as hopelessly stupid, passive victims of the pigs.

I suggested above that the students were reading both the word and the world. The world that is being read is, in part, the adult world of political discourse. In conversation after the lesson, Heather considered that it had been a mistake to spend time watching the video clip of *Youth Question Time*. She realised that the students simply did not need to be inducted into the genre: they either were already knowledgeable or were perfectly capable of contributing to a formal debate without being presented with such a model. Here again, I would want to argue that it is the affordance of work in role that provides access to the genre. At the same time that this is happening, the students are engaged in another, considerably more complex, act of reading. Through their work in role, the students are exploring, rendering visible and holding up to scrutiny, the social relations of the classroom. In constructing the groups, Heather had allocated to the Squealer group four high-achieving, middle-class students whose interactions with other members of the class had, in previous lessons, betrayed more than a hint of arrogance. In the lesson, the Squealer group's preparations for *Animal Farm Question Time* had involved mining a thesaurus for suitably long, sonorous words with which to impress (and silence) their audience. There was a sense, therefore, in which the Squealer students were playing themselves. When the Hens assert their rights and when Sara-as-Mollie takes the floor to analyse exactly what is going on when the Squealers fail to provide answers to the other animals' questions, what is at issue is something of more immediate relevance than the covert hierarchies of the farm: the activity provides a means to challenge the social stratification of the class itself. This can be accomplished relatively safely because of the distance provided by role: Sara is, and is not, Mollie; the four students are, and are not, Squealer.

When Heather read a draft of this essay, she recalled the class's final work on *Animal Farm*:

*"they took their work from the question time lesson further and wrote a persuasive speech in role as a character of their choice and performed it to the class. One student, Joe, created a name and a whole identity for a horse on the farm and read his speech in a cockney accent, walking around the classroom trying to rouse the crowd and convince them that they didn't need Napoleon. It was absolutely brilliant"* (Heather Wood, email correspondence, 28 June 2012).

Joe's choice of accent is, it seems to me, inseparable from the meaning of his speech. It is the counterpoint to the Squealer students' use of the thesaurus: the horse is answering back.

Heather's students' reading of *Animal Farm* cannot be reduced to questions of reception or comprehension. On the contrary, the text is being constantly remade, in the readers' interests. These interests differ, and these different interests, all of which leave their mark on

the text, are what make it unstable, complex, 'multi-accented':

*"The social multiaccentuality of the ideological sign is a very crucial aspect. By and large, it is thanks to this intersecting of accents that a sign maintains its vitality and dynamism and the capacity for further development. A sign that has been withdrawn from the pressures of the social struggle – which, so to speak, crosses beyond the pale of the class struggle – inevitably loses force, degenerating into allegory and becoming the object not of live social intelligibility but of philological comprehension"* (Vološinov, 1986 [1929], p. 23, original emphasis).

*Animal Farm* is reanimated, then, saved from becoming merely an object of 'philological comprehension', precisely because it has become "entangled in the social relations" of the classroom.

## Notes

1. These claims have been contested, of course, notably by Sarland in his very funny account of a less than uplifting shared experience of Steinbeck's *The Pearl* (Sarland, 1991, 'On not finding yourself in the text').
2. I am very grateful to Heather Wood, both for giving me permission to write about the lesson and for the privilege of having observed it. The account that follows is one for which I take full responsibility – it is the lesson that I observed, not the lesson that Heather taught; the account relies heavily on the notes I took during the lesson, though it is also informed by the discussion that I had with Heather afterwards.
3. My emphasis on attending to the particular is at odds with the approach taken by the National Literacy Strategy:
 

*"pupils in one school studying, for example, Treasure Island and Animal Farm, will, one way or another, have covered the same objectives by the end of the key stage as pupils in another school who have studied quite different texts"* (DfEE, 2001, p. 14).
4. Students' names have been changed to culturally appropriate pseudonyms.
5. This is, of course, a very different approach to reading than that which is to be found in the most recent version of the National Curriculum with which primary teachers have been confronted: it is not reducible to either 'word reading' or 'comprehension' (DfE, 2012, p. 2).
6. For a fuller discussion of these ideas, see Daniels (2001), Chaiklin (2003) and Yandell (2007).

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