Dealing with “unseen” texts

Although Chapter 4 was entitled “Reading poetry”, it began by asking you to think about *listening* to poetry. Similarly, this chapter about techniques for “reading on your own” will begin by asking you to think about what happens when someone reads to you, or helps you to read.

Think about how you behave if you have to prepare to read something aloud.

- When a *poem* is to be read aloud, it’s likely that the reader will prepare by looking carefully at features of metre and rhythm, together with any other interesting aspects of sound.

- With an extract from a *play*, a single reader would need to prepare by having an idea of the different voices. It would be important to capture the mood or the tone in which lines would need to be spoken in order to convey something about each character.

- For a passage of *prose*, a reader would prepare by getting clear the basics of the situation – *who*, *what* and *where* – so that the essential narrative and descriptive information can be easily conveyed to a listener.

If you think back to your early experiences of people reading to you – parents, teachers, actors on radio or television, or in audio books – you will remember how they helped you to understand. They may have paused to draw your attention to a picture, or to let you ask a question; they may have asked you questions, to see if you were following the story and could understand. And the process of reading doesn’t really change when you read for yourself: you simply learn to ask those questions for yourself, and doing that becomes automatic.

In an A Level examination when you are under pressure, you need to be able to switch into this automatic process quickly. But for now we’re going to try taking it step by step.
Activity 6.1

The following poem, *The Bull Moose*, is by the Canadian poet Alden Nowlan (1933–83).

Read it carefully and slowly, with a pencil in your hand. As you read, write down the questions that arise in your mind during the reading, and annotate the poem so that your notes show your thought processes.

*The Bull Moose*

Down from the purple mist of trees on the mountain,
lurching through forests of white spruce and cedar,
stumbling through tamarack swamps,
came the bull moose
to be stopped at last by a pole-fenced pasture.

Too tired to turn or, perhaps, aware
there was no place left to go, he stood with the cattle.
They, scenting the musk of death, seeing his great head
like the ritual mask of a blood god, moved to the other end
of the field, and waited.

The neighbors heard of it, and by afternoon
cars lined the road. The children teased him
with alder switches and he gazed at them
like an old, tolerant collie. The women asked
if he could have escaped from a Fair.

The oldest man in the parish remembered seeing
a gelded moose yoked with an ox for plowing.
The young men snickered and tried to pour beer
down his throat, while their girl friends took their pictures.

And the bull moose let them stroke his tick-ravaged flanks,
let them pry open his jaws with bottles, let a giggling girl
plant a little purple cap
of thistles on his head.

When the wardens came, everyone agreed it was a shame
to shoot anything so shaggy and cuddlesome.
He looked like the kind of pet
women put to bed with their sons.
Sometimes a poem, even a short one, will tell a story: it will contain a narrative. As we saw in Chapter 4, it can sometimes be helpful to “label” a poem, but we must be careful not to fall into the trap of thinking that the label will tell us all we need to know about the text.

Even from a very quick reading, we discover that the poem *The Bull Moose* tells a story; it’s at least partly a narrative poem.

Some of your early questions and annotations were probably *wh-* questions: Where are we? What’s happening? Why? Who’s involved?

The poet has been very helpful to the reader. If you look at the structure of the poem you will see that each stanza offers the reader either direct facts or suggestions about one or more of those questions.

Look back at what you’ve written. Let’s try to follow your train of thought by completing the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stanza</th>
<th>Where are we?</th>
<th>What’s happening?</th>
<th>Why?</th>
<th>Who’s involved?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>“a pole-fenced pasture”</td>
<td>“Down from the … mountain … came the bull moose”</td>
<td>“lurching … stumbling … to be stopped at last …”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>“he stood with the cattle”</td>
<td>“They … moved to the other end of the field, and waited.”</td>
<td>“Too tired to turn or, perhaps, aware there was no place left to go”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“The neighbours … The children … The women …”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>“The young men snickered and tried to pour beer down his throat”</td>
<td></td>
<td>[showing off to their girl friends?]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>“the bull moose let them …”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“the wardens came … everyone agreed …”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>“the bull moose gathered his strength … straightened and lifted his horns … he roared”</td>
<td></td>
<td>“like a scaffolding king”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

So they held their fire. But just as the sun dropped in the river the bull moose gathered his strength like a scaffolding, straightened and lifted his horns so that even the wardens backed away as they raised their rifles. When he roared, people ran to their cars. All the young men leaned on their automobile horns as he toppled.

Alden Nowlan
We’ll come back to this poem in Chapter 7, when we will look at a student examination-style answer based on a reading of it.

The unseen text examination paper

All of the texts in this chapter are being treated as “unseen” – that is, it’s assumed that you will not have read the text before, and your first experience of it will be under examination conditions.

The unseen text examination paper is sub-titled “Comment and appreciation”. You might prefer to think of those two aspects the other way round: you need to come to some kind of informed appreciation of a text before you can make a sensible or useful comment on it.

What kind of comment is sensible and/or useful? Well, you need to start with a solid grasp of what the text is about, but you must quickly move on to a more sophisticated level of discussion.

The examination syllabus guidance says that:

- You will be expected to show more than just an understanding of what your chosen passages are about.
- You will need to show that you understand how each writer has created his/her effects, and how the language, form and structure of the passage have helped in doing this.
- Personal response, supported by close and detailed discussion, is what is required.
- Just listing literary devices will gain very few marks.

Beyond the unseen text

Sometimes an unseen text will come with some helpful extra information that you could not automatically be expected to know for yourself, but which might help your understanding. For example, on page 148 you were told that the author of The Bull Moose was Canadian, and you were given some very brief zoological information about the species with a photograph.

However, there will often be nothing beyond the text itself, especially when that text is a complete poem, or a pair of poems for comparison. In such a case, you will not be expected to show any knowledge of other works by the same poet(s), or to know anything about the time when a poem was written.

If one of the passages is an extract from a short story, for example, you are likely to be told what the story is about. However, in the case of all prose and drama passages, if these are extracts which come from longer texts, you will not be expected to have any knowledge at all of where they come from, or of what is written, beyond what you are given on the question paper.
Occasionally you might recognize an author as someone whose works you’ve come across before, but there is no advantage in simply naming those works.

Clearly, then, you need to concentrate on the text itself.

We will now do exactly that, covering the remaining genres of drama and prose, and trying one example of a comparison of two texts.

**Dealing with an unseen drama extract**

You’re about to look at an extract from a play.

As you know, plays are written to be performed by a cast of actors to an audience. As you know from Chapter 3, may be a live audience in a theatre, or a more remote audience on radio or television.

The dramatist has two methods of influencing the reaction of the audience:

1. the words – the lines of dialogue – he/she gives to the actors to speak and give life to the characters

2. the stage directions he/she provides, offering instructions and advice to director and actors, and filling in background details of plot and character.

Reading a play on your own is in many ways an inferior experience to watching and/or listening to a live or recorded dramatic performance. But you as a reader have two big advantages over an audience.

Think what these advantages might be as you read the following extract. Pay particular attention to how the dramatist introduces the setting and characters to the audience.

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**Activity 6.2**

This is the opening of the play *The Piano Lesson* by August Wilson (1945–2005). The action of the play takes place in the kitchen and parlour of the house where Doaker Charles lives with his niece Berniece and her 11-year-old daughter Maretha.

*The lights come up on the Charles household. It is five o’clock in the morning. The dawn is beginning to announce itself, but there is something in the air that belongs to the night. A stillness that is a portent, a gathering, a coming together of something akin to a storm. There is a loud knock at the door.*

BOY WILLIE  *(offstage, calling)*: Hey, Doaker ... Doaker! *(He knocks again and calls.)* Hey Doaker! Hey, Berniece! Berniece!
Doaker enters from his room. He is a tall, thin man of forty-seven, with severe features, who has for all intents and purposes retired from the world though he works full-time as a railroad cook.

DOAKER: Who is it?

BOY WILLIE: Open the door...
   It's me ... Boy Willie!

DOAKER: Who?

BOY WILLIE: Boy Willie! Open the door!

Doaker opens the door and Boy Willie and Lymon enter. Boy Willie is thirty years old. He has an infectious grin and a boyishness that is apt for his name. He is brash and impulsive, talkative, and somewhat crude in speech and manner. Lymon is twenty-nine. Boy Willie's partner, he talks little, and then with a straightforwardness that is often disarming.

DOAKER: What you doing up here?

BOY WILLIE: I told you, Lymon. Lymon talking about you might be sleep. This is Lymon. You remember Lymon Jackson from down home? This my Uncle Doaker.

DOAKER: What you doing up here? I couldn't figure out who that was. I thought you was still down in Mississippi.

BOY WILLIE: Me and Lymon selling watermelons. We got a truck out there. Got a whole truckload of watermelons. We brought them up here to sell. Where's Berniece? (Calls.) Hey, Berniece!

DOAKER: Berniece up there sleep.

BOY WILLIE: Well, let her get up. (Calls.) Hey, Berniece!

DOAKER: She got to go to work in the morning.

BOY WILLIE: Well she can get up and say hi. It's been three years since I seen her. (Calls.) Hey, Berniece! It's me ... Boy Willie.

DOAKER: Berniece don't like all that hollering now. She got to work in the morning.

BOY WILLIE: She can go on back to bed. Me and Lymon been riding two days in that truck ... the least she can do is get up and say hi.

DOAKER (looking out the window): Where you all get that truck from?

BOY WILLIE: It's Lymon's. I told him let's get a load of watermelons and bring them up here.

LYMON: Boy Willie say he going back, but I'm gonna stay. See what it's like up here.

BOY WILLIE: You gonna carry me down there first.
Discussion

Have you read all of the extract?
Did you read any part of it – or all of it – more than once?
If you did, then you’ve discovered the first big advantage that a reader has over an audience when it comes to responding to a play: you can go back and revisit any part you didn’t quite understand the first time round.

What was the second big advantage? Well, you were able to read the dramatist’s stage directions: an audience would have to depend on the director and actor interpreting those.

The big disadvantage, of course, is that you had to “speak” all the different voices in your head. Even in this short extract, there were three new characters, and you had to interpret them and create a “voice” for each one. In other words, you were doing all the work which would be done by three actors and a director in rehearsal.

How did you manage to do all that in your head?
You must be amazingly clever!

The truth is that the act of reading-and-interpreting has become automatic to you. The fact that you have got this far with your studies of literature in English shows that you are quite skilful at this process. But in order to become even better at it, we need to examine how it worked, and you then need to practise the stages.

So, pen or pencil in hand, and armed with some paper to write on, back we go to the start of the extract.
The process of reading and interpreting

Several different strands or layers of meaning are being communicated at the same time in a drama text. These include:

1. explicit (obvious) background information – who/when/where/what – about the setting and characters
2. details from this background information that make you wonder and ask questions
3. evidence in the words and actions of the characters to support or to modify everything in point 1 above
4. hints and suggestions of what might develop in the future (what some people like to call “foreshadowing” or prolepsis)
5. details of characterization in the language given by the writer to each speaker.

Let’s assume that you have completed this reading-and-annotating stage. Here are some points you may have picked up. The numbers in brackets refer to points 1 to 5 in the “strands” suggested above, but they are not at all a complete survey of significant aspects of a drama text.

- August Wilson chooses a domestic location for the play (1). We might wonder why Doaker Charles has his niece Berniece and her 11-year-old daughter living with him (1) and we might imagine explanations (2) for this, perhaps speculating about relationships the characters may have had in the past – for example, where is Maretha’s father?
- Boy Willie’s words and actions in shouting and repeating himself (3) bear out the dramatist’s description of him as “brash and impulsive, talkative, and somewhat crude in speech and manner”.
- All three characters speak in a non-standard colloquial way (5), but Doaker is more “correct” (closer to the grammatical standard) than the two younger men. And all three men (3/5) repeat earlier points – “Open the door!” / “She got to work in the morning.” / “pump them till they catch” – rather than providing a clearer or more developed explanation.
- The truckload of watermelons seems to be a symbol of life “down in Mississippi” as well as a way of making money “up here”. Will Boy Willie and Lymon be successful in their plan to sell the watermelons?

In an examination, you would be picking up ideas from all of these strands as you were reading. It is a good idea to annotate the play extract, using underlining, circling or highlighting of key details and then making sure that you refer to them clearly or even quote them in your final written answer.
There’s a hint of possible future conflict or disappointment when Doaker says: “Berniece don’t like all that hollering now.” Perhaps there was a time when she did like it, but she’s changed.

Look carefully at that last point above. The point depends on how we interpret a single word – “now” – and it’s a very simple word on which to base a substantial argument.

It’s important to pay close attention to details of the language of a text, but it’s also important not to over-interpret. If you had the whole play to deal with, there would be plenty of evidence on which to base an argument about whether Berniece had changed from a woman who could tolerate “hollering” and loud behaviour into one who would be offended or angered by such things. It might turn out not to be a significant point at all.

But in the unseen examination, you won’t have the whole text in front of you, so all you can rely on is the extract you are given. Read carefully whatever textual evidence there is, and make sure your comments are both thoughtful and securely grounded in the text.

You’ll notice I’ve used the word “evidence” twice in the last two paragraphs. What kind of word is it?

- It’s an abstract noun.
- It’s from the lexical field of the law.
- Its etymology (the way the word has developed from its origins) is to do with what you can see. (The Latin verb video means “to see”, and the Latin prefix e- means “outwardly”.)
- It’s used in formal situations – often to do with court cases – to suggest a serious form of proof which might be used to establish someone’s innocence or guilt.

When you look for evidence in a text, you’re not behaving like Hamlet in Shakespeare’s play, trying to prove that his uncle Claudius murdered his father. And you’re not interrogating suspects like a fictional police detective.

However, you are “interrogating” the text – asking questions, as we’ve done so far in this chapter. If you are to be like any fictional character, it should be Sherlock Holmes, looking at all the evidence before coming to any theory or conclusion.

“It is a capital mistake to theorize before you have all the evidence. It biases the judgment.”

From A Study in Scarlet, the first Sherlock Holmes story, by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.
Next: what if the “unseen” text isn’t an unseen?

Activity 6.3

Next we’re going to look at a passage of prose fiction. It’s an extract from very near the start of a short story by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle called *The Speckled Band* – one of the many Sherlock Homes short stories narrated by his colleague Dr Watson.

You are unlikely to be given such a well-known passage in the “unseen text” examination. However, looking at an extract like this one, involving characters who are probably familiar to many readers, will be a very good exercise for you at this stage because you can practise the crucial skill of examining the evidence in front of you without jumping to any conclusions on the basis of anything you might know from outside the text.

This time you are going to be “reading on your own” a bit more than you were in Activities 6.1 and 6.2. Here is your task:

Write a critical commentary on the following extract. Pay particular attention to how the writer has used dialogue as well as narration to begin the story.

It was early in April in the year ‘83 that I woke one morning to find Sherlock Holmes standing, fully dressed, by the side of my bed. He was a late riser, as a rule, and as the clock on the mantelpiece showed me that it was only a quarter-past seven, I blinked up at him in some surprise, and perhaps just a little resentment, for I was myself regular in my habits.

“Very sorry to knock you up, Watson,” said he, “but it’s the common lot this morning. Mrs. Hudson has been knocked up, she retorted upon me, and I on you.”

“What is it, then – a fire?”

“No; a client. It seems that a young lady has arrived in a considerable state of excitement, who insists upon seeing me. She is waiting now in the sitting-room. Now, when young ladies wander about the metropolis at this hour of the morning, and knock sleepy people up out of their beds, I presume that it is something very pressing which they have to communicate. Should it prove to be an interesting case, you would, I am sure, wish to follow it from the outset. I thought, at any rate, that I should call you and give you the chance.”

“My dear fellow, I would not miss it for anything.”

I had no keener pleasure than in following Holmes in his professional investigations, and in admiring the rapid deductions, as swift as intuitions, and yet always founded on a logical basis, with which he unravelled the problems which were submitted to him. I rapidly threw on my clothes and was ready in a few minutes to accompany my friend down to the sitting-room. A lady dressed in black and heavily veiled, who had been sitting in the window, rose as we entered.

“Good-morning, madam,” said Holmes cheerily. “My name is Sherlock Holmes. This is my intimate friend and associate, Dr. Watson, before whom you can speak as freely as before myself. Ha! I am glad to see that Mrs. Hudson has had the good sense to light
the fire. Pray draw up to it, and I shall order
you a cup of hot coffee, for I observe that you
are shivering.”
“It is not cold which makes me shiver,” said
the woman in a low voice, changing her seat
as requested.
“What, then?”
“It is fear, Mr. Holmes. It is terror.” She
raised her veil as she spoke, and we could
see that she was indeed in a pitiable state of
agitation, her face all drawn and gray, with
restless frightened eyes, like those of some
hunted animal. Her features and figure were
those of a woman of thirty, but her hair was
shot with premature gray, and her expression
was weary and haggard. Sherlock Holmes
ran her over with one of his quick, all-
compassive glances.
“You must not fear,” said he soothingly,
bending forward and patting her forearm.
“We shall soon set matters right, I have
no doubt. You have come in by train this
morning, I see.”
“You know me, then?”
“No, but I observe the second half of a return
ticket in the palm of your left glove. You must
have started early, and yet you had a good
drive in a dog-cart, along heavy roads, before
you reached the station.”
The lady gave a violent start and stared in
bewilderment at my companion.
“There is no mystery, my dear madam,” said
he, smiling. “The left arm of your jacket is
spattered with mud in no less than seven
places. The marks are perfectly fresh. There is
no vehicle save a dog-cart which throws up
mud in that way, and then only when you sit
on the left-hand side of the driver.”
“Whatever your reasons may be, you are
perfectly correct,” said she. “I started from
home before six, reached Leatherhead at
twenty past, and came in by the first train to
Waterloo. Sir, I can stand this strain no longer;
I shall go mad if it continues. I have no one
to turn to—none, save only one, who cares for
me, and he, poor fellow, can be of little aid. I
have heard of you, Mr. Holmes; I have heard
of you from Mrs. Farintosh, whom you helped
in the hour of her sore need. It was from her
that I had your address. Oh, sir, do you not
think that you could help me, too, and at least
throw a little light through the dense darkness
which surrounds me? At present it is out of
my power to reward you for your services, but
in a month or six weeks I shall be married,
with the control of my own income, and then
at least you shall not find me ungrateful.”
Holmes turned to his desk and, unlocking
it, drew out a small case-book, which
he consulted.
“Farintosh,” said he. “Ah yes, I recall the case;
it was concerned with an opal tiara. I think
it was before your time, Watson. I can only
say, madam, that I shall be happy to devote
the same care to your case as I did to that of
your friend. As to reward, my profession is its
own reward; but you are at liberty to defray
whatever expenses I may be put to, at the time
which suits you best. And now I beg that you
will lay before us everything that may help us
in forming an opinion upon the matter.”

_The Speckled Band_, Sir Arthur
Conan Doyle
Discussion

The writer perhaps expects his readers to be familiar with the two male characters, Holmes and Watson. After reminding the reader of Holmes’s powers of deduction in the sixth paragraph, Watson (as narrator) shifts the scene to the sitting-room, introduces the “client”, then withdraws from the conversation and just observes.

The client is introduced with details (“dressed in black and heavily veiled”) which suggest something serious and unpleasant. Conan Doyle contrasts this description with Holmes’s cheerful, breezy manner. He makes a joke of the young lady’s arrival when waking Watson: “when young ladies wander about the metropolis at this hour of the morning, and knock sleepy people up out of their beds, I presume that it is something very pressing which they have to communicate.” He speaks to the young lady in a welcoming way, showing concern for her: “I shall order you a cup of hot coffee, for I observe that you are shivering.”

Conan Doyle follows this with the young lady’s first line of speech: “It is not cold which makes me shiver.” She is described as having said this “in a low voice”. Naturally, the dialogue continues with Holmes asking what it is that makes her shiver, and she replies “It is fear, Mr. Holmes. It is terror.” This strikes the reader as more serious still; “terror” is a stronger version of “fear” – it’s a feeling which paralyses a person.

The writer has created suspense in a number of ways. Watson and the reader are waiting to hear the young lady’s story, and the writer keeps us waiting for that. But he also keeps us waiting for a sight of the young lady’s face: she had been “heavily veiled”. The veil is removed after that last dramatic line (“fear … terror”) of dialogue, and the description of its removal is dramatic too: “She raised her veil as she spoke, and we could see that she was indeed in a pitiful state of agitation, her face all drawn and gray, with restless frightened eyes.”

Watson, as the observer and narrator, compares those eyes to “those of some hunted animal.” We perhaps wonder who is doing the hunting. And we then get another effective use of contrast: “Her features and figure were those of a woman of thirty, but her hair was shot with premature gray, and her expression was weary and haggard.”

The next sequence of dialogue serves two purposes. The writer depicts Holmes taking control of the situation. The simple use of pronouns shows the switching of the focus from the young lady’s situation (“You must not fear”) to how they will deal with the problem together (“We shall soon set matters right”) thanks to Holmes’s confidence in his own abilities (“I have no doubt.”)

We are immediately shown that his confidence in his own abilities is justified. He continues: “You have come in by train this morning, I see.” For most people, the expression “I see” is used for everyday observations: I see you’ve got some new shoes; I see there’s going to be World Cup football on television this evening. But for Sherlock Holmes, seeing is the essence of his skill as a detective, and Conan Doyle signals this by using a more precise verb of seeing – “I observe the second half of a return ticket in the palm of your left glove.”
As I pointed out before you read this passage, a text about such a well-known fictional character is not exactly “unseen”, and much of the discussion above refers to features of structure, form and language which the reader expects. But it’s important not to underestimate the writer’s skill. So... keep looking at the evidence.

One of the writer’s techniques already mentioned is the use of **contrast**. And one of the most frequently used metaphorical contrasts in literature is the contrast between dark and light. In her last and longest speech in the extract, the young lady uses this metaphor to describe her situation and feelings: “Oh, sir, do you not think that you could help me, too, and at least throw a little light through the dense darkness which surrounds me?”

**The power of opposition**

Contrast is not just a literary device. It is a visual method of drawing attention to something. On a bigger scale, it is a way of making sense of the world by setting up a series of oppositions. We do this all the time: we divide and classify objects, ideas, feelings, and even people.

- night/day
- warm/cold
- easy/difficult
- masculine/feminine
- cheap/expensive
- sun/moon
- introvert/extrovert
- Manchester United supporters/Barcelona supporters.

Opposition (or contrast) can be a very effective way of organizing your thoughts, and you’ll be trying out in the next activity a method of using opposition to generate twice as many ideas as you had to start with.

It can, however, also be misleading to push your thinking into “polar” opposites.

Think about it. Almost everything on earth is somewhere in between the North Pole and the South Pole. Very few things are actually at one of the Poles.

So be careful in your literary appreciation – not just with unseen texts but with all texts – not to make extravagant or extreme comments that leave you stuck with an exaggerated interpretation.