

Know-How of Background and Literary Breakdown

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Abstract: Literary analysts have not always agreed upon the importance of contextual knowledge. The New Critics, for example, were quite hostile to the notion that one should look at the literary period or the life of the author as a way of explaining a literary work. This paper proceeds from the view that a literary work is not self-sufficient to its own interpretation and indeed never could be so. Instead, I will maintain that a historicized interpretation, alive to the historical context, genre, author and other facets is more productive than one centered on the work in isolation. Contextual information can help a reader produce more subtle and complex interpretations of a primary work. Moreover, there is plentiful research that suggests contextual knowledge is crucial to basic acts of comprehension that are the foundation of sophisticated interpretations. The development of tentative hypotheses, linked with a recursive and self-aware strategy will help students build links between texts and produce richer interpretations. This paper is based on a research held on first year Engineering Students. In order to generate evidence about how students evaluate the relevance of contextual information, a series of two interviews with seven respondents were carried out on an individual basis. Both interviews followed a tradition in studies of expert reading and comprehension by using a talk-aloud protocol fused with on-line analysis to work through the text.

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This paper proceeds from the view that a literary work is not self-sufficient to its own interpretation and indeed never could be so. In a class of Personality Development, I placed Percy Bysshe Shelley's poem "Ozymandias" on the reading list. This is a canonical poem that would be well known to an older generation but which was completely unfamiliar to my first year undergraduate Engineering students.

I was not surprised that the students did not know who Shelley was, or anything about the beliefs, politics or chronology of the Romantic Period. With some help they could get through a basic reading of the poem and most were able to capture some sense of the irony of a boastful inscription when all else had been destroyed by time. Without a concrete background knowledge of the author, or the political context in which the work was written, some observations could still be made, although they tended towards the very general aspects. Basic comprehension is possible without a specialized contextual knowledge, but sophisticated readings required in a literature course, need far more than this.

A well-recognized challenge while reading literature is that a common culture and the assumed reader of much literature no longer exist, at least within an undergraduate setting. The diversity

within cohorts and inequalities and other variations in educational experience meet with a greatly expanded canon to ensure that the context of any work of literature is likely to be poorly understood, at least in the initial phase. Literary analysts have not always agreed upon the importance of contextual knowledge. The New Critics, for example, were hostile to the notion that one should look at the literary period or the life of the author as a way of understanding a literary work. However, there is a lot of research that suggests that contextual knowledge is crucial to basic acts of comprehension that are the foundation of sophisticated interpretations.

Comprehension and discourse studies have examined the issue of general world knowledge and interpretation in considerable detail. Cook and Guerard (2005), Rizzella and O'Brien (2002) and Henry (1990) are some examples of study into the role of general world knowledge in discourse processing. Afflerbach's "The Influence of Prior Knowledge on Expert Readers' Main Idea Construction Strategies" (1990) has been an influential example of these kinds of studies which work from a cognitive perspective to emphasize the importance of contextual knowledge in reading and comprehension. Empirical studies that probe into the expert/novice reader differences also point to the intricate relationships between cognitive processing, memory and prior knowledge. The foundational study in this area is that of Bransford and Johnson (1972) who argue that prior knowledge schemas are important in recall and other processing functions. They presented readers with abstract passages. Readers who were given no explanation of the context of the passage had poor recall of the ideas presented (2.8/18 ideas). Those who were told prior to reading had far better recall (5.8/18 ideas). Those who were told after reading the passage recalled only 2.7/18 ideas. Without a pre-existent schema into which the information could be inserted, its meaningfulness was much reduced.

Given the importance of contextual knowledge to basic comprehension, memory tasks and the production of sophisticated interpretations one would expect that literary instructors after the New Critics would sense that the provision of background information is crucial. In my teaching I discuss websites and other material that assist interpretation of the literary work at hand. But like many, I find this has effects that are far from being uniform. The more perceptive students utilize the information, but the others are less capable and unable to perceive its relevance and thus remain largely ignorant.

One of the tragic ironies of attempting to ameliorate absences in knowledge that interfere with comprehension of a text is that those same absences may interfere with the assimilation of the contextual texts. Concerned with how literary expertise develops, Jock Macleod positions the role of contextual knowledge as something secondary to strategies and practices that generate an interpretation. Indeed he warns of the 'swamping' of students with contextual information. It is unlikely that the information will 'swamp' the students; rather, they will regard it as irrelevant and let it roll over them. However, he is right to point out that students will have difficulty understanding the relevance of background information. A more tendentious claim that MacLeod makes, however, is that students who are unable to develop some sophistication in the analysis of literary works will gain no benefit from contextual materials. Students unable to make a fair fist

of analyzing a poem (or other literary text) will have limited understandings of the wider concerns that typically shape courses in literary studies, for instance, an author's corpus, a literary genre or period, literature in its social, historical or ideological contexts (27).

Contextual information about an author, a historical period or a genre will help produce deeper interpretations. As Braten, Stramse and Britt note, most of the studies into multiple document use have focused on the discipline of history (6), although there are recent studies in law and medicine (7). Literary studies as a discipline needs to take up the question of how literature students assemble and connect multiple texts. In particular, little is known about how readers link historical, political and other material to their analysis of a literary work. Expert literature analysts do this without a second thought and seek to pass on this expertise through displaying the finished product to students; Knapp suggests that literature lecturers continue to act as oracles to students, keeping the actual knowledge-generating strategies obscure (56). Linking Shelley's political beliefs to 'Ozymandias' is simple for a skilled literary critic; however for a student it may be nearly impossible to build the relationship. The literary critic will understand something of Shelley's radical beliefs and what constitutes radicalism in the context of the post-Napoleonic British environment. The seasoned analyst may then link Shelley's disgust with the British administration to the poem; all great powers are destroyed with the effluxion of time and so too will the British establishment one day fall. For a developing literature student, making these connections may involve Herculean difficulties. The very concept of 'politics' may be problematic for a generation that is de-politicised. The meaning of 'radicalism' within the context of the times, when calling oneself a democrat could lead to incarceration, may again be very difficult for a student, whose historical perspective may be very 'flat'. When students cannot make these connections they will regard the additional material as irrelevant and will quickly dispense with it. 'Relevance', then, becomes a marker of how well connections are being made, and 'irrelevance' suggests a connective failure. In order to have a better sense of how students attempt to link contextual information to a literary work, the author carried out a series of interviews with students.

In order to generate evidence about how students evaluate the relevance of contextual information, a series of two interviews with seven respondents was carried out on an individual basis. Both interviews followed a tradition in studies of expert reading and comprehension by using a talk-aloud protocol fused with on-line analysis to work through the text. The think-aloud method has been used widely in studies of expertise (Ericsson and Simon, 1984) to provide data about the problem solving strategies undertaken in text comprehension. Graves (1996, 392-393) also outlines the wealth of studies which have used talk-aloud protocols to investigate text comprehension and literary reading. Allied to the talk-aloud protocol is on-line interpretation in which the developing understanding of the text is described by the reader and generates data about real-time semantic processing of texts. The first interview with 'novice' respondents is in part an exercise in on-line responses, in which respondents move through a poem line by line verbalizing their attempts at analysis. Though this study did not employ some of the stricter

methodologies of some cognitive studies of discourse analysis as described in Ericsson and Simon (1984) and Fredericksen (1986), it does pay attention to the generation of propositions and the establishing of frames that these studies recognize as important.

In the first interview “Ozymandias” was read through and the student gained a basic understanding of the poem, although exact uniformity was not possible. They also exited the interview with the knowledge that ‘Ozymandias’ was the supposed Greek name for Ramesses II, and that the poem had been published in 1818. This preparatory interview ensured that the later relevance judgments were based on as similar a primary reading as possible.

In the week between interview one and two, the interviewees were asked to access three websites that contained information about “Ozymandias”. They were asked not to read any other material about the poem. The respondents had read the websites before the second interview and brought hard copies with relevance rankings marked. They had been asked to grade each paragraph with a mark from 1 to 3, representing a scale of relevance from high to low. Together with a talk aloud exercise, this was designed to show what elements of the secondary reading were considered relevant to forming a deeper interpretation. The three web pages had a variety of foci which might be described as:

Ramesses Information

1. Authorial biography
2. Historical and publishing context

The first web page centered on the figure of Ramesses II. It recounted his military victories, family relations, his desire to construct monuments and the ruins that yet remain. The penultimate paragraph described the ‘discovery’ of Abu Simbel by Johann Burckhardt in 1813 and the penetration of the temple complex four years later by Giovanni Belzoni. The date of 1817 offered the possibility of a chronological connection to the poem which had been written in 1817 but published in 1818. The final paragraph commented on the 1974 discovery that the mummified remains of Ramesses II were suffering from a fungal infection, and that the body had to enter France for treatment using an Egyptian passport that listed his occupation as ‘King (deceased)’.

The second page contained biographical information about Shelley, his unconventional lifestyle, writings and political leanings. Of particular interest was the penultimate paragraph which recorded his reaction to the Peterloo massacre, his heightened resistance to the British government and his hopes that a peaceful reform could forestall an inevitable revolution. The third page contained material about the British Empire, a growing British Egyptomania, contemporary contemplation about the rise and fall of empires and a comparison of ‘Ozymandias’ with Horace Smith’s poem on a similar theme. There is no absolute basis of relevance to which the respondents’ relevance judgments may be compared. The initial interpretation of the

poem will have a deep effect on relevance determinations, which was why the interviewees were to leave the first interview with a similar understanding of the poem. While the interpretation has an effect on relevance determination so too does the more general interpretive frame. For instance, an interpreter who is author-focused will be more likely to find page two more relevant. A reader more open to using other literary works as a comparison may find page three of greater interest. However, it is unacceptable to simply suggest that all interpretations are of equivalent value. My judgment as an expert reader is that the third page clearly contains more relevant material than the other two pages, but this is inflected by my interpretative frame. This frame is (roughly) historicist, in that I am interested in the period in which the poem was written, its connections to the culture of the time, and, in the particular case of “Ozymandias,” whatever political connotations it may have.

A brief summary of the results of this survey may be given. Overall, the seven respondents over-valued the relevance of the first web page with dealt with Egypt. Obviously, topicality had a strong role to play here; the poem is set in Egypt, therefore more information about Egypt and Ramesses was presumed to be helpful. In fact, that is not the case. Without either being proscriptive or completely ignoring the possibility of innovative approaches, it is fair to say that knowing about Ramesses’ military victories or fortunes of his close relatives does not help one interpret the poem. In the language of relevance theory, some interviewees find a sufficient *cognitive effect* from superficial, topical relationships (see Sperber & Wilson). They stop at this point and wider interpretation becomes impossible. Bereiter and Scardamalia (1993, 176) found that studies of summarizing and note-taking suggest that students tend to retain or reject textual information on the basis of superficial indicators of its importance rather than on the basis of interrelationships. Thinking-aloud studies of readers show that the less able ones attend mainly to topics and details rather than to overarching propositions.

Bereiter and Scardamalia point out that this kind of schema in which rapid pickup and reproduction of information is dominant is at odds with the kinds of knowledge-building schemas in which interpretation plays a significant role. It is not surprising then that students were fixed upon the Site 1 information about Ramesses as being immediately relevant, even though it cannot be used in any high level interpretation of the poem. As Bereiter and Scardamalia note (1993, 168-169), this immediate best-fit matching of new information to old may lead to inexpert learners jumping to conclusions on the basis of the little they have already learned, making subjective judgments about importance, constructing simplistic interpretations and becoming captivated by items of tangential interest (1993, 170). The great danger of new knowledge is not that it cannot be understood, but that it is assimilated too easily. For example, the student who learned that Ozymandias was the Greek name for the Egyptian Pharaoh Ramesses II reads the poem through the frame of ‘Egypt’. This tended to limit the possible interpretations, ignoring metaphorical and political significances and distorting relevance recognitions when background information is encountered.

More perversely, even though most of the respondents reached a sophisticated understanding of the poem in which Ramesses is metonymic of all tyrants and temporal powers, they nevertheless considered most of Site 1 of high or moderate relevance. The cognitive effect in the recognition of the contiguity of Ramesses in the poem and in the contextual material is too much for even a sophisticated reading. The students valued Site 2, the information about the author was of moderate relevance, which was roughly in accord with my views. But Site 3, which dealt with European Egyptomania and the related thinking about the rise and fall of empires, was considered of low relevance by the students, in contrast to my judgment. If even sophisticated, metaphorically aware readings do not guide one toward relevant sources that might further develop such a reader, then the claim for the utility of secondary readings would be thin. But Bereiter and Scardamalia observe that successful readers and writers engage in a recursive movement between the relevant elements of domain knowledge, and the particular texts, and that this movement is an important constituent of expertise (1991,178). Most of the student respondents remained stuck within their initial and basic interpretation of the poem; this acted as a frame for relevance judgments about the secondary material. The poem was in some sense *about* Ozymandias, or, in the terminology of Perfettiet. al., their situational model was paramount. This caused them to respond to Site 1 strongly, but did not establish a recursive relationship between the poem and the contextual material. One of the interviewees, on the other hand, developed a tentative hypothesis regarding the poem. She initially felt that the poem evoked the triumph of Ramesses; if his kingdom was in ruins it was also true that his constructions and monumental boast were the only things that had survived the passage of time. However, she was able to explain that this interpretation was one with which she was unsatisfied and which was abandoned after reading Site 3. She returned from Site 3 to generate a much more sophisticated reading of “Ozymandias.”

Why is her relevance recognition much more productive than the other students? She is not swayed by topical contiguity, and the superficial connections between the poem and the site. Why this is so is not completely clear, but it does correlate with her level of academic success which was higher than the other interviewees. The key difference seems to be that her responses displayed a significant metacognitive component; not only did she employ a recursive heuristic but she was aware that she did. Her ability to move to a much richer analysis of the poem shows that what might be considered an initial defective competency in dealing with the irony of the poem is more than compensated by her possession of a framework for further investigation, an ability to move between context and poem and a metacognitive awareness.

Absence in cultural knowledge that enables deeper interpretations is a continuing problem in literature studies. Literary instructors need to elucidate and make overt the habits of mind they have developed but which are obscure to students. The development of tentative hypotheses, linked with a recursive and self-aware strategy will help students build links between texts and produce richer interpretations.

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