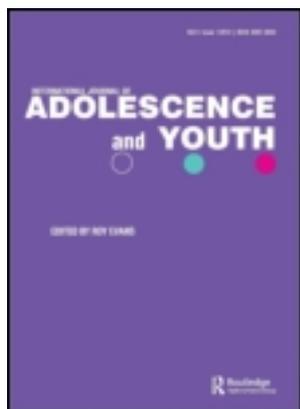


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‘Dissecting butterflies’: literary theory and poetry teaching in post-16 education

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This paper discusses the role of literary theory within the teaching of poetry by focusing on post-16 education in Malta as a case study. Literary theory was meant to lead to a rethinking of the way poetry is approached in the A-level English classroom, but this failed to really come about due to the fact that it has not been adopted by syllabus developers and teachers. This paper explores the reasons for such reluctance by analysing the views of teachers and an examiner. It shows how a sense of unease with students’ and teachers’ ability to exploit literary theory in the poetry lesson seems to be one of the main factors behind its continued absence.

Keywords: post-16 education; poetry teaching; literary theory; A-level English; reading

Introduction

The 1980–1981 Colin MacCabe affair demonstrated a lack of consensus on the way literature should be taught and it foregrounded new trends in literary studies. Over the past few decades, ‘attention to literature and literary discourse as such has been supplanted as a defining characteristic of the literary disciplines’ by theory, which ‘proposes less a knowledge of the field of literature than a way of becoming self-conscious about how we use language and language uses us’ (Paulson, 2001, p. 6). This burgeoning tendency is criticised by Edmundson (2004), who feels that the humanities have become dominated by ‘work that is best described as out-and-out rewriting of the authors at hand. In fact, we might call these efforts not so much criticism as transformation’ (p. 38). He criticises those literature lessons during which ‘The student is taught not to be open to the influence of great works, but rather to perform facile and empty acts of usurpation, in which he assumes unearned power over the text’ (Edmundson, 2004, p. 45). Eco (2002/2004) calls this ‘a dangerous critical heresy, typical of our time, according to which we can do anything we like with a work of literature’ (p. 4). However, Culler (1988) is much more cautious about debunking theory and states that ‘Criticism goes with crisis, itself generates a rhetoric of crisis, insofar as it calls one to rethink the canon and to reflect on the order of a culture’s discourses and the relations among them’ (p. 53). The debate on whether literary theory has a place within undergraduate courses in English seems to have fizzled out as theory has now become institutionalised. However, it is still a subject of dissension when it comes to post-16 education.

In Malta, the issue of whether literary theory should feature in the A-level English course was given further prominence with the publication of the 2013 syllabus. This document explicitly states that

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Reference to literary critics and theorists does not make up part of the assessment criteria at Advanced Level... However, the examiners may choose to award evidence of broader reading within an author's work or across critique of that author, as well as reference to critics and theorists if these are discerningly and appropriately (rather than tokenistically) used. (Matriculation and Secondary Education Certificate [MATSEC], 2010, p. 8)

For some teachers, this proved to be somewhat confounding as, on the one hand, the syllabus maintains that knowledge of literary theory is not part of the assessment criteria, while, on the other hand, it also says that careful references to literary theory might encourage examiners to award a candidate a higher grade. Despite the reassurance that literary theory is not an assessable area, some teachers felt that in order for them to encourage students to go the extra mile they needed to make it a staple part of their lessons. By means of interviews with a group of teachers and one of the syllabus developers and examiners for A-level English, this study sought to explore attitudes towards literary theory's place within the teaching of poetry at post-16 level in Malta.

Undermining the dominant paradigm

From its inception, A-level English Literature in the UK 'was criticised by both school and university teachers for its narrow focus on the close reading of a small number of traditional canonical set texts informed by an essentially Leavisite paradigm' (Snapper, 2007, p. 17). A similar situation exists in Malta where the teaching of poetry at A-level has for many decades been heavily influenced by the traditional close reading of a text. Burton (1989) argues that I.A. Richard's conception of close reading resulted in 'a textual authoritarianism under which generations of school-children have been dragooned into believing that there can only be one response to a text' (p. 3). The teacher has the privilege of deciphering the poem and exposing the totality that resides beneath its constituent parts. This leads some students to 'feel uneasy when confronted by a poem' (Murray, 1989, p. 4) because they are told that as inexperienced readers they will be unable to fathom its totality. However, Murray (1989) attacks this misconception and argues that a poem does not possess 'a fixed anchor-point or centre from which the text gains its unity, but instead an endless deferral of that finding of centre' (p. 9). This encourages the reader to engage in a 'multiplicity of meanings, of incomplete and constantly revised interpretations' (Collingborn, 1989, p. 10), a view of reading that has apparently not yet fully taken root in the post-16 teaching of English.

By conceiving meaning as being embedded in the text waiting to be discovered and the function of the reader as being that of establishing what the poem means, New Criticism has provided the teacher with the role of 'model and expert mediator between text and reader' and this is 'more a deterrent to readers' achieving an autonomy as readers than it is a help' (Dias & Hayhoe, 1988, p. 6). Dias and Hayhoe (1988) criticise such a practice because it 'dictates that teacher's role is to *conduct* the reading of a poem, and hope somehow that his or her reading will be appropriated by pupils' (p. 7). The teacher's questions during such an activity are not really exploring students' response because the answers are already known. Even though New Criticism has a strong bearing on the way poetry is taught in schools and assessed in examinations, post-structuralism 'may affect classroom practice in ways that are more consonant with ways young people actually read literature' (Dias & Hayhoe, 1988, p. 11). This is because it sees meaning as being 'indeterminate and unstable' and hence 'a poem cannot mean on its own or as part of a system, but is dependent on several choices on the part of its readers' (Dias & Hayhoe, 1988, p. 14). The popularity of the Leavisite paradigm in A-level English classes might

indicate that for some teachers the notion of multiplicity of meaning is too perilous for it to be adopted as part of their poetry pedagogy.

Carter and Long (1991) point out that 'A pedagogical disadvantage' associated with traditional practical criticism 'is that there is no clear *method*' to it and that its teaching methods are 'tightly controlled by the teacher, either in the form of directed questions accompanied by teacher-led commentary, or in the form of a demonstration exposition in a lecture or seminar' (p. 181). Students are not explicitly taught a number of procedures that they can 'implement for themselves' and hence they pick these up 'at second hand' (Carter & Long, 1991, p. 181) from their teachers or books. According to Exton (1984), the 'firm separation of creation from criticism, of practice from theory' is one of the handicaps affecting the teaching of poetry and that is why what is needed are approaches that being informed by theory 'are designed to give children confidence and recognise their creative power when they read and negotiate with poems' (pp. 70–71). What is most imperative is that 'these approaches need to feed from and into the personal experience of students and awake their active engagement with texts' (Carter & Long, 1991, p. 195). Whether a teacher-centred approach to the teaching of poetry can foster student engagement is highly questionable and yet this seems to be the most popular pedagogical approach in post-16 classes.

The emergence of literary theory was meant to lead to a rethinking of the way poetry is taught at A-level. However, theory seems to have had little impact on the teaching of English at pre-university level. In fact, Peim (2009) posits that in the UK 'the National Curriculum in English is entirely unaware of these various discourses and their impact. Contemporary English teaching in schools remains structured around a normative model of language and advances a relatively narrow concept of textual literacy' (p. 154). This situation is also apparent in Malta, and as shown by this study, one of the chief responsible factors seems to be teachers' own reluctance to adopt poetry teaching approaches informed by contemporary literary theory.

Teachers' scepticism

One of the reasons for which literary theory does not seem to be so popular in A-level classes is that teachers themselves are sceptical about whether it has a place within the teaching of English at this level. However, Eaglestone (2001) affirms that theory is not to be underestimated at A-level because ultimately 'it is a discipline that, through the study of literature, attempts to comprehend better the world around us and to appreciate the others that inhabit it' (p. 6). Those teachers who object to theory's place in the A-level English classroom are 'object[ing] to the changing intellectual and social climate of the world', and Eaglestone (2001) is not convinced that A-level students are willing to do that: 'They ask the big questions of literary texts because they really care about what they mean' (p. 7). Appleman (2009) is aware that 'Teachers ... may not be convinced of the relevance of contemporary literary theory. High school literature teachers often feel distant and detached' (p. 4) from it. Calway (2009) agrees with this idea and maintains that most A-level teachers object to critical theory because they complain about the fact that they and their students have 'enough to worry about reading the texts themselves let alone peering through a range of ingenious critical binoculars interposed between them and the texts' (p. 55). However, he argues that even the avoidance of theory 'is itself a reading theory ... that acts more like prejudice than insight' (Calway, 2009, p. 55). Teachers should perceive literary theory as 'an enriching and informing route to one's own reading', especially because it 'offer[s] a modern way of reading that students enjoy' (Calway,

2009, p. 55). In fact, Bellis, Parr, and Doecke (2009) point out that those who attack literary theory's place in the curriculum by saying that it goes counter to reading for personal pleasure fail to understand the complexities of textual engagement as it happens in a lesson and in so doing 'deny students both the pleasures of engaging with the imaginative world of texts and the opportunities to reflect on those pleasures in ways that enhance their sense of themselves as readers' (p. 172). Teachers' reluctance to adopt literary theory as part of their poetry lessons seems to be one of the reasons for which students are being deprived of an approach that has the potential to enrich their reading experience.

Alternative perspectives

Encouraging A-level students to engage with poetry via the use of literary theory is considered to be a means of enhancing their reading experience. Exton (1984) believes that reading activities informed by literary theory allow students 'to understand precisely *how* and therefore *what* a text says, and how we make those meanings' and this needs to happen 'before moving on to make statements about "life" outside the poem' (p. 74). Such activities provide students with 'the tools to analyse the world around them . . . and to make their own decisions' (Exton, 1984, p. 78). Some teachers consider poetry as being a problematic subject due to the difficulty of showing students how it works but this may change if they come to see 'creativity and criticism' as being 'mutually supportive and illuminating' (Exton, 1984, p. 76). It is partly for such reasons that Peim (1989) considers 'a practice of English based on innocence, uncontaminated by theory' (p. 26) as being no longer viable.

Burton (1989) postulates that literary theory is 'a very useful base from which to devise English teaching which opens more texts than it closes' (p. 6). Certain teachers find that when they use theory in their lessons this is

far more enriching and creative than a didactic approach, largely because the text is opened up in so many different ways and allows pupils a variety of viewing points from which to consider and respond to the issues it raises. (Twist, 1989, p. 30)

Collingborn (1989) feels that those methods that engage the student in 'simultaneous involvement and distancing' from the text are 'a more honest, open and accessible approach for the majority of pupils than the traditional literary criticism' (p. 9). The latter is criticised for endorsing only a limited number of responses that are perceived as being timeless and universal. In Collingborn's (1989) opinion 'Encouraging pupils to see themselves as questioners of and commentators upon the book can also serve to make them more critical as readers, and more aware of themselves as interpreters and shapers of the meaning of the text' (p. 9). Mitchell (1993) agrees with this idea and argues that an 'awareness of possible responses and types of engagement should . . . be integrated into a practice which is rigorously and fundamentally reflexive, questioning and on-going' (p. 27). Furniss and Bath (1996) maintain that it is important for students to be aware of their assumptions in relation to the nature of poetry since these inform their reading of poetry. There is no such thing as an innocent reader and this is because 'our assumptions about poetry are shaped by our own particular place in history, and by the unconscious theories about literature which our particular culture holds and disseminates' (Furniss & Bath, 1996, p. 21). Students should therefore be encouraged 'to think about poetry in theoretically informed ways' since this will allow them 'to be attentive to the theoretical implications of the features of each particular poem' (Furniss & Bath, 1996, p. 22).

Theory at A-level ‘should be embraced, not kept behind the scenes’ because it offers ‘a reflection on literature as it forms, interacts with and mirrors the world we all share’ (Eaglestone, 2001, p. 7). Wyse and Jones (2002) claim that ‘given the encouragement to develop interest in texts and diverse ways to reflect upon them, literary theory offers scope for greater understanding’ (p. 78). Rather than teaching a literary text by focusing on theme, characterisation, etc., and using literature teaching as a means of developing solely students’ reading and writing skills, ‘the literature curriculum could focus on constructing a certain critical disposition in students where the intellectual stress of the subject would fall on the politics of representation’ (Poon, 2007, p. 57). This can be achieved because ‘Literary theories provide lenses that can sharpen one’s vision and provide alternative ways of seeing’ (Appleman, 2009, p. 4). For Eaglestone (2009), the act of ‘questioning and reading from different perspectives is central to doing English and to the enjoyment of reading’ (p. 25). Nightingale (2011) asserts that ‘a more central role for theory, from the outset, would make an A-Level course more than a series of isolated texts; and provide a critical framework that took students beyond their personal response’ (p. 158). Tuchaai, O’Neill, and Sharplin (2012) seem to concur with this idea and they argue that ‘Exposure to theories of reading offers students different ways of reading texts to construct meaning’ (p. 163) and this facilitates the development of higher order critical thinking skills. The benefits of employing a poetry pedagogy informed by literary theory seem to be quite compelling and those teachers who fail to actually adopt such an approach are probably not aware that their students are being short-changed, especially since they will be expected to engage with poetry through literary theory immediately at the end of post-16 education.

Bridging the gap

Eaglestone (1999) argues that ‘Students going on to higher education find their A level poor preparation for a degree’ because while literary theory is a staple part of English undergraduate degrees, ‘sixth-form teaching still rests on more traditional analysis of themes, plot, character and style’. McEvoy (1999) concurs by saying that ‘In no other A level subject are the ideas of 40 years ago, ideas which have been long abandoned in the universities, still taught’. Theory has not sufficiently influenced the A-level study of English and ‘forms one of the largest gaps’ (McEvoy, 1999) between post-16 and undergraduate study. Even though the A-level English course should not ‘simply be exclusively a training for a degree’, it is ‘very far from matching – in an appropriate way – the shape of the discipline in HE’ (Eaglestone, 2001, p. 6). Ballinger (2003) reports that her first-year undergraduate students ‘often felt bewildered by literary theory and were unsure about how to use criticism saliently in their assessed essays’ (p. 100). She is of the opinion that literary theory should preferably be introduced in the second year of an A-level course in order ‘to help ease the transition to university’ (Ballinger, 2003, p. 104). Atherton (2004) makes a case for the teaching of literary theory to A-level students since this will ‘acknowledge that our subject does possess a set of specialist skills and a body of specialist knowledge – factors which enable the student of English to be distinguished from the lay reader’ (p. 33). It will also help ‘close the gap between A Level and higher education, introducing students to the theoretical ideas that inform the study of English at degree level’ (Atherton, 2004, p. 31). Nightingale (2007) argues that in terms of A-level students’ preparation for undergraduate studies in English ‘the problem is one of insufficient specialisation insofar as this means an evolving acquaintance with the body of knowledge (i.e. critical and theoretical work) that will constitute the subject in HE’ (p. 138). Snapper (2009) found that first-year university students of English tend to

struggle with literary theory because ‘At A Level, they had been given little opportunity to move beyond a conventional form of textual “appreciation” towards a broader and more conceptual grasp of the nature of literature and literary study and response’ (p. 207). Nonetheless, as undergraduates ‘their familiarity with such concepts and frameworks was assumed to such an extent that they were effectively still hindered from a genuine engagement with them’ (Snapper, 2009, p. 207). Eaglestone (2009) maintains that literary theory is necessary at A-level because ‘the world we live in now is not the same world that the Leavises and others who shaped the subject lived in’ (p. 17). Students are not yet being fully encouraged to embrace the idea that ‘every way of reading brings with it presuppositions’ and that ‘there simply cannot be one correct way of reading’ (Eaglestone, 2009, p. 22). The gap between post-16 and undergraduate study of English is detrimental to students and can probably be traced to a reluctance on the part of teachers and syllabus developers to merge the ways in which students engage with texts in these two levels.

The study

The study took place at the largest post-16 college in Malta where students enrol on a two-year A-level English course leading to a nine-hour examination. The latter includes two poetry components: a question on a set text (e.g. Wilfred Owen’s war poems) and an unseen poem. Preparation for the first component is provided by means of lectures, while training for the unseen poem component is held during literary criticism seminars.

This study involved semi-structured interviews with eight poetry teachers and the person responsible for A-level English in Malta, both as the chair of the syllabus panel and as a highly influential examiner. Every interview was conducted in a one-to-one manner and the interview with the examiner was complemented by written responses to some of the questions. The teachers all held Master’s degrees or PhDs in English and only one of them had less than five years’ teaching experience. The examiner holds a PhD in critical and cultural theory and has published widely on different aspects of literary theory.

Teachers’ views

The interviewed teachers seem to share similar views about whether literary theory has a place within the A-level poetry lesson. Three of them consider it to be premature to introduce students to literary theory because they ‘don’t think that students are ready for it’ (Teacher H, henceforth TH). This is in line with one of the findings of Tew and Addis’ (2007) study, which shows that teachers expressed ‘concern about its appropriateness in terms of the level of the students’ (p. 323). One particular teacher claimed that students are ‘not prepared for it and personally I don’t think it’s important’, neither at this level nor ‘even in the future’ (TB). He felt that by disagreeing with the idea of exposing students to literary theory he was being ‘old fashioned’ and also admitted a bit of insecurity in relation to the subject because when faced with the works of literary theorists ‘many of them to me don’t make sense personally’ (TB). In his opinion, what matters most for students is ‘what the poet says and their interpretation of it’ and he encourages them to be aware that ‘they’re walking a very thin line between objectivity and subjectivity’ (TB) in their response to poetry. A colleague of his thinks that literary theory does not have a place in the A-level poetry lesson because things are already quite ‘difficult’ (TE) for students. He claimed to ‘sympathise with the literary devices approach to literary crit’ and he would rather not ‘complicate matters further’ because ‘students find that already engaging enough and sometimes they find it pretty difficult as well’ (TE). It is clear that these

teachers' preferred pedagogy relies quite heavily on the idea of interpreting what the poet is conveying by means of his or her choice of literary devices. The risk here is that students would come to see poetry as an exercise in device spotting and the understanding of the poet's hidden message.

Another three teachers expressed themselves quite cautiously about whether literary theory should feature in A-level poetry lessons. In their opinion, it should only do so at a 'basic' (TF) level. According to one teacher, students should be exposed to it only 'to a very limited extent ... literary theory should have a very limited scope in the teaching of poetry' (TC). Just like those colleagues who disagree with the use of literary theory in poetry lessons, this teacher feels that students are not 'cognitively and intellectually ready for it' (TC). This is because 'it involves a level of abstraction which our students at sixteen, for most of them in anyway, find inaccessible' (TC). Moreover, he believes that literary theory is 'not exactly an easy subject and I wouldn't want that to spoil their approach by disheartening them, by discouraging them from enjoying poetry' (TC). A colleague of his agreed with these ideas and claimed that 'what you need at this level are the foundations ... a basic grounding in practical criticism is sufficient' (TD). This is not only because students are still unready for literary theory but 'also because a lot of lecturers here have been educated at a time where literary theory wasn't even taught at university ... they did a course which was based on New Criticism and things like that' (TD). In his opinion, literary theory has some value in that 'it does change and determine the way you look at things'; however, it should not be 'a necessary requirement for a lecturer' (TD). He indicated that teachers could do well without it: 'no, I don't think you need literary theory' (TD). Once again it emerges that amongst these teachers there exists a lot of scepticism about the place of literary theory in the A-level poetry classroom and that this is motivated by their concerns about students' cognitive maturity as well as by some unease about their own ability to use literary theory for the purpose of teaching poetry. In the light of Britzman's (2012) idea that 'Fear of theory can be approached as a constellation of anxiety that binds teachers and students in a sadomasochistic transference' (p. 53), it is most probable that teachers' avoidance of theory at A-level will lead their own students to shrink from theory once they are expected to engage with it as undergraduates.

Only two teachers feel that literary theory deserves to form part of their poetry lessons; however, both of them expressed reservations about the extent to which it should do so. One of them claimed that 'students should be made aware of' it because poets themselves might have been 'influenced' by literary theory and 'some of them do exploit' (TG) it. However, despite the fact that a 'certain basic knowledge of these theories is important', a teacher should not 'go into the depth that you're going to expect at university level' (TG). His colleague considers literary theory to be 'essential' but revealed concern about 'the philosophical aspect of it' given the fact that it 'gets very very profound' (TA). This, in his opinion, is part of the 'problem ... with literary theory' (TA). It concerns the fear mentioned by some of the other teachers, the idea that because of literary theory a teacher may 'discourage' (TA) students from engaging with poetry. This could happen either because it makes poetry seem overly difficult or else because a teacher might 'make the theory more interesting than the poem itself' (TA). To describe the other facet of the 'problem' with literary theory, he used the metaphor of dissecting a butterfly:

It's exactly what happens when dissecting butterflies. You take a butterfly and you kill it and you cut it into bits and you might learn how a butterfly flies, but that butterfly will never fly again. If you do it well, if you do it really well then you do the dissection, you show them how the butterfly flies and that butterfly will fly in many minds. But you have to be a really good dissector. (TA)

For this teacher, literary theory entails a process of analysing a poem in order to explain how it works. He seems to share Appleman's (2009) idea that by means of literary theory teachers can 'help students learn to decipher the world inscribed within the texts they study as well as help them learn to read the world around them' (p. 10). However, his fear is that if the teacher is not sufficiently skilled in the judicious use of literary theory there is the risk of ruining the poem and failing to inspire students to enjoy the poetry reading experience.

The examiner's views

Just like some of the interviewed teachers, the examiner also expressed himself cautiously in relation to whether literary theory should form part of a teacher's approach to poetry at post-16 level. He claimed that the reference to literary theory in the syllabus was 'put there to dispel misapprehensions which were floating around at the time'. He explained that 'clearly, one does not need to be quoting Eliot or Richards or Ricks or Kermode or Steiner or Jameson or Derrida or Lyotard or Rancière or Badiou to get an A grade'. However, despite saying this, he complicated matters further by indicating that there exists the possibility of students being awarded more marks if they do quote literary theorists in their essays on poetry: 'If someone wants to mention them and to do so pertinently, then of course the marking will determine whether that deserves "brownie" points or not'. From a 'personal' stance, he 'hope[s] that teachers will always be aware of what diverse areas of literary criticism can contribute in teaching "to" the syllabus, and that they can be discerning in deciding how to "release" that knowledge in different classroom situations'. To substantiate this idea, the examiner recounted an anecdote in which he explained that the teacher who used to teach him literature in secondary school 'referred us regularly to Coleridge on *Macbeth*. Coleridge's criticism, as we know, is as theoretical as anything that came later. That didn't harm anybody, and it helped quite a few of us'. Coincidentally, the teacher he is referring to is TA with whom he seems to share an appreciation of a skilful and informed pedagogy that adeptly uses literary theory in order to enhance the teaching of poetry.

For the examiner, teachers of poetry at post-16 level should not only 'have a good idea of the canon of English poetry' but also be 'looking at some of the most fundamental works of criticism of the twentieth century on poetry'. In his opinion, if as a teacher 'you don't have that curiosity then I can't see how you can bring a certain *je ne sais quoi* to the classroom'. What he would like to see is 'a specialist kind of teacher for whom all of this is viscerally important'. The examiner considers it 'worrying' that teacher education programmes, both pre- and in-service, seem to be 'very poor' when it comes to developing that curiosity. He lamented the fact that 'there aren't as many area-specific opportunities for teacher training that would help us to be more reasonably reassured'. There seems to be a lack of 'recurrently reinvigorated means to get teachers up to speed with current thinking in terms of teaching poetry'. Hence, teachers end up being 'undertrained' in this area. It seems clear that for this examiner knowledge of literary theory goes hand in hand with the discerning ability to exploit it for the benefit of students' engagement with poetry in class.

Conclusion

The views expressed by the teachers and the examiner who took part in this small-scale study seem to indicate that one of the reasons for which literary theory still finds it hard to take root within the post-16 teaching of English is the attitude of teachers towards the

subject. The perceived difficulty of literary theory seems to discourage them from using it in their poetry lessons due to the fear that it might dampen students' enthusiasm. However, some of them are also reluctant to incorporate it within their lessons because of their awareness that they might be somewhat out of their depth if they attempted to do so. As pointed out by the examiner, this highlights the need for teachers who are positively inclined to harness the benefits of literary theory and who have been trained in its use. Ensuring that teachers of poetry transform their practices by being open to teaching approaches that foster a view of reading as a process involving the adoption of multiple perspectives enables students to develop the necessary critical thinking skills expected of them in higher education and the world beyond.

Notes on contributor

Daniel Xerri teaches English at the University of Malta Junior College. He is currently completing doctoral research at the University of York, and his main area of interest concerns teachers' and students' beliefs in relation to the teaching of literature.

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