Chapter 7 Literary texts and loaded texts

Literary texts

In the last chapter a contrast was made between, on the one hand, texts whose main function is to display language items, and, on the other, informative texts, those that are 'vehicles-of-information'. Most of this book has been concerned, so far, with one or the other. But of course there is a whole class of texts that are intended neither to display nor to inform, but whose function is primarily expressive. These are literary texts. What exactly distinguishes literary texts from non-literary ones?

Discovery activity 7.1 *Literary texts*

Here are some texts. Which would you classify as literature – and why?

7.1

The dream is green
You wear our memories like a cloak:
bedecked with flowers in spring
and the summer dew
bestrewn with gold in the fall
and the winter frost.
You spread yourself beneath our dreams
like a carpet:
our kid's games and our poolside barbecues
and weekend picnics and the days of rest.
You celebrate us.
We nurture you.
Green. You are the dream.

7.2

Leave-taking
He took her hand. She took his money.
He took a lover.
She took exception. He took leave of his senses. She took advice. He took fright.
She took him to the cleaner's. He took to drink.
She took a holiday.
He took his life.
She took up ballroom dancing.

7.3

The Rainbow
Even the rainbow has a body
made of the drizzling rain
and is an architecture of glistening atoms
built up, built up
yet you can't lay your hand on it,
nay, nor even your mind.

7.4

The elderly passenger sitting on the north-window side of that inexorably moving railway coach, next to an empty seat and facing two empty ones, was none other than Professor Timofey Pnin. Ideally bald, sun-tanned and clean-shaven, he began rather impressively with that great brown dome of his, tortoise-shell glasses (masking an infantile absence of eyebrows), apish upper lip, thick neck and strong-man torso in a tightish tweed coat, but ended, somewhat disappointingly, in a pair of spindly legs (now flannelled and crossed) and frail-looking, almost feminine feet...

7.5

CHERYL COMES BACK IN.
Barbara Ahhh Cheryl, congratulations!
Denise I'm dead, dead, dead pleased for you.
Cheryl Thanks, everyone.
Michelle What's all this about?
Barbara Ah well, Cheryl went to see a clairvoyant yesterday and she said she'd find true love in two days, two weeks, two months or two years.
Michelle Who told you this, Cheryl?
Cheryl Gemini Astrid, up the precinct.
Michelle Gemini Astrid?
Cheryl Yeah.
Michelle For three quid?
Cheryl Yeah.
Michelle She talks complete bollocks, she does, love, I'd take no notice.
Barbara Oh Cheryl. You'd found love and now you've lost it.
Mary Better to have loved and lost then never to have loved at all.
Barbara Yeah.
Cheryl Yeah.
BIG PAUSE.

Commentary ■ ■ ■

Although they differ widely, these texts are clearly not simply transactional: they do not serve merely to trade information, goods or services. Rather, and to varying degrees, they use language expressively, imaginatively and sometimes playfully. One or two are obviously very carefully crafted: they display a high degree of conscious artifice and a deliberate use of sometimes rare or abstruse language. There are several instances of language 'drawing attention to itself', through the use, for instance, of repetition, or the way the text is laid out on the page. And there are cases where the language seems to be saying one thing but meaning another – where the meaning is

not *literal,* but has to be inferred. In that sense, they are all *literary* in style, although some are perhaps more literary than others. Let's look at them individually.

Text 7.1 is about a colour, green, but the colour is given agency: it wears our memories like a cloak, and it spreads itself like a carpet. Clearly, the text is not literally true, but is in some way *metaphorical*: the effect of green is *like* an animated cloak or carpet. Metaphorical use of language is, of course, associated with poetry. But is Text 7.1 a poem? It is laid out like one, and there is a kind of rhythmic repetition of elements (called *parallelism*), such as:

bedecked with flowers in spring
and the summer dew
bestrewn with gold in the fall
and the winter frost.

But is it poetry? You may have your suspicions. The inclusive use of *our* and *we*, for a start, seems odd. The writer seems to be speaking not just to, but on behalf of, the reader. Moreover, the definite article *the* in *the dream* implies that the writer and reader share knowledge of what that dream is. In short, the writer is not detached and introspective, as might be expected in lyric verse, but is complicit with the reader in the expression of a – let's admit – rather trite sentiment. Don't we feel that, just perhaps, this complicity only thinly disguises the fact that we are being sold something?

In fact, the text comes from a magazine advertisement for lawn fertilizer, and the design of the advertisement leaves no doubt that it is the *American* dream that is being invoked. Having a nice green lawn is a part of that dream, is the message.

The use of the conventions of literary language in advertising is, of course, not uncommon. Think of the playful use of rhyme in slogans like *Beanz Meanz Heinz*. But the fact that advertising co-opts features of literary style does not make it literature. As one researcher noted, 'Ads are a parasite discourse which has attached itself to literary discourse (among other types) as a host.'[88] Nevertheless, ads can be productively used when highlighting features of literary style, especially by comparing them to and contrasting them with, the 'real thing'. For example, here is a 'real' poem about grass[89]. Like the 'green' text, it also humanizes an inanimate object and uses parallelism and direct repetition to create its effects. But its voice is not the adman's, trying to cosy up to us. Nor does the sub-text extol the American dream. Quite the contrary:

7.6

Grass

Pile the bodies high at Austerlitz and Waterloo.
Shovel them under and let me work –
I am the grass; I cover all.

And pile them high at Gettysburg
And pile them high at Ypres and Verdun.
Shovel them under and let me work.

Two years, ten years and passengers ask the conductor:
What place is this?
Where are we now?

I am the grass.
Let me work.

Carl Sandburg

Text 7.2 bears a strong similarity to language teaching texts, in that one linguistic feature (the verb *take*) is prominent to an almost absurd degree. Compare it, for example, with text 6.1 in Chapter 6. Yet it's not uncommon for literary texts, too, to exaggerate a single linguistic feature, whether a sound or a word or a phrase, in order to create an insistent, rhythmic effect. Take, for example, the beginning of a poem by Allen Ginsberg[90]:

7.7

America I've given you all and now I'm nothing –
America when will we end the war?
America when will you be angelic?
America when will you take off your clothes and be human?
America when will you give me back my mother?
America when will you give me back my love? . . .

In other ways as well, text 7.2 has literary attributes. It tells a story and the story is self-contained. One way that non-literary texts are often distinguished from literary ones is that, while the former make connections with our social world and practices – they are situated and contingent – literature creates a disassociated and self-contained world of its own. Text 7.2 makes no reference to known people, nor actual events nor even places. There is nothing to suggest that it is a true story. It is probably pure invention and the persistent use of *took* underscores its inventiveness. In that sense it aspires to the literary. On the other hand, its inventiveness is a little self-conscious: a bit too clever by half. Whereas Ginsberg's use of repetition creates an effect that is like a prayer or an incantation, the repetition of *take* in text 7.2 is like nothing other than an exercise or a word-game. Could it have been an entry in a competition?

Indeed it could. It was a prize-winning entry in a British newspaper's regular 'mini-saga' feature.[91] A mini-saga is a story of exactly 50 words: no more no less. So popular was the competition that, as the writer Victoria Glendinning comments, 'The mini-saga is here to stay and is all set to join the limerick and the haiku as one of those short, apparently easy, but actually pretty tricky, literary forms that catches everyone's imagination.' Granting the mini-saga literary status may be premature: even the novel had to wait a long time before it was admitted into the select group of genres that constitute Literature. But as literature with a small *l*, the mini-saga has certainly a greater claim than advertising copy. Nor does the 50-word 'rule' disqualify the mini-saga: many other literary genres, such as the sonnet, have similarly highly constraining rules.

More interestingly, for our purposes, is the mini-saga's utility in the language classroom. Its brevity allows it to be exploited in various ways in the course of a lesson. The example I have chosen (text 7.2) could be used first as the basis of a reading task: learners can use dictionaries to 'unpack' all the different meanings of *take* and write a more transparent version *not* using the verb *take*, e.g. *He became an alcoholic* instead of *He took to drink.* They could then 'interview' the woman, as a form of role play, to get her version of events. And they could then write their own mini-sagas, based around another high-frequency verb, such as *go*, or *make*, or *do.*

Text 7.3 is a late poem by D. H. Lawrence (1885–1930) and qualifies therefore as 'capital L' literature. As a poem it shares some of the poetic features of text 7.1,

including the layout, some instances of repetition (*built up, built up*) and some internal half-rhymes (*drizzling, glistening*). But instead of appealing to an inclusive *we*, it uses the informal but impersonal *you* to make a general statement that represents the poet's introspective thoughts. It is not trying to sell us anything, nor even change us particularly, apart from making us think. And the statement that it makes, like its subject, the rainbow, is itself elusive, so that you 'can't lay your hand on it'. The poem is about the rainbow, but about something else too. The first word, *even,* suggests a prior idea, of which the rainbow is being advanced as further proof. Try taking away that *even*: the poem still makes perfect sense, but we are no longer compelled to look beyond the poem, to search for an idea with which the rainbow correlates. The poem loses some of its mystery. And that is a very literary 'trick': that a poem about mystery should itself be mysterious. It is also a quality of (good) literature that texts don't surrender their (multiple) meanings without a struggle. Compare this to the trite didactic tone of the advertising text (7.1). The Lawrence poem simply suggests, and leaves it up to the reader to fill in the gaps. That may be another feature of good literature: its economy. It is the unsaid that is as important as what is said. Only by hinting at something can there be resonance.

However, in this case there *are* clues beyond the text. As one literary critic has noted, 'Lawrence's poems are less framed and finished products than fragments of a larger discourse. Images circulate from one poem to another, one poem flows into another or acts as raw material for it, and the whole process is criss-crossed by resonances, redundancies, repetitions.'[92] The poem that precedes 'The Rainbow' in my edition of Lawrence's poems is called 'The Body of God' and begins 'God is the great urge that has not yet found a body...' In the light of this, the *even* that begins 'The Rainbow' starts to reach out and take root, making a connection to the 'larger discourse' about the insubstantiality of God. We shouldn't forget, either, that Lawrence wrote a novel called *The Rainbow,* at the end of which the heroine, contemplating the bleak industrial landscape of the north of England, sees a rainbow begin to form in the sky:

> She saw in the rainbow the earth's new architecture, the old, brittle corruption of houses and factories swept away, the world built up in a living fabric of Truth, fitting to the over-arching heaven.

Note that, in both the novel and the poem, Lawrence describes the rainbow as *architecture* and uses the verb *built up.* Only in the novel, though, is the connection between *architecture* and the rainbow's *arch* made explicit.

This characteristic of literary texts – to connect to a larger discourse – is called *intertextuality.* Sometimes the connection is explicit, as when a writer quotes directly from another text. The poem that follows 'The Rainbow' begins:

> *The man of Tyre went down to the sea*
> *pondering, for he was a Greek, that God is one and all alone and ever more shall be so.*

Many readers of these lines will recognize the phrase *[One] is one and all alone and ever more shall be so* as forming part of the refrain of a traditional English song (which has the, possibly unintended, effect of trivializing the Greek's theological reflections).

Often, intertextual references are veiled, taking the form of puns, for example. This is a characteristic of many newspaper headlines in English, such as *The Blame In Spain,* a headline that appeared in *The Guardian* about troubled relations between Britain and Spain and which makes reference to the song *The rain in Spain.* An article about Stradivarius, the violin maker, was titled *Lord of the Strings,* coinciding with the success of the film version of Tolkein's *Lord of the Rings.* Or texts reflect the *structure* of other texts: *genres* are a product of intertextuality, as, over time, writers replicate the structural features of particular texts until they become institutionalized. Reading a limerick, for example, we are reminded of all the other limericks we have read. Indeed, one critic, Bakhtin, has suggested that *all* language use is intertextual and that *all* texts contain echoes of the texts that preceded them.

As a feature of literary texts, intertexuality will prove elusive to many second language learners, who may lack knowledge of the shared background, both cultural and linguistic, with which the text interconnects. But intertextuality is also a feature of literature that lends itself to classroom exploitation: simply put two related texts together and ask learners to make the connections. Whatever connections are made, the process of seeking them out will encourage a closer than normal reading of the texts.

Text 7.4 is the opening of a novel, *Pnin*[93], by the naturalized US writer, Vladimir Nabokov. The elaborateness of the description, including the choice of many uncommon words (*inexorably, infantile, apish, spindly*), identifies this as distinctively literary. The text conveys a great deal more than would be necessary, in normal circumstances, to identify the person being described. In fact, an interesting exercise for learners would be to re-cast the text in the form of a non-literary text type, such as a 'missing persons notice':

> **MISSING**
> Timofey Pnin (Professor)
> Elderly; bald, clean-shaven, tanned complexion, wears glasses; thick-set.
> Last seen wearing tweed coat and flannel trousers.

What makes the literary version distinctive is the *point of view.* Pnin is being observed in minute detail by an anonymous narrator who is not even physically present at the scene: note the empty seats and the use of the distancing determiner *that* in *that inexorably moving railway coach,* as if we were seeing it all from a long way off. This disembodied narrator's voice is both detached and ironic. His lack of involvement is underscored by the use of the modifiers *rather* and *somewhat.* The passenger is *none other than* Professor Pnin, perhaps a little dig at the character's sense of self-importance. He is described as *beginning* and *ending,* which has faintly comical overtones: people, after all, don't normally begin and end. But these verbs are consistent with a description that is all about externals: we have no idea as to what is going on inside Pnin's head.

But we know a lot about what is going on in the *writer's* head. The description is thick with evaluations (*ideally, impressively, disappointingly*) – all the *writer's* evaluations, note, not the subject's. Pnin is being both observed and judged and is, of course, blissfully unaware of the fact. Note also how the description mirrors the person described, beginning sonorously with the *great brown dome* and ending lamely with a fizz of fricatives: *flannelled, frail-looking, feminine.* The use of

language that, through its actual shape or sound, *means* what it describes is called *iconicity* and is yet another feature of literary texts. In an earlier novel, *Lolita,* Nabokov celebrates the iconic nature of the protagonist's name:

> Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta.
>
> She was Lo, plain Lo, in the morning, standing four feet ten in one sock. She was Lola in slacks. She was Dolly at school. She was Dolores on the dotted line. But in my arms she was always Lolita.

In the extract from *Pnin,* the wry detachment of the observer, coupled with the caricatured nature of the observation, seems to be setting the protagonist up for some kind of unexpected downfall. This expectation is reinforced by our familiarity with narrative texts in general, in which circumstantial information (characters and setting) typically presage a complicating event. (At this point, if you were using this text in class, you could ask learners what they think is about to happen. This is always a good strategy, as it both directs attention to the narrator's technique and encourages more active, engaged, reading.)

Sure enough, a paragraph later, we read:

> Now a secret must be imparted. Professor Pnin was on the wrong train...

Pnin is not only oblivious to 'us' observing him, but is oblivious to his fate. Again, we hear the arch, ironic voice of the god-like narrator: not *I must tell you a secret,* but the agentless passive and the rather portentous choice of verb: *a secret must be imparted.* The choice of the modal verb *must* is also significant. Compare this, for example, with *a secret will be imparted. Must* implies some kind of moral obligation. The writer is deferring to the reader's 'right to know' what is going on, even if Pnin himself has no right to know. The writer and the reader are sharing the joke at Pnin's expense. This capacity of writers – both to adopt a point of view and to situate the reader in relation to this point of view – is an extremely potent one and we will return to it in the section on ideology below. Meanwhile, as a point of comparison, it's worth contrasting the description of Pnin with another description, also of a person on a train, and also in the first chapter of a novel (*Mr Norris Changes Trains* by Christoper Isherwood). Note how the narrator's point of view differs from the one adopted by Nabokov's narrator:

7.8

> My first impression was that the stranger's eyes were of an unusually light blue. [...] He had a large blunt fleshy nose and a chin which seemed to have slipped sideways. It was like a broken concertina. When he spoke, it jerked crooked in the most curious fashion and a deep cleft dimple like a wound surprisingly appeared in the side of it. Above his ripe red cheeks, his forehead was sculpturally white, like marble. A queerly cut fringe of dark grey hair lay across it, compact, thick and heavy. After a moment's examination, I realized, with extreme interest, that he was wearing a wig.

The most obvious difference with *Pnin* is that here the point of view is that of a first-person narrator who is physically present in the situation he is describing. Nouns like *impression* and *examination* and verbs like *seemed* and *realized* all attest to the physical and cognitive processes of looking, absent in the Nabokov extract. Moreover, the observer is not just observing from a distance, but doing so from close up and with *extreme interest*. This is reflected in the adverbs and adjectives he chooses: *unusually, most curious, surprisingly, queerly*. We get the sense of the narrator as an involved, engaged participant in the encounter, his gaze flitting from feature to feature, gathering a series of somewhat disconnected impressions in real time: *my first impression... when he spoke... after a moment's examination....* This cumulative, rather 'cubist' approach to description is reflected both in the similes he chooses: *like a broken concertina, like a wound, like marble*, and the highly contrastive colours: *blue, red, white, dark grey*. (Curiously, in another of his 'Berlin novels' Isherwood described his narrative technique in these terms: 'I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking...' In fact, he is anything but passive, and his thought processes are much more easily read than Nabokov's all-knowing but inscrutable narrator.)

In short, apart from the fact that both Pnin and Mr Norris border on the grotesque, and that both descriptions end in bathos, they could not be more different. These two extracts demonstrate how writers of literary texts, like directors of films, can manipulate point of view to create a diverse range of effects. One of the most crucial of these effects is whether we, as readers, are positioned to view the events through the eyes of one of the participants, or through those of a detached narrator. This in turn can have an important influence on how we interpret what we are reading or listening to.

Text 7.5 is an extract from a television comedy series, *The Royle Family*[94], which charts the fairly uneventful lives of a working class family in the north of England. Because it is popular entertainment, purists might discount it as literature altogether, or classify it as a *sub-literary* form. But it does have many, if not all, of the defining features of 'high' drama, including plot, characterization and dialogue. And it creates a self-enclosed world, one that closely *parallels* the real world, but where the characters are slightly more exaggerated and where the events are 'tidied up' in order to bring out their humour or pathos. Thus, the incident where Cheryl's expectations of finding true love are dashed, has a beginning, a middle and an end, whereas in real life it probably would not be so neatly packaged. And the characters are 'types': we recognize (and perhaps identify with) Cheryl's credulity and Michelle's cynicism, and we can laugh at (because we recognize) Mary's misguided attempt to console Cheryl (her daughter) with the platitude: *Better to have loved and lost then never to have loved at all.* (The irony is, of course, that Cheryl *hasn't* loved.) Despite this 'tidying up' of characters and events, the language which the characters use has many of the qualities of naturally occurring language – qualities we looked at in Chapter 4. Part of the skill of the dialogue writing is in the way it mirrors vernacular language use, as in:

> She talks complete bollocks, she does, love, I'd take no notice.

It is *like* real speech, but we know it's *not* real speech. Features of casual conversation – such as its elliptic and often inconsequential nature – have been accentuated, as they are in the plays of Harold Pinter, for example. But whereas in Pinter's plays the effect is often sinister, in *The Royle Family* it is gently mocking. In short, this is a text that doesn't directly *refer* to the real world, but *re-presents* it. The

distinction between (non-literary) *referential* texts and (literary) *representational* ones, is one that is frequently made in the study of literary discourse. ■

To sum up, then, characteristics of literary texts include the following:

- Language is used expressively, ie to express feelings, emotions.
- Language is used playfully, ie forms are chosen and repeated purely for their effect.
- Language is used iconically, ie forms are chosen because their form is (part of) their meaning.
- Language is used imaginatively, to conjure up alternative worlds, or, put another way, texts re-present reality, rather than simply referring to it.
- Language is used metaphorically, ie to say one thing in terms of another, and because of this literary texts are meaningful on different levels.
- The point of view of the writer may be detached or involved, and this in turn affects the way the reader interprets the text, eg as irony, as matter-of-fact, etc.
- The text's meaning is partly intertextual, ie the text may only be fully understood by reference to other, related, texts.
- Texts conform to, and are constrained by, certain generic features; very broadly they can be classed as poetry, prose, or drama.
- Texts are often highly valued by the culture, at least in the case of 'literature with a capital L'.

Of course, any of these characteristics may be shared by other, non-literary, kinds of texts. We have seen how advertising discourse makes expressive and playful use of language. And there are certain other types of texts – such as inspiring political speeches of which Martin Luther King's 'I have a dream' speech is an example – that are highly valued without necessarily being classed as literature. Moreover, literary texts are no different from non-literary texts in many fundamental respects. There is the expectation that they will make sense, and to this end they exhibit internal cohesion. Take the Lawrence poem, text 7.3, for example:

> Even the rainbow has a body
> made of the drizzling rain
> and is an architecture of glistening atoms
> built up, built up
> yet you can't lay your hand on it,
> nay, nor even your mind.

Here cohesion is achieved by exactly the same means that non-literary texts achieve cohesion: through the use of lexical chains (*rainbow... drizzling rain; body... atoms; architecture... built up; hand... mind*); the use of conjuncts and other discourse markers (*and, yet, nay*); pronoun reference (*lay your hand on it*), verb tense consistency (*has, is, can't*); parallelism (*you can't lay your hand on it [and you can't lay] your mind [on it]*); and ellipsis (*and [it] is an architecture...; nor even [can you lay] your mind [on it]*). All this in the short space of 35 words!

The poem – like all texts – has an *architecture* that is *built up*. The difference between the poem and other, more mundane, texts is that it is harder to 'lay your mind on it'. But, apart from whatever local difficulties they present, there is no reason why literary texts cannot also be used, alongside non-literary texts, as effective vehicles for highlighting such textual features as cohesion, discourse organization and grammar and vocabulary use.

So, do literary texts have any advantages over non-literary ones, from a teaching point of view? And do they require a different approach?

There are at least five reasons for using literary texts in the classroom:

1 **Variety** – they provide exposure to other kinds of texts and language functions, especially those not covered by the more utilitarian text types associated with work, studies, obtaining services, etc, and they provide an antidote to the kind of ephemeral, magazine-type, texts that are now the norm in most coursebooks (and which were criticized in the last chapter).

2 **Language awareness** – since literary texts are also authentic texts, they offer instances of real language use and therefore qualify, like any other authentic texts, as useful sources for raising language awareness (although it would be a shame if they were used *only* for this purpose).

3 **Challenge and skill** – being generally more difficult than non-literary texts, they raise the level of challenge and they help train learners in the more interpretative kinds of text processing skills, such as inferencing (reading between the lines), identifying the writer's point of view, etc.

4 **Pleasure** – since literary texts are originally designed to entertain and give pleasure, this purpose should not be lost or ignored in the classroom; moreover, helping learners to appreciate literary texts in the classroom may motivate them to further reading outside the classroom.

5 **Cultural knowledge** – literary texts typically encode a lot of cultural knowledge about the society that both produced and values the texts and therefore they offer a source of such knowledge for those learners who may be interested in integrating into the culture, or at least understanding other texts produced by that culture.

Discovery activity 7.2 ***How is the approach to using literary texts different?***

Let's look at the Carl Sandburg poem again. Imagine you plan to use this in the classroom. How might your use of it be similar to – or different from – the approach used for the Christian Aid brochure in Chapter 6 (see page 128)?

Grass

Pile the bodies high at Austerlitz and Waterloo.
Shovel them under and let me work –
I am the grass; I cover all.

And pile them high at Gettysburg
And pile them high at Ypres and Verdun.
Shovel them under and let me work.

Two years, ten years and passengers ask the conductor:
What place is this?
Where are we now?
I am the grass.
Let me work.

Commentary ■ ■ ■

Essentially there needn't be any major differences between the approach to using non-literary texts and the approach to using literary ones. However, you might have to work harder at the *pre-text* stage, providing any helpful background knowledge (including cultural and biographical information) and you might have to intervene more at the *comprehending* stage, ie the stage where learners are attempting to construct a coherent mental *schema* of the text. What is important (as with non-literary texts) is that at some point you should solicit the learners' *response* to the text, including their feelings about it: did they find it moving, funny, difficult, thought-provoking, etc? And why or why not? At some point, and especially if the text is a poem, learners should be given the opportunity of hearing the text read aloud. Often, because of such factors as *iconicity*, for example, the text doesn't properly come alive until it is heard. ■

Classroom applications

A possible sequence of activities based around Sandburg's 'Grass' (and one that closely mirrors the lesson plan in Chapter 6) might be:

1 **Warm-up**
Play a guessing game. Describe a view and ask the class: *Where am I?* For example, *There are three huge buildings. They are made of stone. They each finish in a point. They are surrounded by sand. Where am I?* (Answer: The Pyramids at Giza.) Learners take turns to do the same in small groups.

2 **Schema activation**
Write the single word *grass* on the board and ask learners to work together and brainstorm sentences beginning *Grass....* They should divide these between facts and opinions: say, five of each. Provide any vocabulary needed, or allow learners to consult dictionaries. Ask individuals to read out selected sentences.

3 **Text: first contact**
Learners read the poem in order to answer the question: *Where is the grass?* (Answer: on battlefields.) They should have a chance to discuss this in pairs. Answering this question will require learners to recognize at least one of the names of the battles and, by extension, to guess the others. If they don't, then of course they should be told. The words *pile* and *shovel* will also need to be dealt with – but learners should first be encouraged to try and guess what they mean. At the same time, it is important that they also focus on the words that they *do* know: there's a tendency to overemphasize unfamiliar words in texts, at the expense of the very many – often high-frequency function words – that they are already familiar with.

4 **Listening**
Read the text aloud, or play a recording of it being read.

5 Response to text
Elicit statements about the poem, by providing a framework:
I (don't) like it, because…
It makes me feel…
It reminds me of…
It's saying that…
I'm not sure I understand the bit about…

6 Text: closer reading
Ask comprehending questions to help establish a clear mental schema of the poem's surface meaning and of its underlying purpose. For example:
Whose voice is speaking in the poem? (The grass.)
Who is being addressed?
What do you 'see' in line 1?
What do you 'see' in line 7? Who are the passengers? Who is the conductor?
What is the significance of the passengers' questions?
What has changed between the beginning and the end of the poem?
What is the poet's feeling about the grass, do you think? How does he convey this?
What would you change in order to 'modernize' the poem?

7 Text: reconstruction
Provide a gapped version of the poem, omitting key verbs and nouns, for example, (but not the place names).

Alternatively, ask learners to identify the most important words in the poem. That is, if they had to reduce it to just ten words, what would they be? These words could then serve as the basis for a reconstruction-from-memory exercise.

8 Language focus: *let* + noun + verb
Highlight the expression *Let me work.* Elicit a paraphrase, eg *Allow me to work.* Ask learners, working together, to draw up a list of sentences following this model:

Let	me	grow,	said the grass.
Let	us	watch TV,	said the children.

9 Writing
Ask learners, working individually or in pairs, to write short poems which include one of the following lines:
I am the dust.
I am the wind.
I am the sand.
I am the fire.
I am the water.
I am the trees.
I am the snow.

They can choose to stick closely to the format of the Sandburg poem or to depart from it radically.

Learners read each others' poems and some of these are selected for reading aloud.

10 Listening and speaking

Describe the experience of visiting a famous historical site, your feelings about being there and how the site must have changed over time. Ask learners to share similar experiences. Alternatively, (and more riskily perhaps), introduce a discussion about the healing effect of time. For example, suggest that the poet is in two minds about the grass: that it helps heal the wounds of war, but that it also induces forgetfulness. Should, indeed, the grass be allowed to do its work?

As homework, learners could write a short appreciation of the poem.

There are many other ways that the poem could be incorporated into a lesson. For a start, no cultural-historical background has been included in the above treatment, but a short biography of Sandburg might help learners situate the text. Comparison with other texts on the same theme (such as the lawn fertilizer ad – text 7.1 above) would also be productive, especially at higher levels. Likewise, other poems on the same, or a similar, theme could be used, especially where they hint at intertextual connections. Many readers, reading Sandburg's poem, will hear echoes of Whitman's 'Leaves of Grass', for example:

> *A child said, What is the grass? fetching it to me with full hands;*
> *How could I answer the child?. . . I do not know what it is any more than he.*
> *[....]*
> *And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves.*

Nor has much *stylistic* attention been paid to the text in the lesson outlined above. *Stylistics* is concerned with accounting for how linguistic choices determine particular textual effects. A stylistic analysis would describe the overall structure of the poem – its parallelism and use of repetition, for example – or its grammatical choices (eg imperatives) or the extreme simplicity of its vocabulary (eg apart from the proper names all the words have either one or two syllables). These choices would then be matched with the effect they create – for example, the relentless, faceless, even thankless work that the grass does by virtue of simply growing.

Ideology

We have already seen how writers use language in order to create a point of view and to position the reader vis-à-vis this point of view. In text 7.1, the lawn fertilizer ad, the writer uses the inclusive pronouns *we* and *our* to establish shared group membership and refers obliquely to *the dream,* meaning the American dream. The message is: *To be truly American, ie one of us, you should have a lawn, and the greener the better.* The connotations of greenness are very different from what you might find, say, in a Green Party election leaflet.

The choice of pronouns and articles in the advertising text are *ideological* choices. They are not neutral or accidental or value-free. They assert particular values and

attempt to align the reader with these values. The study of how language is co-opted for ideological purposes is called *critical linguistics* and takes as its starting point the assumption that all texts are inherently ideological in nature. But some texts are more 'loaded' than others, especially if their function is coercive, as in the case of advertising or propaganda. And some aspects of language seem to play a particularly important role in this ideological loading.

For example, in Chapter 6 we saw how the choice of intransitive verbs with inanimate subjects can effectively disguise the agency of events:

> World War One [...] broke out in 1914 and did not come to an end until 1918. World War Two broke out in 1939 and lasted until 1945.

The choice of passive is also significant in the way it can avoid any mention of agency:

> World War II was fought in Europe, Africa and Asia...

And the transformation of actions (expressed by verbs) into things (expressed by nouns) is yet another way of disguising agency. This is called *grammatical metaphor.* In the following extract, the verbal process *drop* is nominalized into *the dropping,* thereby absolving the writer of any need to say who performed the action:

> The war against Japan ended with the dropping of the first atomic bombs on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki...[95]

As an example of how language can be deliberately manipulated in the services of power, the 'sexing up' of the British government's dossier on Iraq's supposed weapons of mass destruction prior to the Iraq War in 2003, is a case in point. Note the subtle changes in the different drafts of the dossier relating to what became known as the '45-minute claim'[96]:

> Intelligence also indicates that chemical and biological munitions could be with military units and ready for firing within 20–45 minutes.
> (Joint intelligence committee report, 9th September 2002)

> ... envisages the use of weapons of mass destruction in its current military planning and could deploy such weapons within 45 minutes of the order being given for their use.
> (Draft dossier, 10th–11th September 2002)

> And the document discloses that his military planning allows for some of the WMD to be ready within 45 minutes of an order to use them... The Iraqi military may be able to deploy chemical or biological weapons within 45 minutes of an order to do so.
> (Draft dossier, 16th September 2002)

> Some of these weapons are deployable within 45 minutes of an order to use them... Intelligence indicates that the Iraqi military are able to deploy chemical or biological weapons within 45 minutes of an order to do so.
> (Published dossier, 24th September 2002)

Apart from the original *munitions* becoming *weapons of mass destruction (WMD),* all traces of modality – hence doubt – have been removed in the successive re-draftings.

Discovery activity 7.3 ***Choice of vocabulary***

One of the more obvious ways that writers attempt to influence their readers ideologically is in the choice of vocabulary (such as *weapons of mass destruction*). In the following newspaper report[97], how does the writer's ideological stance show through in his choice of nouns to identify the different participants?

7.9

Ridsdale moves to ban Turks after killings

By Red Williams

Leeds are almost certain to tackle Galatasaray in the second leg of their highly-charged UEFA Cup semi-final in front of their own fans at Elland Road.

The Turkish outfit were urging UEFA to switch the explosive match to a neutral venue after two English fans were knifed to death in Istanbul on Wednesday night.

But European football's ruling body said they expected the showdown to go ahead at Leeds.

Meanwhile, grieving Leeds have told the Turks to stay away after two Leeds fans were brutally stabbed to death by Turkish thugs.

Chairman Peter Ridsdale was backed by the FA – and was calling for UEFA support – as he warned 1,500 Turkish hotheads heading for Leeds to stay at home.

The Leeds chief acted as the city mourned the horrifying killings of supporters Christopher Loftus, 37 and Kevin Speight, 40.

[...]

Leeds fans were targeted by knife-wielding Turkish thugs when a brawl spilled out onto the busy city streets, while police claim the fighting was started by English fans making obscene gestures with the Turkish flag.

Commentary ■ ■ ■

It's fairly obvious that, whereas the Leeds supporters are described as just that, *supporters*, or *fans*, the Turks are identified in pejorative terms, such as *thugs* and *hotheads*, and the Turkish football authorities are described as *the Turkish outfit*. There is no doubt in the writer's mind as to who was to blame for the incident, despite the *claim* (another loaded word) that the fighting was started by English fans. The *sub-text* is clearly visible through the surface. ■

A hidden agenda

Classroom texts are, of course, not immune to charges of ideological bias either. In fact, educational texts have a long history of ideological sub-textuality, precisely because they *are* educational. Sometimes they function as outright propaganda of the political kind, as in this text from *English for you*, the official textbook of the German Democratic Republic (G.D.R.) in the 1970s and 1980s[98]:

7.10

> **VISITING THE G.D.R.**
> Bob Driver, a young teacher from Oxford, got out of the train at Berlin Ostbahnhof...
>
> Bob Driver stayed two days in Berlin before he went to Erfurt. What he saw and learnt during those two days made a good impression on him. So, he thought, the 'Morning Star' had not overestimated what had been done in the G.D.R. But he had not expected to see so many new buildings, modern shops, well-dressed people, show windows full of TV-sets, refrigerators, washing machines, textiles and food. He was also surprised by the low rents and fares...

Often, though, texts simply perpetuate values through stereotypical situations, characters and behaviours, as in this example from an (admittedly fairly old) course of English for Mexican school children[99]:

7.11

> I am going to tell you what we can do.
>
> We can run and jump. We can play with our dog. We can fly our kite. We can spin our top. We can play ball. We can swing. We can not play with dolls, because we are not girls. I don't like dolls.

Apart from its not so subtle sexist message, what is curious about this text is that it seems to merge two meanings of *can: can* meaning *able to* and *can* meaning *allowed to.*

In fact, the overt language agenda of many coursebook texts may be one of the reasons why their ideological sub-texts go largely unnoticed or are condoned. In the following text[100], the language focus is firmly fixed on the past perfect. But what values does it communicate – as much by what it *doesn't* say as by what it does?

7.12

> **Admirable people**
> My neighbour Dien Tranh was born in 1959 in Vietnam, in the city of Hue. By the time he was 12, he had lost both his parents. Somehow he cared for himself and his younger sister. By the time he was 20 he had arrived in the United States as a refugee and he had begun working two and sometimes three jobs at a time. Within five years, he had already saved enough money to help bring many of his relatives to the United States and he had bought a small florist shop. By 1994 – 10 years after he bought that small shop – Tranh had expanded his business to include six stores and more than 30 employees.

What the text doesn't tell us is as significant as what it does. How, for example, did Dien Tranh lose his parents? Might it have had something to with the fact that Hue was the scene of one of the most bitterly contested battles of the Vietnam War? How did Dien Tranh care for himself and his little sister? How did he get to the US and why did he choose the US? How did he get work? Was he legally employed? Did his relatives enter the US legally? Who are these 30 people he employs: are *they* legal? And what values are implied by titling the text *Admirable people*?

These are all important questions and could lead to interesting speculations on the part of the learners, but the writers don't seem to think so. Having completed a time line of Dien Tranh's life, the learners' next task is to study a diagram 'about how to use the past perfect tense'.

This indifference to the content of coursebook texts has been criticized by some writers, who point out that what is *not* said, as in text 7.12, is also ideological. In actual fact, the decision to avoid confronting sensitive issues is probably less to do with either the writers' queasiness or their political affiliation and more to do with the nervousness that educational publishers feel about the possibility of causing offence to a potential market. Publishers have to tread a narrow line between the need to provide interesting, topical texts, on the one hand, and to avoid controversy, on the other. To this end, guidelines are drawn up for authors, both to ensure *inclusivity,* ie avoidance of gender or ethnic bias in the way that people in coursebooks are represented, and *appropriacy.* Topics that are considered *in*appropriate are informally known as the 'PARSNIP' topics, ie politics, alcohol, religion, sex, narcotics, *-isms* and pork. The result is what one critic[101] has called the 'soft fudginess' of most EFL materials.

But there is also a tension between the political correctness of inclusivity and the commercial expediency of appropriacy, such that some sectors of society are not represented at all. This is the case with gays and lesbians who have been glaringly invisible in coursebooks (apart from inadvertent appearances, as in the case of Roger and David!).

But even this long-standing taboo has started to yield under pressure. Witness this text from a recently published adult course[102]:

7.13

Ricardo: It was New Year's Eve and I 4__________ some people around to my house to celebrate. I planned a quiet party but my friends brought other friends and by twelve o'clock there were lots of people. I was making some drinks in the kitchen when I noticed this guy on his own. He didn't seem to know anybody, so I 5__________ over to him and 6__________ myself. He said, "So you're not Antonio, then?!" He was at the wrong party – he had made a mistake with the address! I asked him to stay and we got on really well ... and now we're together.'

The above text appears in a coursebook written primarily for a southern European market, so it is perhaps not surprising that it has been able to take liberties with its content. The problem is often that coursebooks are written for global markets and therefore cannot comfortably accommodate local interests, concerns and aspirations. John Gray, who interviewed a number of teachers about their attitudes to coursebooks, concludes that 'it is certainly the case that the teachers I spoke to about global materials clearly felt the need for what might be called a *glocal* (ie a global-plus-local) coursebook – something which could give them 'a better fit' and simultaneously connect the world of their students with the world of English.'[103] Moreover, a *glocal* focus would, in theory, be easier for local teachers to mediate, especially those whose first language was not English, and who may feel either unqualified or compromised if required to use imported materials.

Classroom applications

One approach to unmasking the ideological sub-texts of texts, whether authentic or EFL-written, is to encourage what is called *critical reading*. On the one hand, this involves *interrogating* the text, in the way that I interrogated the text about Dien Tranh (text 7.12), in order both to disclose what has been left out and to *problematize* the text. On the other, it means critically examining the language choices that the writer (or speaker) has made in order to find clues as to the ideological position that has been adopted, whether intentionally or not. The sort of questions that can be asked at the linguistic level include:

Word choice

- Are there words that have strong negative or positive connotations?
- Are euphemisms used (ie polite ways of expressing sensitive ideas)?
- What evaluative words are used?
- What idiomatic, slang or dialectic words are used?
- Are vague expressions used?
- What deictic expressions are used (such as *now, then; here, there; this, that*)?
- What metaphors are used?
- What reporting terms are used (eg *claimed, alleged, threatened*)?
- Are polarities established (eg between *fan* and *thug*)?
- Are words repeated?
- What proper nouns (names of people, places, etc) are used?

Grammar choice

- Who or what are the themes of the sentences?
- Who or what are the agents of the sentences?
- Are sentences affirmative or negative?
- Are verbs passive or active?
- Are verbs transitive or intransitive?
- Is grammatical metaphor used?
- Are modal verbs used, and, if so, which?
- Is speech direct or indirect?
- What shared knowledge is assumed, eg by the use of the definite article?
- What pronouns are used, eg first, second, or third person; singular or plural; exclusive or inclusive (in the case of *we*); masculine or feminine?

Discourse choice

- What linking devices are used to connect sentences?
- What titles, headlines, etc, are there?
- What features of layout, punctuation, type-face, etc, are there?
- Is the text illustrated?
- What larger scale structures does the text have, eg problem–solution; question–answer, etc?
- What reference is made to other texts?

Of course, it is unlikely that any one text – unless a very long one – will exhibit all these features, or even a small proportion of them. Nor is it the case that the presence or absence of these features is necessarily indicative of an ideological point of view. However, particular clusters, and more than average frequencies, of certain features are often worth examining for what they might reveal about the point of view of the writer and where the writer assumes – or wishes – the reader's sympathies lie.

Discovery activity 7.4 *Critical reading*

By way of a simple example, read the following newspaper text[104] and decide which team the writer thinks his readers support. What clues helped you decide?

7.14

Stratford settles for draw after top hockey start

Stratford drew its Mid Central Super League top six hockey match 4–4 with Wanganui Rangers in Stratford on Saturday.

In front of a sizable crowd, Stratford got off to a good start, playing some of its best hockey for several seasons. It shot to a 3–1 lead, with two goals to Grant Boyde and another from a penalty corner to Greg Bland.

Going into halftime 4–2 up, it would have been expected that Stratford would try to maintain the momentum in the second half. However, positional changes and substitutions at the break had the opposite effect and Stratford lost both its shape and direction.

Rangers struck back with two goals and Stratford was forced to hold out for a draw. James Newell had his best performance of the season at left half for Stratford.

Commentary ■ ■ ■

There should be no doubt that this text was written for Stratford fans, not Wanganui Rangers fans. Stratford gets eight mentions (compared to Rangers' two) and is the subject – hence *theme* – of seven of the texts' eleven finite clauses, including the headline. This foregrounding of Stratford involves using the passive in one instance (*Stratford was forced*), even though the subject of the previous clause is *Rangers*. The named players all play for Stratford; no Rangers player is named. All the words with positive connotations (*top, sizable, good, best* x2) refer to Stratford – its team's start, its crowd, its players, and so on. Moreover, Stratford's superiority is emphasized by words like *lead, up* and *momentum* and verbs with forceful connotations like *got off to* and *shot to.* On this evidence alone, you'd be forgiven for thinking that Stratford won the match comfortably.

In the second paragraph this 'accentuating of the positive' is sustained, but in order to do so the writer has to invent a hypothetical world, since in the real world there was an 'opposite effect'. The shift to unreality (called, technically, *irrealis)* is signalled by modal verbs: *it would have been expected that Stratford would try to maintain the momentum in the second half.* Compare this to the much more negative-sounding: *Stratford didn't try to maintain the momentum in the second half.* (Note, by the way, how modal verbs are always a reliable indicator of some mood, perspective, or reality, shift.) And any human agency behind Stratford's disappointing second-half performance is disguised behind grammatical metaphor: *positional changes and substitutions.*Compare this with: *The coach changed some positions and substituted some key players.*

A useful exercise aimed at sensitizing learners to the different ways in which the same facts can be very differently presented would be to ask them to re-write the text from the *Wanganui* point of view. ■

It needs to be stressed that there is nothing necessarily underhand or manipulative about the way the writer has positioned the reader in this text. To have written it with a less biased slant would have made it less appropriate for its readership. What the writer has done is exactly what all effective writers do: he or she has *kept the reader in mind.*

Conclusion

In this chapter we have extended the definition of text to include both literary texts and sub-texts. In the case of the former, we have found that literary texts share many if not all of the qualities of non-literary texts, such that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between the two categories. Advertising texts, for instance, borrow heavily from the former in the way that they use language playfully. And some literary texts 'disguise' themselves as non-literary texts: think of novels that are written as a sequence of letters, for example. In classroom terms, the approach to literary texts need not be qualitatively different from that used for non-literary texts and a twin-pronged, TAVI and TALO, approach (see Chapter 6) is equally appropriate, although it might be more accurate to re-cast TAVI as TAVE: *text as vehicle of expression.*

As for the sub-texts of texts, the capacity of learners to identify point-of-view might usefully be developed through the study of literary texts, but also through advertising texts and the more overtly ideological text types such as journalism. But all texts, including coursebook texts, are ideological to a certain extent, in that their producers have made a considered choice out of all the many possible ways that the text *could* have been, and this choice is in part determined by the effect that they hoped to achieve on their reader or listener.