



To Narnia and Beyond

Taking English to the Third Dimension

Joy Alexander reports on a Northern Ireland classroom in which creative responses to literature are central.

CS Lewis was born and spent his early years in Belfast and drew on his memories of rural and coastal Ireland in depicting the Narnian landscape. Now, I am at a celebration of work that pupils from Ballynahinch – a town twenty miles south of Belfast – have been doing on Narnia and C S Lewis.

Writing, artwork and research by the pupils is prominently displayed in the school library where the event is taking place. My attention is drawn to a three-dimensional miniature wardrobe made by a pupil from cardboard. Painted in dark-brown, the doors open to reveal a contrasting scene of a lamp-post and fir-trees in the snow, with the perspective making it seem to stretch into the distance.

I know straightaway which school the pupil who had created it must be from.

Some years previously I had visited St Colman's High and Sixth Form College in Ballynahinch. I have been in many English classrooms, many of which have featured eye-catching wall displays of pupils' work. The room of the St Colman's Head of English, Mary Fettes, stood out from any other room in my experience. What I can still see in my mind's eye is a board dedicated to *The Kite Runner*, which the sixth form were studying, where the students' writing was enhanced by kites hand-made with coloured tracing paper seemingly floating from the display-board across the room.

When I expressed my wonderment to Mary she invited me to come with her to the school library to view work done by Key Stage 3 pupils as a response to reading *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*. What I saw were a number of what I can only describe as interpretational artefacts – sizable models that might each sit on a desk-top, made from all manner of materials. What struck me most was that they were much more than merely descriptive as, for example, a model of a concentration camp would be. Rather than simply displaying narrative content, themes and moods associated with the text were conveyed by such means as colour (black/grey) or material (twisted wire). When you looked down on one model, the shape of a yellow star appeared. I had never seen anything like it.

The Narnian wardrobe reminded me of this visit and I determined to visit St Colman's again to find out more about its use of kinaesthetic learning in English. There are several key elements to their application of this approach:

- It is used most extensively in Year 9 (equivalent to Year 8 in England and Wales), but is introduced in Year 8 and may feature in the curriculum right up to and including sixth form.
- The response is most frequently to literature – a novel, poem or literary theme – and is implemented by the creative act of making a tactile artefact.

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- This can be a powerful way of demonstrating understanding or of offering an interpretation.
- It is also an effective vehicle for expressing emotion or capturing mood and tone.
- It allows all abilities to perform well. It is obvious that pupils engage in research and put a great deal of effort into the artefacts they make.
- Generally when the finished product is first exhibited, its creator makes an oral presentation explaining what he/she has done and why. Their speech is then written up as a lasting record to accompany the piece of work.

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Releasing creative energy

‘I’d never be good enough to be an Art teacher, but I love art!’ Mary Fettes’ enthusiasm and her own practice apparent in her classroom initiated this approach to teaching English, which has also been adopted and developed by Alannah Turner, another English teacher in the school. While making a kinaesthetic response to literature and language is fun, it also appears to release creative energy. Pupils are generally prepared to work hard on their creations and it is affirming for them when the finished object is exhibited, discussed and admired.



Each year, Year 9 pupils prepare in English for an exhibition. The textual work is studied in the English classroom; the representational response is devised and created by the pupils in their own time over several weeks. One approach that has been used is to follow a theme such as conflict – *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, poems on historical conflicts or on people in conflict. Mary says: *‘Our objective is that the pupils will interpret what they read or feel or research, putting it into another form than words.’* Another approach that has worked particularly well is to read a poem – ‘The Highwayman’ (Alfred Noyes); ‘Out of the Blue’ or ‘Clown Punk’ (Simon Armitage); *‘they have to take a part of it and interpret it differently and that usually ends up with the best work of all.’* The interpretations take many forms: tapestries; use of cardboard, clay, wood, metal; making a costume; origami. Some may be literal but many are genuinely creative.

An exhibition is held in the classroom and an effort is made to create an appropriate ambience. Music plays in the background, there is non-alcoholic juice and cheese instead of canapés, and staff members and others view the exhibits. The young people stand beside their art piece and speak about and discuss its creation.

‘With every year group we do something interpretive,’ says Mary. A little is done in Year 8 but the major focus for this curriculum activity is in Year 9 where it fits well into longer-term learning goals. For the 150th anniversary of the writing of *Alice in Wonderland*, Year 8 created hats incorporating interpretations of the novel for a Mad Hatter’s tea-party. This was a cross-curricular activity involving the English and Art departments. Usually however this type of work is embedded in the English programme. With GCSE classes, drawings may be done to clarify and aid comprehension of literature but time is not spent on this.

Mary thinks it is better when pupils do not see the work produced in a previous year: *‘I would talk about ones from the past, from maybe about five or six years ago, so I’d say, “well, the kinds of things people have done are”* The pupils use the SimpleMind app on their iPads – they put a word in the middle and can create their own mind-map, which throws out ideas. I tell them not to think 2D first of all but to think 3D. Some of their dads might be welders so I might suggest that they go with metal if that’s what they’re good at, or someone else might be able to draw on the skills of a granny who knits.’ This opens up possibilities of different avenues to explore in devising an interpretation.





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From word to image

Simon Armitage's poem on 9/11, 'Out of the Blue' (Part 3), inspired elegiac and imaginative responses, many requiring considerable research. In one, tiny photographs of many of the victims were mounted in a memorial collage. In another, a boy made a fireman's hatchet and accompanied it with a metaphorical commentary on the heroic role of the first responders.

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time and the related topic of autism have stimulated impressive work. One boy represented Christopher Boone's mind and the confusion in it as a planet with colliding red and yellow cars, this being the means by which Christopher mentally ranks days as 'super good' or 'black.' Other novels that are on the department's reading curriculum and have stimulated imaginative work are *Wonder* by R J Palacio, *Ways to Live Forever* by Sally Nicholls and some of David Walliams' novels.

An imaginative depiction of the sinking of the Titanic showed two hands formed from clay on which the ship rested. It was intended to express the hope of their souls being recovered. When first presented, a jar of ice was with it so that the viewer could experience the touch of the iceberg and feel the cold of the sea-water.

Making their artefact not only enables the young people to be creative, it also encourages them to make both a cognitive and an affective response to the literary text. It is part of their brief to draw explicitly on words and imagery in the text and striving to express this kinaesthetically leads to deeper understanding. Often the created model serves as an objective correlative for the literature from which it originates, in that the young maker is forming an objective means through which to convey the emotion evoked by it. When their work is exhibited, each pupil has to give an oral presentation explaining what they have done and why, speeches which are usually marked by confidence and authority.



‘The Highwayman’

The dramatic narrative and vivid imagery in Alfred Noyes’ poem ‘The Highwayman’ have given rise to notably imaginative exhibits. A diorama of the inn on the moor uses a real ribbon to create the effect of a path leading to the door – ‘The road was a ribbon of moonlight over the purple moor’ – with a light which flicks on and off inside the inn to signify the landlord’s daughter’s fatal warning to the highwayman. A girl found a more abstract way to represent the same line: ‘One of my favourite things to do is sew, so I decided to do a cushion.’ She chose purple tweed which has the texture and appearance of the heather-covered moor, with the path crossing it in a ribbon made from a sheer fabric of silvery-white voile or organza: ‘the moon shining down creates an effect that the path looks like a silver ribbon laid upon the heather on the moor.’

The poem’s descriptive opening sparked artistic responses:

*‘The wind was a torrent of darkness among the gusty trees,
The moon was a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas.’*

Someone actually made a large galleon, while a girl created an atmospheric depiction in a shoe box that the viewer looks down into: ‘I broke off tiny branches with leaves and used sellotape to stick them to the cocktail sticks to make it look like trees. I bought a mini cooling fan and placed it in the shoe-box. When I switched the fan on the trees blow a little to make it look almost like when you read the line in the poem.’

Tim the ostler received attention – Tim, whose ‘eyes were hollows of madness, his hair like mouldy hay’ and who loved ‘the landlord’s red-lipped daughter.’ A boy wrapped a box ‘in a kind of skin colour, then cut holes and stuck two hand-drawn wide eyes on the box to resemble Tim’s eyes. I didn’t do a mouth because I wanted to keep focus on the eyes. Then I put quotes and pictures inside the box about the things that are driving him mad.’ The viewer sees these things by looking through Tim’s eyes and, as it were, seeing into his mind. A girl had a comparable idea of having a box, inside which were painted Tim’s thoughts and imaginings, behind a face made from papier-mâché, with strips of yellow tissue paper for his hair.

Making this had provoked her to reflect on why Tim’s eyes were like ‘hollows of madness’: ‘did he mean that his eyes were like spooky woods, or did he mean ‘hollows’ as if his eyes were just shells of madness that show no sign of emotion anymore? Does it mean that he inflicted this upon himself as he continues his infatuation for Bess? It shows that Tim’s eyes are reflecting his deepest darkest desires for this one-sided romance.’

In some of the best work the interpretation is non-realistic. Once the imagination is sparked off, it discovers new metaphors to express emotions, mood or attitude. Someone turned the line ‘the hours crawled by like years’ into an aesthetic meditation on time by getting a kitchen clock and replacing the twelve numerals by the years from 1705 to 1716, having researched that this was when highwaymen were prevalent. The glass on the clock was cracked and a broken heart was drawn in the centre of the clock-face. The highwayman, whose ‘face burnt like a brand’ and who pledged, ‘I’ll come to thee by moonlight, though hell should bar the way’ led one boy to bring these two images together by using a red-hot poker to draw a barred gate on a heavy piece of wood, suggesting a hellfire obstruction. The aptness of these metaphors within the poem becomes evident in their realisation.

I feel frustrated by the inadequacy of my attempt to convey the remarkable quality of these dioramas; their variety in topic and in art media; the prowess in imaginative realisation; and also the fact that they are produced by all the members of a class, not just a select few.

Digital imaginings

The pedagogical strategies which have been described are also applied using digital technology: for instance, pupils make films, sometimes of their own writing in response to a variety of stimuli – for example, World War One letters – using such apps as Movie Maker, iMap, Shadow Puppet, Morfo 3D Face Booth, and finding music to capture the tone. Since these methodologies are familiar and widely used in schools they are not a focus of this article and one example will suffice.

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This activity is part of the department’s GCSE non-fiction curriculum. Pupils open an envelope in which each group finds a different task. They may be given the title of a novel which they may or may not have read – *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, *The Body Snatchers*; a country or a place; a list of words (‘tessellation’, ‘menacing’); or expressions (‘needle in a haystack’, ‘the pen is mightier than the sword’). The group has ninety minutes to research the contents of their envelope and to make a plan for completing the task. They then have forty minutes with their iPads around the school, during which they have to take a photo to capture the subject-matter they were given. The time limitation means that they have to think on their feet. The resulting pictures were on display on a noticeboard along one of the school corridors; some are clever and many are creative in their framing or imagery. Finally the group has to make a speech, explaining why they did what they did and what they could have done differently and there is a vote on how effectively the image has been captured.



The classroom imaginarium

Mary Fettes’ classroom silently advertises her pedagogy. It is an imaginarium, a place devoted to stimulating and cultivating the imagination. A signpost points to Wonderland, Hogwarts, District 12, Narnia, Toad Hall; of course, it’s a 3D signpost, with polystyrene signs lettered in an appropriate font. Yet this is not an Aladdin’s cave of the weird and wonderful. It is an orderly, efficient classroom where the focus is clearly on learning. The wall displays are stunning but are planned as a whole within a frame and are all the more powerful for being so purposeful. They draw the eye and then invite the spectator also to be a reader of what is displayed and thus are in fact an effective teaching tool.

When I visited, there was a large wall display of the Gothic and another of *Great Expectations*, incorporating realia such as a bride’s veil. Most striking was a more sparse board, relating to *Of Mice and Men*, with the word ‘loneliness’ highlighted. A female silhouette cut from black paper leaned back, as it were, against the side of the wall-board, in a Marilyn Monroe pose. Beside Crooks’ name was a picture of an apple-box with some of his possessions visible in it. An actual empty dog-lead was pinned alongside Candy’s name. A pack of cards denotes George shuffling cards for a game of Solitaire.

The isolation of these items on the expanse of board was visually poignant and was a potent discussion starter on the novel’s themes and characters. When GCSE pupils were writing the controlled task on the novel in the assembly hall, picturing this board in their mind would surely have been a helpful prompt.

‘We underestimate what children can do ...’

I have two observations to make in conclusion. Firstly I’m struck by how much can be sparked off by the creativity of a teacher who harnesses her or his own interests. This has its satisfactions for the teacher concerned, but it also generates a force field that arouses creative energy in pupils. But secondly I am amazed by the excellence to which pupils can rise when they are released from the limits of imposed learning outcomes and given agency and a creative stimulus. Reflecting on long experience of teaching writing in elementary schools, Donald Graves wrote that ‘we underestimate what children can do.’ There is ample evidence of the truth of this claim in Mary Fettes’ English classroom.

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