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## **In/visible education: class, gender and pedagogy in Educating Rita and Dead Poets' Society**

Anne Cranny-Francis and J.R. Martin

In this paper we look at two films which, in different ways, are about education. The first film we deal with is the very popular American film, Dead Poets' Society, set in America in the 1950s, filmed by an Australian cinematographer and directed by Australian director, Peter Weir. The other film we discuss is the British film, Educating Rita, made in 1983, during Mrs Thatcher's term as Prime Minister. The film is set in Britain and directed by Lewis Gilbert from a screenplay by Willy Russell (first production in June 1980, Royal Shakespeare Company). In our analysis Educating Rita operates as an interrogative intertext for the American film, challenging its failure to engage with issues of class and gender - a failure which is very significant since Dead Poets' Society organises its narrative around a clash of pedagogies.

We chose to look at the two films because of the use which was being made of Dead Poets' Society in what was, at the time, an engaging debate about education in NSW and around Australia. For example, writing in the Sydney Morning Herald in 1990, Yvonne Preston refers to this film when discussing what she identifies as a shift in the political grounds of the debate. Preston notes that it was once easy to characterise the education debate with "progressives favouring creative thinking above spelling and grammar to the Left; traditional proponents of discipline and the 3Rs to the Right". Now, however, Preston notes, it seems that the grounds have shifted, with the leader of the NSW Labor party, Bob Carr aligning himself with the calls for literacy and numeracy; it seems that the political left have deserted progressivism. As readers we might ask how

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this affects our familiar political reading of the education debate: Has that reading been in error in some way? Or have the grounds on which it was made simply shifted so that it is obsolete? Or a combination of the above?

Without resolving that question, Preston ends her column with the following eulogy to Dead Poets' Society:

The lovely new film, Dead Poets' Society, provides a last word with its salutary warning of how readily the dead hand of educational-establishment conformity can come down to crush creativity. I still savour that marvellous scene where a bewildered class of adolescents is instructed to rip out from a book of poetry a page of pretentious introductory nonsense.

Certainly that seemed to be the grounds for the dewy-eyed responses to the film we observed at our viewing (in a suburban cinema) and in talking later to people. However, that response and Preston's summation of it, map out the grounds for the debate in dangerously simplistic and historically inaccurate terms. The debate about education was not a simple two-way tussle between a traditionalist position (the dead hand of Preston's comment) and the progressive one (the one which supposedly fosters creativity - and we will elaborate further on that evaluation of progressivism later in the paper). Certainly there were some reconstituted traditionalists adding their voice to the debate, and the progressives were out in force, but if that's all there was the debate would not be new; in fact it probably would not have happened at all. There was a new voice in the debate, a voice constituted in and by the failure of progressive pedagogy - the failure of that pedagogy to cater to the educational needs of many students in Australia. That was, after all, why the debate happened in the first place. This new voice came from a number of different sources, but what it commonly proposed was an explicit teaching method (rather than the more implicit methods of progressivism) and it also proposed (implicitly or explicitly) the deconstruction of progressive pedagogy - to find out what went wrong. We will call this position critical literacy<sup>1</sup> (for an early profile of the debate see Reid 1987; for recent retrospectives from the perspective of

critical literacy, see Cope & Kalantzis 1993, Cope et al. 1993, and Martin 1991, 1993).

Australian educators, parents, politicians and students were therefore involved in a three way debate involving one pedagogy with an implicit teaching practice - progressivism, and two pedagogies with an explicit teaching practice - traditionalism and critical literacy. But what happened very often during the debate was that the critical literacy position was identified as or with the traditionalist position and a line of polemic was then followed which failed to address or totally avoided having to address the criticisms of the progressive pedagogy being made from the critical literacy position. The debate would simply be reconstituted as a traditional versus progressive one - with the obvious result; after all, no one would argue a return to traditionalism (if such a thing were even possible - which we seriously doubt). The debate was effectively short-circuited and the reasons it was being staged (the students who were failing at school, or passing through the schools and failing in the job market) were effectively ignored. It may be worth noting that as late as 1991 the same rhetorical strategy was used in a plenary conference paper, with any non-orthodox (which is to say, visible) pedagogy reductively characterised as a revised traditionalism, and then demigrated with sentimentally-rendered horror stories of our traditional past!

It therefore seemed very interesting that right in the middle of the debate along came a film which told as a narrative the story of conflicting pedagogies, and it was not surprising, but infinitely disappointing, to discover that the film constituted the debate in traditional versus progressive terms. Of course, the movie is set in the 50s so that particular construction of pedagogical positionings is at least appropriate to the time. But then one had to ask why that was done? Certainly the film was the product of a different society (American not Australian), but all the evidence points to the fact that America has similar problems with literacy and numeracy to Australia. So why was a movie about pedagogy, a hot issue in America as well as in Australia, set back in the 1950s? Was it precisely so that the grounds of the debate might be constituted as traditional versus progressive? So that the public could be given that battle they know so well, between authoritarianism and creativity. This is familiar from so many texts that it is easy to know which side to be on, and if you're not sure, there's the enormously popular Robin Williams playing the part you know you should (therefore) be sympathising with!

<sup>1</sup> It should also be noted that, since this time, the debate about what constitutes 'critical literacy' has continued, with a number of different positions being formulated. Basically these differences are organised around different theoretical and pedagogical positions, and involve systemic linguistics, poststructuralist theories of different kinds, feminist theorists, and a range of writings by indigenous and ethnic community leaders.

Now the film might be enacting an educational debate which is very different from that in Australia. Perhaps the voices of conservatism are much louder and more powerful in America: perhaps there is no apparently anomalous siding of the Left with demands for literacy and numeracy testing to suggest that something new is happening in education. With one president just passing from the arena who was one of McCarthy's informers in the 50s and an incoming president who used to be Head of the CIA, perhaps Americans really did fear a return to the 50s - and maybe the movie enacted that concern? Possibly.

The point remains that it was read here as a description - a simplified and distorted description - of the debate in Australia. That was unfortunate on many grounds, not the least being that it simply works to preserve the status quo: traditionalists in the black hats, progressives in the white hats. Thus it short-circuits the critical deconstruction of progressivism. Or does it?

As we watched the film, we were struck by what seemed to us, and to the people we later spoke to, a very positive and accurate depiction of progressive pedagogy in action. The traditional position is caricatured, which accords with the demands of the narrative. The viewer is traditionally positioned to enjoy working through the tribulations and triumphs of the hero; the villain's history and psychology is not so important - his job (usually) is simply to be very bad and so act as a foil to the hero. In Dead Poets' Society traditionalism is very bad; teaching absurdly reductionist forms of poetic analysis and laying down the law with a very strong hand - and bat. On the other hand, the progressive position is outlined in detail through the narrative of teacher, John Keating and several boys from one of his English classes. We decided to analyse the filmic construction of the progressive pedagogy as an accurate and sympathetic portrayal, and to use that analysis to understand what we and many of our colleagues, as people involved and interested in education, found disturbing about the film.

We will begin with a general analysis of the film narrative, with special reference to two scenes and then continue with a more detailed analysis of one scene in which Keating's pedagogical practice is made quite explicit. Our aim is to situate the narrative discursively (for background on the analytical framework used here, see Cranny-Francis in press) and then examine the pedagogy in relation to the narrative.

### **The Dead Poets' Society narrative**

"Ladies and gentlemen, boys..." The headmaster's words spell out the exclusion of women from the world of Welton, the private boys' college which is the scene for most of the action in Dead Poets' Society. In fact, women have just two possible roles at Welton - mothers (more or less satisfactory ones, but in any case absent) and lovers (who are absent within the confines of the school itself). These boys apparently don't even have sisters! In fact, there are some girls present at the ceremony, but they are effaced by the headmaster - included in the address as "ladies" which effaces their complementary status to the boys. As the English visual references spell out (the straw boater, the traditional uniform, the rowing teams, the boys playing soccer rather than gridiron) this is not only a boys-only school; it is an upper middle class boys school - an American version of an English Public School. There are no blacks at this school - or, to be precise, we see only one black person, very briefly, working in the kitchen. There are no black students, no Asian students, no Hispanic students. This school is a whites-only enclave, as its class constituency would necessitate.

So this narrative is about an exclusively masculine, all white, upper middle class boys school. It is important to recognise the particularity of the educational context in which the new progressive pedagogy is to be practised by teacher, John Keating (played by Robin Williams). It is important not only because it provides (narratively) a suitable jousting ground for the hero of progressivism, but also because those parameters are not specified as particular by the narrative. They are simply naturalised as 'normal'; these are normal 50s adolescents, white boys growing up under the tyranny of an authoritarian pedagogy when they should be free to express themselves. The crucial point is that they are not 'normal' at all; they are very uniquely positioned within that society as potentially the most socially advantaged and powerful members of it. The only factor which keeps them from fully expressing that power is their age. However, they are learning ...

They learn to be powerful by exploiting those less powerful than themselves, and we, the audience, are positioned as complicit in this exploitation. An example of this positioning occurs in a scene which is a meeting of the Dead Poets' society. During this meeting Charles ('Charlie') Dalton, one of the film's most attractive characters, changes

his name to *Nawonda*, in a parody of Native American pride. The ease with which Dalton appropriates Native American signifiers is not surprising given his very special position within the group. Dalton's family, we learn at one stage, is extremely rich; his father is a banker; and, throughout the narrative, Dalton displays a sophistication which accords with this particular positioning. Of course, in terms of the realist narrative, Dalton's action is represented as adolescent good humour - but as anyone involved in discursive analysis knows, humour is perhaps the most revealing aspect of any text. Dalton's action is the 'natural' prerogative of a highly placed member of a colonialist culture.

Equally blatant is his exploitation of the girls he brings to the meeting. His social and educational advantage is the means by which he impresses these girls, while at the same time ridiculing their lack of knowledge to his companions. Dalton recites poetry to the girls which he represents as his own invention. The audience is positioned to laugh at their naive responses; and yet one wonders how many of the audience would know the source of the poetry Dalton recites. In other words, the audience is positioned to respond positively to Dalton's actions despite the fact that they, themselves, may be closer (educationally and socially) to the position of the girls, than to that of Dalton.

The girls are also obviously positioned as working class by their dress and manner. However, the viewer might challenge the grounds of this representation. Their clothes are not very well-coordinated, not stylish; they wear a lot of colourful make-up; they smoke and drink; they appear just a bit tarty. In other words, the filmmaker has constituted these characters in terms of familiar working-class stereotypes. And working class women have always been potential victims of middle class masculine exploitation, because of their lesser access to education, money, and status. What we are seeing here is a naturalised presentation of class inequality and gender inequality - all in the guise of just good adolescent fun!

Working class men fare just as badly in *Dead Poets' Society*. In the party attended by Knox Overstreet, for example, he, the upper middle class private school boy, is forced into a drinking competition by two footballers who are again obviously meant to be working class. Why? Again because they fulfil middle-class interpretations of what it means to be working class. The boys in question are big and fat; they drink too

much; their accents are working class; they're a bit thick; and they look as if they have Irish ethnic origins (with their red hair and pugilistic manner - another middle class American stereotype). And the audience is positioned to laugh at them, too, as much as at Knox's discomfiture in being harassed by them. They are the 'animals' against whom Knox and his fellow students appear so 'civilised'.

In the course of the story Knox falls in love with a middle-class girl, Chris from the town, though she is presented, Grace Kelly style, as a kind of American princess. The class difference between them is indicated by Knox's ability to approach her inside her school during school hours, to operate at that site, and by his swift removal of her from Welton when she appears there to talk to him. Not that that difference goes unmarked (she comments on it), but it becomes part of the gender narrative, not a class matter. As a man he has to seek her out and win her, no matter how dangerous and unfriendly the territory. The truth is that her territory may be unfriendly, and then purely for reasons of class hostility, but it is never dangerous to him in any but the most superficial terms (interestingly there are black students at Chris's school, which further underlines the exclusiveness of Welton).

The relationship between Knox and Chris effectively displaces the town/gown tension into a love story; the class narrative becomes a gender narrative; power inequality is displaced from class into gender - with its resolution in romance. This is what Carolyn Steedman identified in *Landscape for a Good Woman* as one of the great bourgeois narratives: the idea that women are somehow classless and can, in her words, deconstructing Hoggart and Seabrook, "with the right cut of skirt and a good pair of shoes" cross the boundaries between classes. Which of course begs many questions about the knowledge which identifies a particular cut of skirt as "right" or the money required for a good pair of shoes. Nevertheless, as Steedman notes, it is a narrative which provides a handy resolution of class hostility, and which conveniently shifts the hostility onto women (the class traitors!).

In *Dead Poets' Society* the class narrative is constantly effaced. There is no apparent conflict of class in this film. The boys are 'normal' boys, just a bit richer and more civilised and attractive and noble than the other boys in the film, and a good catch for any girl. And the audience is constantly positioned, particularly by the use of humour, to accept that

definition of the norm: it is white, masculine and upper middle class. That is not a specific positioning in this film, responsible for particular attitudes and values and actions; it is the normal one, which the audience is positioned to accept and to identify, or at least sympathise, with.

There is one boy at the school whose antecedents are not solidly middle-class; and interestingly he is Keating's chief acolyte, Neil Perry. Neil is thrilled, excited and inspired by Keating's teaching methods and his views on literature; and it is Neil who has the idea to reconstitute the Dead Poets' Society, to which Keating had belonged when he was a Welton student. Neil wants to be an actor, much to the disgust of his father; Mr Perry wants Neil to be a doctor and has mapped out that future for him. Early on in the film Mr Perry's tyranny over his son is established (for example, Neil has spent the summer studying Chemistry, rather than holidaying; he is told by his father to give up his position as Assistant Editor on the school newspaper) but it is not until the final scenes that the reasons for that tyranny are approached. Mr Perry tells his son that he (Neil) has opportunities that he never had as a young man and Neil is not to waste them on such frivolous pursuits as acting. So Mr Perry is a 'self-made man' and his demands of his son can be read as the insecurity of a man operating within a context, with discourses, which are relatively new to him; to which he, and now his son, do not have extensive access. Mr Perry does not negotiate with Neil; he orders. And Neil does not, cannot, negotiate with his father; he capitulates. When Neil approaches Keating with this problem, Keating's advice accords with his educational philosophy, "Tell him what you feel". However, he does not suggest how Neil might do that, or how he might make his feelings important to his father.

So Neil is in many ways the odd-man-out at Welton; he is not the norm defined by the narrative. So it is appropriate that he is later removed from the space defined by Welton - and that he (and his suicide) becomes the means by which the class narrative of Welton is reestablished.

### **Progressive pedagogy in Dead Poets' Society**

In our reading of the progressive pedagogy introduced to Welton by Keating, and the comparison with traditional pedagogy, we refer to Bernstein's deconstructions of pedagogy. Bernstein argues that these

conflicting pedagogies (the traditional and progressive) "have their origins within fractions of the middle class and so an unreflecting institutionalizing of either pedagogy will not be to the advantage of the lower working class" (Bernstein 1975: 19). From this viewpoint it would seem no accident that in Dead Poets' Society the two pedagogies just for control in an upper middle class school. According to Bernstein, traditional pedagogy is associated with the old middle class, whose power "rests upon ownership/control over specialised physical resources, although it would include entrepreneurial professional occupations such as lawyers, medical consultants, solicitors, accountants" (Bernstein 1975:18). Progressive pedagogy on the other hand is associated with the new middle class, whose power "rests upon ownership/control over dominant and specialized forms of communication" (Bernstein 1975: 18). It is therefore appropriate that at Welton, a school controlled by the old middle class, the new middle class pedagogy loses out, though the audience is not positioned to see this as a loss for the pedagogy - but for the school. In terms of the narrative the clear victor, the hero, is progressivism as it is embodied in the romanticised character of the teacher, John Keating.

In related work Bernstein refers to the progressive pedagogy as an **invisible pedagogy** because of the way in which it presents the teacher as a friend and facilitator rather than an authority, and also because of the general lack of explicitness about, and direct teaching of, what is to be learned (Bernstein 1975: 116). In this respect it contrasts with traditional pedagogy with its emphasis on direct instruction in a more authoritarian regime. As noted above, we read Keating's teaching in Dead Poets' Society as a relatively faithful representation of progressive principles, and begin by examining the supposedly non-authoritarian nature of his teaching and then move on to his/its lack of explicit goals and expectations.

As far as authoritarian teaching is concerned, certainly Keating's interactions with his students are far from the traditional pedagogic norm. He chats personally with students out of class, and counsels one student, Neil Perry, one evening in his rooms. He teaches students in the hall (as tour guide), from the top of desks (as preacher/orator), in a gridiron huddle (as quarterback), in the courtyard (as drill sergeant), on the soccer field (as coach), through game-show questioning (as host) and, in one pivotal scene (which we consider later in more detail), through a

hands-on police-verbal style interrogation (as interrogator). So there is a lot of variety in the way Keating interacts with his students. Many of these interactions are also funny and so tend to position the audience to celebrate his teaching. We need to ask, however, whether the non-authoritarian nature of this teaching is more apparent than real. In every role (tour guide, preacher-orator, quarterback, drill sergeant, game-show host, interrogator), Keating maintains a dominant position over his students. In fact, the variety of interactions seems to provide Keating with a licence for a kind of emotional terrorism that might be harder to practise within the confines of a traditional pedagogic relationship.

Consider for example the way in which Keating sets up the poetry assignment we explore below, complete with special effects (the flicks lights on and off in the classroom) and the individuation of Todd Anderson as the student he specifically wishes to engage in this exercise. He not only singles Anderson out for friendly [?] abuse ("you mole"), but he also publicly exposes Anderson's shyness ("don't think I don't know that this assignment scares the hell out of you"). Keating's (friendly[?]) abuse of Todd Anderson is just one instance of the insults he hurls at students throughout the film; even students' names are a source of derision, as Pitts and Meeks are to discover. Nor is direct public humiliation beyond Keating. Mr Hopkins, the one student in the class who publicly resists Keating's progressive teaching, is severely dealt with for a poem that to Keating's mind abuses the freedom of choice he offers his class. So when Hopkins offers his own resistant reading of the exercise with the doggerel verse, "The cat sat on the mat", Keating uses his own advanced verbal skills to ridicule the student, concluding "We're not laughing at you, we're laughing near you." Keating does give an explanation for his rejection of Hopkins' work ("don't let your poems be ordinary"), but he does so at the expense of, not with the complicity of, this student. And Todd Anderson's insecurities are treated with an equally heavy hand: "Mr Anderson thinks that everything inside him is worthless and embarrassing. Isn't that right, Todd? Isn't that your worst fear? ..."

In general, we found it hard not to read this kind of behaviour as every bit as authoritarian as the traditional teaching behaviour caricatured by Keating's peers. In fact, progressive pedagogy seems to be providing Keating with additional mechanisms for dominating his boys. As suggested above, Keating's celebrated elicitation of a poem from Todd Anderson is more like an interrogation than a teaching interaction. There

is no reciprocity in the interaction: Keating commands, Anderson complies, Keating evaluates and commands again. And violent verbal exchanges and physical contact are both deployed to ensure Anderson's submission:

[Key: I = initiation; R = response; F = feedback; analysis based on Sinclair & Coulthard 1975]

I Mr Keating: ... Now, who's next? Mr Anderson. I see you sitting there in agony. Come on Todd, step up. Let's put you out of your misery.  
R Mr Anderson: I...I didn't do it. I didn't write a poem.

I Mr Keating: Mr Anderson thinks that everything inside him is worthless and embarrassing. Isn't that right, Todd? Isn't that your worst fear?

R Mr Anderson: -  
F ...Mr Keating: I think you're wrong. I think you have something inside of you that is worth a great deal.

I Mr Keating: [writing] "I sound my barbaric YAWP over the rooftops of the world." WW, Uncle Walt again. Now for those of you who don't know, a yawp is a loud cry or yell. Now Todd, I would like you to give us a demonstration of a barbaric yawp. Come on. You can't yawp sitting down. Perform. Come up. Now get in yawping stance.

[Mr Anderson: A yawp.  
Mr Keating: No, not just a yawp, a barbaric yawp.]  
R Mr Anderson: Yawp.

I ...Mr Keating: Come on, louder.  
F Mr Anderson: Yawp.  
R Mr Keating: Oh that's a mouse.

I Mr Keating: Come on, louder.  
R Mr Anderson: Yawp.  
F Mr Keating: Oh good god boy

I ...Mr Keating: yell, yell.  
R Mr Anderson: Yawp.  
F Mr Keating: There it is. You see, there's a barbarian in you after all.

I ...Mr Keating: Now - you don't get away that easy. There's a picture of Uncle Walt up there. What does he remind you of? Don't think. Answer. Go on.  
R Mr Anderson: A madman.

I Mr Keating: What kind of madman? Don't think about it. Just answer me.  
R Mr Anderson: A crazy madman.  
F Mr Keating: No. You can do better than that.

I ...Mr Keating: Free your mind. Use your imagination. Say the first thing that pops into your head even if it's total gibberish. Go on.  
R Mr Anderson: A sweaty-toothed madman.  
F Mr Keating: Good God, boy, there's a poet in you after all.

I ...Mr Keating: There, close your eyes...close them. Now, describe what you see.  
R Mr Anderson: I close my eyes...  
F Mr Keating: Yes

...R Mr Anderson: uh and the scene which floats beside me...

- F **Mr Keating:** sweaty-toothed madman
- ...R **Mr Anderson:** a sweaty-toothed madman with a stare that pounds my brain...
- F **Mr Keating:** Oh that's excellent.
- I ...**Mr Keating:** Now give him action, make him do something.
- R **Mr Anderson:** His hands reach out and choke me...
- F **Mr Keating:** That's it. Wonderful, wonderful.
- I **Mr Anderson:** And all the time he's mumbling...
- I **Mr Keating:** What's he mumbling?
- R **Mr Anderson:** Mumbling truth...
- F **Mr Keating:** That's it.
- I **Mr Anderson:** truh like a blanket that always leaves your feet cold...
- R boys: [laughter]
- F **Mr Keating:** Forget them, forget them:
- I ...**Mr Keating:** stay with the blanket, tell me about the blanket.
- R **Mr Anderson:** You, you, you, you ki...you push it, stretch it, it will never be enough. You kick at it and beat it, it will never cover any of us. From the moment we enter crying to the moment we leave dying, it will just cover your face as you wail and cry and scream.
- F boys: [applause]
- I **Mr Keating:** Don't you forget this.

This contrasts ironically with the way in which Neil and Todd negotiate a solution to Todd's participation in the *Dead Poets' Society*. In Neil and Todd's negotiation, both have the opportunity to make statements and ask questions and, although Neil pushes the discussion towards a compromise solution, Todd has an opportunity to resist. In this exchange, Todd is not simply the puppet manipulated by Keating as in the poem elicitation scene presented above.

- Neil Perry:** Todd, are you coming tonight?
- Todd Anderson:** No.
- Neil Perry:** Why not? God, you were there. You heard Keating. Don't you want to do something about...
- Todd Anderson:** Yes. But...
- Neil Perry:** But what?
- Todd Anderson:** Keating said that everybody took turns reading and I don't want to do that.
- Neil Perry:** Gosh, you really have a problem with that, don't you?
- Todd Anderson:** No, I don't have a problem. Neil, I just...I don't want to do it, okay?
- Neil Perry:** Alrigh... What if you didn't have to read? What if you just came and listened?
- Todd Anderson:** That's not how it works.
- Neil Perry:** Forget how it works. What if what if he said it was okay?

- Todd Anderson:** What? Are you going to go up and ask them and...
- Neil Perry:** (nods)
- Todd Anderson:** No, no ...
- Neil Perry:** I'll be right back.
- Todd Anderson:** Neil...Neil

The poetry-teaching scene raises a number of issues: Why is the poem that Keating elicits from Todd so highly valued? Did the ends justify these particular means? Were Keating's teaching methods an efficient way to achieve them? This raises the issue of implicitness in progressive pedagogy. One of the central tenets in this pedagogy is that what has to be learned cannot be taught. Indeed, it is generally argued that teaching gets in the way of learning. Instead of teaching, it is argued, teachers should facilitate; their role is simply to provide environments conducive to learning. This means that goals cannot be made explicit to students, for fear that they will get in the way of the spontaneous acquisition of understanding.

As far as explicitness about goals is concerned, Keating is certainly faithful to this progressivist stance. And note that for Keating, this does not mean that there are no right answers. When he asks questions, Keating has very specific answers in mind:

- Mr Keating:** Oh Captain, my captain. Who knows where that comes from? Anybody. Not a clue. It's from a poem by Walt Whitman about Mr Abraham Lincoln.
- Mr Keating:** The Latin term for that sentiment is *carpe diem*. Who knows what that means?
- Meeks:** *Carpe diem*. That's seize the day.
- Mr Keating:** Very good...
- Mr Keating:** The man is not tired, he is exhausted, and don't use very sad, use, come on Mr Overstreet, you twerp.
- Knox Overstreet:** Morose?
- Mr Keating:** Exactly, morose. Now, language was developed for one endeavour, and that is...Mr Anderson, come on...are you a man or an amoeba?
- Todd Anderson:** ...
- Mr Keating:** Mr Perry.
- Neil Perry:** Ah, to communicate?
- Mr Keating:** No, to woo women.

The game-show genre taken up here and there in the film institutionalises Keating's role as an arbiter of truth. In general, his students can only respond by guessing. For the answers Keating is expecting have not been explicitly framed:

**Mr Keating:** Why does the writer use this line?

**Charlie Dalton:** Because he's in a hurry

**Mr Keating:** No, ding. Thanks for playing anyway. Because we are food for worms lads. Because believe it or not each and every one of us in this room is going to one day stop breathing [focus on Neill], turn old and die.

**Mr Keating:** Why do I stand up here? anybody...

**Charlie Dalton:** To feel taller.

**Mr Keating:** No. [rings bell with foot] Thank-you for playing Mr Dalton. I stand upon my desk to remind myself that we must constantly look at things in a different way.

This means that when it comes to the problem of what counts as a good poem, Keating's students are left floundering. They have been told that the purpose of poetry is to woo women; they are exhorted to use non-core vocabulary; and they have read a number of famous poems. Knox makes an attempt, with his poem to Chris. After initially joining in the public humiliation of Knox, Keating moves to support him, evaluating his poem "as a good effort". The poem he elicits from Todd, however, receives lavish praise: "There's a poet in you... Excellent... Wonderful". And the class applauds, taking their cue from Keating. What is the difference between these two poems? This is something that Keating, faithful to his pedagogy, does not make explicit. Again, in light of the emphasis which progressive educators place on 'natural' language learning (cf. Gray 1987, 1990), it is important to note that the language of these poems is no more or less natural than Keating's teaching interactions. Contrast the language of Knox's poem with the way he evaluates Chris with his friends:

To Chris

I see a sweetness in her smile  
Bright light shines from her eyes  
But life is complete, contentment is mine  
Just knowing that she's alive.

compared with

Charlie Dalton: How was dinner?

Knox Overstreet: Huh?

Charlie Dalton: How was dinner?

Knox Overstreet: Terrible. Awful.

Charlie Dalton: What? What happened?

Knox Overstreet: Tonight I met the most beautiful girl I have ever seen in my entire life

Neil Perry: Are you crazy? What's wrong with that?

Knox Overstreet: She's practically engaged to Chet Danbury.

Charlie Dalton: That guy could eat a football.

Pitts: It's too bad.

Knox Overstreet: Too bad? It's worse than too bad, Pitts. It's a

tragedy. A girl this beautiful in love with such a jerk

Pitts: All the good ones go for jerks. You know that.

Cameron: Yeah. Forget her. Open your trig book and try and figure out problem 5.

Knox Overstreet: I can't just forget her, Cameron. And I certainly can't think about trig.

By osmosis (for which read, implicit cultural learning), Knox has learned that everyday language needs to be reworked in a love poem, and he knows that the general drift of this change is in the direction of more nominalised expression. In effect, this represents a shift from spoken to more written style (cf. Halliday 1985a). A rough translation for the first three lines of his poem is provided below:

'written' I see a **sweetness** in her smile  
'spoken' [I see her smile sweetly]

'written' **Bright light shines from her eyes**  
'spoken' [I see her eyes shine brightly {reflecting light}]

'written' But **life** is complete, **contentment** is mine  
'spoken' [but I'm 'satisfied', and I'm happy]

'written' Just knowing that she's **alive**.  
'spoken' [Just knowing she's living]



Knox's problem is that he doesn't know what to do with this poetic language. His written poem is too personal; it is embarrassing. For this style of poetry, what Knox needs is a 'universal' poem, which simply suggests or refers obliquely to the personal or particular. According to the criteria implicitly employed in this analysis of poetry, he should use his written language to deparicularise meaning and so allow for layers of readings. Consider the following model poem, by a real Dead Poet, Robert Herrick (Herrick 1973):

Upon Julia's Clothes

Whenas in silks my Julia goes,

Then, then, methinks, how sweetly flows

That liquefaction of her clothes.

Next, when I cast mine eyes, and see

That brave\* vibration, each way free,

O, how that glittering taketh me.

[\* bright - foomole]

Herrick uses the written language to construct layers of meaning: Julia's silk clothes on one level and waves of liquid/light on the other, producing the 'transcendent' meaning that 'immortalises' his 'love'. With reference to contemporary physics and its then novel modelling of light, Herrick's nominalisations set up an extended metaphor running through the poem. This metaphor is roughly unpacked below (taking liquefaction as a possible blend of liquefy and refract).

That **liquefaction** of her clothes flows sweetly      LIQUID (& light?)  
[the clothes move like liquid]                              silk clothes moving

(I) see that brave **vibration**                              WAVES (liquid/light)  
[the clothes vibrate splendidly]                              silk clothes moving  
how that **glittering** taketh me                              LIGHT  
[the clothes glitter so as to move me greatly]                              silk clothes moving

There's no need to feel embarrassed when language is used to set up a universal meaning transcending the particular in this way. This is precisely the construal of meaning that Keating has not taught; and it is

precisely the 'spontaneous' and 'natural' construal of meaning he drags out of Todd:

A sweaty-toothed madman with a stare that pounds my brain

His hands reach out and choke me

And all the time he's mumbling

Truth

Like a blanket that always leaves your feet cold

You push it, stretch it, it will never be enough

You kick at it and beat it, it will never cover any of us

From the moment we enter crying

To the moment we leave dying

It will just cover your face

As you wail and cry and scream.

Note that Todd doesn't talk about a madman with teeth that are covered in sweat or dribble; he talks about "a **sweaty-toothed** madman." And he doesn't talk about a madman who looks at him and makes his brain throbb; he talks about "a **stare** that pounds my brain." And Todd knows what to do with his metaphors: the nominalisation **truth** is "like a blanket that always leaves your feet cold..." - a simile that continues for the rest of the poem. And if you know the film, you know that this metaphor is suggestive of Todd's own particular uncomfortable truth - that he follows in the footsteps of a very successful brother, an old boy from Welton, and that his birthday present was a desk-set, exactly the same present his parents had sent him the year before. Consider how embarrassing this truth would have been if Todd had written a directly personal poem, as Knox did, instead of a universal poem, which implies his own experience and that of any readers who might care to 'identify' with his message:

The Desk-set

I lie sweating, my brain pounding -

Last year's present, again today

What are they thinking?

What aren't they thinking?

I wail and cry and scream

but they don't care.

This comparison of language usage demonstrates the way in which an

invisible pedagogy like progressivism hides a very specific set of specialised competencies. These competencies or skills may be implicitly available to those with the intellectual potential and appropriate cultural context, but they are often extremely difficult to decipher for those without that specific cultural context (with or without the intellectual potential). Unfortunately, not teaching these competencies is rationalised by arguing that direct teaching is bad pedagogy. "Bad pedagogy for whom?", we might well ask. Bernstein sums up the hidden curriculum of progressivism and the class bias involved as follows (in this quotation, 'strong classification' refers to very specific knowledge and skills; 'weak frames' refers to the varied kinds of student-teacher interaction engaged in by teachers like Keating):

"It is more than likely that if we examine empirically invisible pedagogies we shall find to different degrees a stress on the transmission of specific isolated competencies. Thus the 'hidden curriculum' of invisible pedagogies may well be, embryonically, strong classification, albeit with relatively weak frames. It becomes a matter of importance to find out which children or groups of children are particularly responsive to this 'hidden curriculum'. For some children may come to see or be led to see that there are two transmissions, one overt, the other covert, which stand in a figure-ground relation to each other." (Bernstein 1975:143)

### **Educating Rita**

As we noted at the beginning of this article, we decided to work on Educating Rita after seeing Dead Poets' Society and finding its avoidance or evasion of issues of class extremely problematic both in relation to the pedagogy itself and in the debate between pedagogies with which the narrative is concerned. Educating Rita deals very specifically with the relationship between the (essentially middle class) institution of education and class identity. The film is not about pedagogy in the same way that Dead Poets' Society is; but it does address the middle class assumptions about education and class identity which the audience is positioned to make in Dead Poets' Society and which are often elided in the wider community debate about education.

Educating Rita is not so well-known as Dead Poets' Society and it is a few years older, so we should perhaps start by outlining the story. Educating

Rita tells the story of Susan White (Julie Walters), who calls herself Rita, a working class woman of 27 (at the beginning of the film), who has decided she wants to study for a degree in English literature through the (part-time) Open University system. Frank Bryant (Michael Caine) has been appointed her tutor. In order to complete her degree Rita not only has to battle Frank, who is unsure from the very beginning whether he wants to teach Rita, but she also has to battle the conformist pressure from her working class background, expressed mainly through a patriarchal discourse which positions her as wife and mother, not student. In the course of her studies Rita's marriage breaks up and she is alienated from her background. Frank's relationship with a young female tutor also disintegrates and he descends even further into the well of self-pity he occupied when Rita first encountered him. The audience is constantly enticed by the possibility of a romance between Frank and Rita.

This film also received a mixed response. Some women from working class backgrounds felt that they were being ridiculed in the character of Rita and that the whole film was simply a middle-class fantasy of working class life. That is not our reading of the film; it does seem to us an accurate portrayal of the dilemmas faced by a working-class woman in a middle-class institution. However, whether that is true or not, the film does offer middle-class viewers a perspective on education informed by class analysis. It places the problem of class difference at the heart of the debate about what constitutes education - unlike Dead Poets' Society where class, along with gender and race and ethnicity are ignored in the battle of pedagogies.

Significantly, what is not ignored by the narrative may well be effaced by critics. It is interesting to note that in the Longman edition of Russell's play, the differences between Frank and Rita are presented to students as individual differences, not class differences. Richard Adams writes in his introduction that "...we can certainly detect in general terms the tension between the two characters from a reading of the text - Rita's blunt, direct questioning contrasts amusingly with Frank's embarrassed reluctance to give direct answers" (1985:3-4). Adams reads the opening scene as a clash of personality, whereas a more productive reading might see it as a clash of class cultures.

One of the most interesting features of this scene is the difference in orientations to meaning enacted in the dialogue between Frank, a middle

class man, and Rita, a working class woman. What makes this difference particularly engaging is the fact that Rita has not been silenced by this unfamiliar context or the higher (social) status of her middle class male tutor. Somewhat surprisingly, she contests the ground, in a way that many of her peers might find difficult. Let's look at this scene in a little more detail now, from the perspective of Rita and then from the perspective on Frank.

For Rita, the point of the meeting seems to be to establish some kind of solitary relationship with Frank. One of the striking ways she goes about this is to try to share feelings with him; throughout the scene she evaluates objects in and around the room and explicitly invites Frank to join in. In each of the following examples, Rita's evaluations are in bold face, and her invitations to Frank to share her feelings are underlined:

Rita: Well, that's **no good**, is it - always meaning to?

Rita: It's **a fantastic book**, you know. Do you want to lend it?

Rita: Okay, Frank. That's **a nice picture**, isn't it Frank?

Rita: Yes, but with educated people, they **don't worry**, do they?

Rita: What? Yeah. **Was that a joke**?

Rita: I've tried to explain it to me husband, you know. But between you and me I think he's **thick**.

Rita: 'Howard's End'. Sounds **filthy**, doesn't it?

Rita: Oh yeah. **What's it like**?

Rita: I love this room. I love the view from this window. **Do you like it**?

Rita: You're **bleeding mad** you, aren't you?

Rita: But that's only because I'm not you know well you know like **confident** like.

In general terms, Rita's strategy is to build up a relationship with Frank by revealing her feelings, judgements and evaluations to him and inviting

him to react. This is a powerful strategy for building up a relationship with someone, since shared feelings tend to draw people together. Rita uses the meeting to size Frank up; to see what evaluations they might be able to share or not. Subsequently she can draw on what she has learned to develop the relationship. This is part of an orientation to meaning and the negotiation of relationships that Bernstein (e.g., 1975) refers to as positional (see also Hasan 1990).

For his part, in Rita's terms, Frank reveals very little about himself. Up to his parting monologue where he evaluates his appalling teaching and appalling students, he gives no opinions at all. Rather, for Frank, the point of the meeting is to establish himself as a very special kind of individual ("bleeding mad" is Rita's assessment). As a result of this orientation to meaning, when pressed by Rita, Frank appears to hedge and prevaricate. Consider what happens for example when Rita offers him a cigarette:

Rita: Here you are. Do you want one?

Frank: Well I.. I'd like one.

Rita: Yeah, go on.

Frank: No but I.. I.. I promised not to smoke.

Rita: Well, I won't tell anyone.

Frank: Promise?

Rita: I hate smoking on me own. Everyone seems to have packed up these days. All afraid of getting cancer. Bloody cowards.

Compared with Rita, Frank does not answer directly. Note how directly

Rita comes to the point when Frank offers her a seat:

Frank: Would you like to sit down?

Rita: No.

But the more important point here, as far as social class and meaning are concerned, is that by avoiding a direct answer Frank creates an opportunity to personalise his response. He sets himself up as someone who'd like a cigarette but doesn't want one, who's promised not to smoke but would like to, and who will smoke as long as someone promises not to tell. Frank is not just someone accepting a cigarette, in other words; rather he is a naughty boy who just might sneak a fag on the understanding he won't get caught. In constructing this part of his

persona, Frank is presenting himself as something special - a little boy in tutor's clothing.

Consider now the way in which Frank responds to one of Rita's attempts to share feeling:

Rita: I love this room. I love the view from this window. Do you like it?

Frank: I don't often consider it actually. I sometimes get the urge to throw something through it.

Rita: What?

Frank: A student usually.

Rita: You're bleeding mad you, aren't you?

Frank: Probably.

Once again, compared to Rita, Frank's response is indirect. Note how forthcoming Rita is when asked by Frank to evaluate her ability as a hairdresser:

Frank: Are you a good ladies' hairdresser Rita?

Rita: Yeah, I am.

But again, what is significant is that Frank's indirectness gives him the opportunity to reveal something special about himself; not only that he seldom takes any notice of the window, but that, when he does, it is not to admire the view but to amuse himself with the thought of throwing an appalling student through it. So Frank is not just someone who likes nice views; rather, he is in part a raving lunatic, in whose care students are far from secure - a wolf in tweed clothing. Rita responds positively to this individuation, which she obviously finds as appealing as Frank finds her 'Frank' evaluations. In this respect the scene as a whole sets up the Pygmalion love narrative which is constantly suggested throughout the film.

For Frank, Rita's attempts to share feeling are a breath of fresh air blowing through the stodgy halls of academe; for Rita, Frank's construction of a complex and contradictory persona is a novel and intriguing challenge to the frustrating limitations of her life.

The complementarity of Rita and Frank's orientation to meaning is summed up nicely in the following exchange. Rita tries to share feelings

about a picture hanging in Frank's room (in bold face below: *a nice picture, very erotic, look at those tits*); Frank personalises his response (underlined below: *I suppose, I don't think, I suppose*) and takes the opportunity to specialise himself as someone who hasn't looked at the picture in ten years:

Rita: Okay, Frank. That's a nice picture, isn't it Frank?

Frank: Uh yes, I suppose it is.

Rita: It's very erotic.

Frank: Actually I don't think I've looked at that picture in 10 years, but, uh, yes, it is, I suppose so.

Rita: Well, there's no suppose about it. **Look at those tits.** Do you mind me using words like that?

Strikingly, Rita actually takes the step of commenting directly on and resisting Frank's individuation when she says "There's no suppose about it." She then sets off on another tack, probing Frank's reaction to her use of taboo words like *tits*. Rita's challenge to Frank's coding in those exchanges is symbolic of her refusal to comply passively with his positionings of her throughout the film. She's an assertive working class woman; and she wants change.

The film deals with this change in a complex manner, however; this is no simplistic Pygmalion story, even if it constantly threatens to become so. The last part of the film deals with the consequences of choice for someone without the contexts in which to place the choices available. So there is a period of evaluation during which choices are explored in their own terms, uncritically at first, and subsequently accepted or rejected. However, the film also specifies the crucial importance that such choices are available - and that the adoption of one choice over another is left to the individual student.

In one scene Frank, the middle-class lecturer, berates Rita for her uncritical acceptance of what she has learned at the university. This scene is very complex, revealing the problems both characters have in dealing with Rita's increased facility with middle-class language and discourse. Rita visits Frank's home to give him back a copy of his own poems and to tell him that she thinks they are brilliant. For Frank the fact that Rita is so impressed by his heavily allusive poetry spells out her degradation; for him, her descent from the exoticism of the working-class into the

normalcy - and dullness - of the middle-class. She is now just another one of those students he despises. And note that he takes the credit (Henry Higgins like) for the state of her literary critical skills, which he equates with her entire subjectivity. This is a very important point, in view of much of the recent debate about literacy - which is the point at which this paper began.

Frank attributes to Rita almost no agency in the learning process, instead identifying any kind of essential transformation (and note that Frank sees the change as *essential* transformation - hence the Frankenstein reference) as his own work, the (dubious) success of the middle-class educator. Frank is not prepared to acknowledge Rita's autonomy as a working-class woman; to leave her to work out the contradictions within her current positioning for herself. Instead he feels that this product for whom he had such high hopes, this piece of exotica who was his special province, has changed her clothes and her hairstyle - and thereby has lost her history: her culture, her beliefs, her assumptions, the working-class positioning which made her so interesting to him in the first place.

And this is where Frank's notions of essentialism come in. Somehow Rita is no longer essentially exotic (which is to say, working class) because, in adopting some of the mannerisms and learning the discourses and genres of the middle-class, she has somehow lost the first 26 years of her life. In learning some discourses and powerful genres she has lost others or, at least, she has lost the 'essential' innocence and naivety she once had. She is no longer the romantic image of working class exoticism, at once so gratifying and so reassuring to the middle-class; gratifying because that innocence and naivety suggest a greater state of innocence is possible within human society, and reassuring because, given its eminent exploitability, they are not its possessors.

Rita responds by deconstructing this middle-class arrogance on Frank's part, even as he taunts her with what seems to him the poverty of her learning; that she has settled for knowing the right clothes to wear and the right wine to buy. Yet, even as he does this, the viewer is referred back to Rita's agony early in the movie about what to wear to a dinner party hosted by Frank and his partner. Frank's obliviousness to the trauma of that occasion for Rita attested to a class-blindness from which he still suffers. It's not that Rita wants to be middle-class; it's that she doesn't want to be **patronised** by the middle-class. And that's what would have

happened at the party, as she knew well enough not to attend, but which Frank does not understand - and still doesn't.

When Rita tells Frank that she no longer needs him because she knows the manners and habits of the middle class, she is telling him about the class-based nature of the institution in which he works. She is telling Frank that she can now position herself among the middle-class if she wants; she can operate within a middle-class institution without feeling intimidated. And she also tells Frank that he doesn't like it **because** he no longer has power over her, a power he is too class-blind even to recognise. He also does not recognise that an essential part of her exoticism for him was his knowledge of his own social advantage, an advantage which his disaffected manner serves only to emphasise.

And again this argument deconstructs an important aspect of the current debate about education, namely the paternalistic attitude of some middle-class educators, desperate to conserve what they objectify as some kind of working-class essentialism. The question that needs to be asked here is why these educators and commentators should think that they have the power to destroy working class culture through their interventions? In a recent article Stuart Hall wrote of the predisposition of some Marxists "to construct the pure, disembodied essence of the revolutionary proletarian as a substitute for their own distilled moral outrage" (Hall 1988). The same predisposition seems to afflict some educators and commentators, unwilling to make powerful genres and discourses available to the working class in case they lose the innocence and naivety (as it appears within middle class culture) which makes them so charming and so exploitable. But again, why they think that they have the right or the power to make decisions about working class culture and people is a question which remains to be answered.

Frank epitomises this paternalism. It is no accident that he is intertextually related to Henry Higgins. However, there is a sense in which Frank is also correct, as Rita later acknowledges. Rita has accepted much of her middle-class education uncritically, and she realises this when she goes home to find that her flatmate, Trish, an embodiment of middle class 'sophistication', has attempted to commit suicide - because of the emptiness of her life. Rita's subsequent reassessment of her life involves revisiting the working-class area in which she lived and an encounter with Denny (her ex-husband) and his pregnant wife. This

meeting with Denny and his new wife is very friendly and reestablishes Rita's communication with her background; makes its options again available to her. However, as she points out to Frank in one of their final meetings, they are no longer her only options.

Choice is the critical concept in Educating Rita and that is demonstrated very clearly in the final scenes where - frustrating the conventions of romance and comedy, frustrating the intertextual relation with the better known version of Pygmalion, My Fair Lady, frustrating even the conventions of popular film - Rita does not go off to Australia with Frank (the glaring colonialism with which the film ends) to live happily ever after. She stays in England to construct her own life her own way. Of course, that seems to underestimate the problems that Rita undoubtedly will have in any of those choices, as well as the pressures she may experience unconsciously to make a particular choice. However, it would be unwise, as well as paternalistic, to assume that a woman in Rita's position does not appreciate both those problems and potential problems.

As her teacher Frank has made some of those choices available to her, but her actions make it very clear that she does not, therefore, feel tied to Frank and what he represents - as a romantic ending would have argued. In other words, by frustrating the romantic ending, the film rejects the narrative of middle class superiority which would have had Frank leading Rita from the ignominy of her birth (that is, class) to an enriched middle class existence. Instead Rita is shown in a number of contexts, each with their own problems and their own riches - from the poverty of Frank's original cynicism to Denny's delight in his new baby. She now has available to her a number of different choices which she is now able to judge more competently, not to reject or accept uncritically.

Both movies feature a romantic narrative alongside a narrative about education. In Dead Poets' Society the story of Knox's successful wooing of Chris is yet another testament to the power of progressive pedagogy. After all, Keating has told them that one reason for studying literature is that it enables you to "woo women" (thereby, of course, explicitly excluding heterosexual women as students!)<sup>1</sup>) The fact that the class difference between Knox and Chris, between Knox and Chris' former boyfriend, and the power of Knox's upper middle class positioning do not feature in the story but are the elided assumptions on which the narrative rests is indicative of the class-blindness of the pedagogy Knox represents.

The romance of Knox and Chris is classic Mills and Boon, told from the viewpoint of the male character. And Mills and Boon romance, like the 18th and 19th century romance from which it derives, is about class mobility as much as it is about desire - masculine and feminine - and probably about a lot of other things as well (Cranny-Francis 1990). The essential feature of the romance narrative is a hero who is more socially powerful than the heroine, whose status the heroine acquires along with his hand in marriage. It is a fully naturalised narrative of the power of the middle class and its use here reveals the similar naturalisation of a narrative of middle class power in the progressive pedagogy which has so empowered Knox.

In Educating Rita the romance narrative serves a slightly different function. It is the audience-grabbing narrative in this movie aimed at a general audience: the love story is a familiar convention which is certain to please and maintain the involvement of a large audience. And in many ways the personal relationship between Frank and Rita underscores the class relationship. In other words, the greater status and power associated with the masculine in a patriarchal society underscores the greater status and power associated with the middle class in a bourgeois society, both realised in the characterisation of Frank. So the potential romance between Frank and Rita with its naturalised class narrative serves as an ironic counterpoint to Rita's growing familiarity with the class to which (according to romance) a relationship with Frank would give her access. And so it is critically important that Rita rejects this romance and the class narrative it enacts. She will not be positioned by this naturalised bourgeois class narrative with its assumptions about working class inferiority, as well as its recognition of working class powerlessness. The song that Rita sings is a new one - not middle class or working class in any essentialist sense: Rita is an educated working class woman - and the new song she sings is about the choice that she now has.

And that is a choice which the class-blindness of progressivism and many other pedagogies does not confer because, as the deconstruction of the progressive pedagogy characterised in Dead Poets' Society demonstrates, the freedom it espouses is pure polemic, and, as the poem elicited by Keating from Todd Anderson shows, the creativity of progressivism is an exhortation to reproduce a particular (bourgeois) aesthetic. The progressive pedagogy characterised by John Keating in Dead Poets' Society does not give choice because it does not give negotiating skills.

When Rita learns the genres and discourses of the middle-class, she is able to negotiate with middle-class people and institutions; she can no longer be patronised as a piece of exotica.

For Keating's students, however, there is no similar access to negotiating skills because what they have to learn is supposedly within themselves. And yet what that "within yourself" rhetoric conceals is the terrorism of a pedagogy which dictates what should be found within each student; namely, the middle-class sensibility shaped by middle-class culture which it is the aim of this pedagogy to find (that is, construct) in each student. By not making explicit the terms of that construction Keating does not empower his students to do anything other than exploit their class-based privilege - like Nawonda with the working-class girls, or Knox with Chris. But what choice does it offer Neil Perry, a boy whose cultural/class background does not provide that kind of empowerment?

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## On Not Being Homer: Popular Culture in Lower Secondary English

Catherine Beavis

### Homer Who?

Well, in this context, obviously not the Greek one. Or is that opposition quite so inexorable? Popular and Classic texts are sometimes seen as violently antithetical, the one driving the other out, not just of the classroom but of the Culture. I want to argue here, that, on the contrary, far from displacing the world of traditional literary texts, popular ones can work in the English classroom to develop and extend students' understanding and knowledge, both of reading and of texts of all kinds. Work with the popular as part of a spectrum of texts may in fact be one of the best ways to create a framework within which the study of Greek epics, or whichever classics you choose, can be engaging, 'rigorous' and enjoyable. The point is not so much to use the popular as a sort of carrot or gimmick to get students in, as to broaden the study of texts in such a way that the study of any text is genuinely exploratory and pertinent to students' selves and worlds.

Original "readers" of that Homer of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, (he/they himself of somewhat shadowy identity) are not so distant from the readers and audiences of today, in their enjoyment of the pleasures and perils of popular narrative. The relationship of those stories and their ideologies to the communal history and individual subjectivities of those initial listeners is not much different from that which obtains for viewers/listeners/readers of contemporary texts today. The Homer of popular culture for most viewers, however, is not the classical Greek!

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