

## MULTIPLE SELVES IN LITERARY INTERPRETATION: ENGAGEMENT AND THE LANGUAGE OF DRAMA

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*What they don't understand about birthdays and what they never tell you is that when you're eleven, you're also ten, and nine, and eight, and seven, and six, and five, and four, and three, and two, and one. . . . Because the way you grow old is kind of like an onion or like the rings inside a tree trunk or like my little wooden dolls that fit one inside the other, each year inside the next one. That's how being eleven years old is (Cisneros, 1991, pp. 6-7).*

Much of what Cisneros says about aging can be applied to drama and the potential for interpreting literature, because what people do not always understand about drama and reading is the constant layering of self upon self that occurs in the interpretation of character. Actors and readers shift back and forth between multiple selves—between self and character, other actors, characters, and audience members. These shifts require much interpretation and negotiation, for to cast oneself in the space and time of others (whether the other be standing in reality or fantasy) calls for a continual crossing of boundaries. Anthropologists (Turner, 1990; Turnbull, 1990) define these moments of crossing as “liminal states” which have less to do with being in between worlds than engaging in and transforming two or more worlds at once.

Here we discuss drama as a medium for text interpretation that enables readers to enter and alter the multiple worlds of literary and personal experiences. Our examples and analyses of drama-based responses to literature are drawn from the responses of NRC members to an alternative symposium designed not only for the facilitators to explain dramatic possibilities, but for the participants to enact individual and group interpretations. Participants worked to describe and improvise on their personal responses to the story “Eleven” (Cisneros, 1991) into agreed-upon group scenes. As facilitators, we proposed different contexts through which they could converse with the story’s characters and consider the perspectives of a larger community of characters implied by the story. After the improvisational work, we provided metacommentary that focused on the educational importance of drama—moving a private experience into a public domain (Enciso 1993/1994; O’Neill & Rogers, 1991) and language that weaves through and surrounds dramatic creations (Wolf, 1994, 1995).

Three central themes cut across our work: (a) many voices/multiple perspectives, (b) negotiated action, and (c) alternative symbolic systems. In the first theme, the word “voices” captures the dialogic nature of the creation of meaning (Bakhtin, 1981), whereas the word “perspectives” emphasizes the necessity of shifting roles, attitudes, and motivations to create a dramatic world (Stanislavski, 1949). Quite often today, and particularly in school, there is a *single* voice that takes center stage—either that of the teacher or the text to be interpreted—and it is a voice that is privileged above others (Heath, 1990; Hiebert & Fisher, 1991). In emphasizing *many* voices and perspectives, privilege is distributed across myriad perspectives and articulated by a multiplicity of voices (Bruner, 1986). In this NRC session, the participants were asked to take on alternative roles—from teacher, to student, to colleague, to actor, to character. The strength here lies not simply in a human being’s ability to take on a particular role effectively, but in the importance and possibility of roles in general. Shifting from one role to another—taking on a range of alternatives from the multiple perspectives and voices available—teaches not only about that role but about the self. Bateson (1982) calls this deuterio-learning: “learning about the self which results in a *change in the self*” (p. 4).

The second theme is that of negotiated action. The word “action” is not limited to physical movement, but implies mental action. Wertsch (1991) explains:

When action is given analytic priority, human beings are viewed as coming into contact with, and creating, their surroundings as well as themselves through the actions in which they engage. . . . This contrasts . . . with approaches that treat the individual primarily as a passive recipient of information from the environment. . . . (p. 8)

In stressing action, we move from the transmission of meaning to the generation of meaning. The participants in this session were not asked to accept information passively, but to create meaning actively—not only to take on multiple perspectives and voices, but to mingle and merge their roles with others in order to solve real problems in text interpretation. Thus the word “negotiated” indicates that the voices of varying perspectives must enter into a dialogic relationship, as actors work together to discuss, dispute, challenge, and confirm each other’s suggestions for text interpretation. In negotiated action the mind is viewed as something that “extends beyond the skin.” As Wertsch suggests, mental action is “often socially distributed and it is connected to the notion of mediation” (p. 14).

The third point is the use of alternative symbolic systems for problem solving in text interpretation. In today’s schooling there is a strong verbocentric emphasis—especially on specific language genres such as classroom oral question-and-answer discussions, test questions, and teacher talk (Cazden, 1988). Although Harste (1991) explains that “*Voice* for whole-language educators encompasses alternate sign systems, including language, art, music, math, and more” (p. 386), acknowledgment of the importance of physicalization in meaning-making is still rare. Yet, reliance on verbal interpretation often limits the reader’s response, for meaning is not solely dependent on speech (Hickman, 1983; Wolf & Heath, 1992). In dramatic enactments, the possibilities for expression expand. The variety of speech genres available broaden to include debate, personal narratives, and directives on the part of the children and not just the teacher. But beyond this verbal expansion is the spread of meaning mak-

ing into alternative symbolic systems—art, gesture, drama, and music as participants interpret text simultaneously through multiple channels. This expansion has the potential to sweep more children into its broad embrace—children whose learning styles and cultural backgrounds or initial state in learning English as a second language may know much more than they can effectively verbalize in response to teacher-directed questions (Wolf, 1993).

### *Setting the Scene*

Plans for the shared drama work were based on the drama structures described by drama educators O'Neill and Lambert (1982), Heathcote (1984), and Edmiston (1993). The use of dramatic structures such as tableaux, frame, improvised dialogue, and overheard conversations allow readers to depict and critique both the personal and social meanings they experience during reading. For example, an individual participant may have aligned primarily with one character on her own. Yet, through participation in and conversation about the drama, she may begin to see why she followed a certain perspective and what other perspectives might be considered.

The agenda for our session was designed to involve NRC researchers in the processes and products of drama-based literary interpretation. We began with an oral reading of "Eleven," the story of Rachel, a young girl who is humiliated when her teacher suggests that an old, abandoned sweater is hers. Rachel insists that the sweater is not hers, but the teacher makes her put it on. It is Rachel's 11th birthday, and although she tries to project herself beyond the degrading moment to home where a party and loving parents await, the ugliness and stench of the sweater trap her in classroom constraints. She bursts into tears. Through this incident, Rachel realizes that although she is 11, she is simultaneously a much younger child—and that it is life's moments, not the accumulation of years, that determine your age and how you act.

Following the reading, we asked the participants to sketch an image symbolic of their response to a character or scene in the story and then share that image with a partner. Participants subsequently entered into "drama conversations"—small groups which engaged in an improvisation among (a) children directly mentioned in the story, (b) teachers suggested by the story's setting, or (c) other adults implied by a character's references to people they knew and cared about. After sharing these conversations with the group, one facilitator (Pat) took on the role of a newspaper editor who assigned the participants to two groups: Group A were reporters investigating the attitudes and experiences of Group B, parents, children, teachers, and others associated with the local school. The editor explained that there had been some negative reports from some of the parents and school board members, and that the paper wanted to run a series of articles on the conflicts involved. Following the interviews, the reporters described their findings to the editor. Finally, the participants were asked to write a response to the story. They could write as a reporter, as a person interviewed, as a character in the story, or as themselves based on any one of the dramatic experiences in which they had been engaged. Lines from these writings were then shared in an unrehearsed group reading.

During the sessions, we acted as facilitators and observers, laying out the guidelines for the activities and then taking fieldnotes on the resultant scenes. At the end of

the session, we both made closing comments analyzing what we had seen and how the patterns that emerged in this session were similar or dissimilar to other drama groups we had studied. We also collected the participants' drawings and writings for later analysis.

In planning the session, we made many changes from the agenda in our initial proposal. We tried to keep the question "What will NRC members be willing to do?" in the forefront of our planning and we were led to this question by the reviewer comments on the proposal. Although our reviewers were positive and congratulated us on "delving into new territory," they also cautioned us about going too far. With regard to the question "What is the evidence that the work will be presented in an engaging format?" one reviewer wrote, "For those who like creative drama, they will be pleased. Others may have difficulty." Another reviewer wrote, "Much [evidence], perhaps too much for NRC at this point, though I support their effort." Later, this same reviewer wrote, "Somehow I can't picture a lot of stodgy educational researchers creating tableaux."

We had planned to have participants engage in tableaux (staging single moments of the story where character and scene is revealed through eye gaze, stance, and frozen gesture) as well as have the participants cut out figures, props, and/or scenes from construction paper, but we ultimately eliminated these activities fearing that we might stretch beyond the bounds of what the participants would be willing to do. Our e-mail conversations reflect our struggle to create an engaging session without disengaging our participants:

I agree that the paper cutting can make people feel a little weird, if they think they're supposed to be beyond paper and scissors. But having some image is an important touchstone for recalling or revisiting one's connection with the story (11/11/93—Pat).

I, too, see the ridiculous aspects of people thinking they're too old to cut and paste, but what can we do? I have my graduate students illustrate scenes from fairy tales using only torn paper. They are so resistant at first and then they "get into it". . . . But I don't think we have time for the resistance (11/12/93—Shelby).

In retrospect, we feel that we could have had more faith in our participants, for no "stodgy educational researchers" showed up. The participants, like the many students we have worked with over the years, seemed quite willing to leave their current positions as well as ages behind, letting the moment and the momentum of the activity determine how they would act.

### *Private Experience to Public Domain*

I hate Mrs. Price. She made me look so stupid today. She put that germy, moth-eaten sweater on my desk and made me put my arms in it. I wanted to die. It scratched and made me feel dirty all over.

. . . I remember feeling the same burning hurt in a classroom, only the teacher did not cause the . . . pain, but a very pretty girl in an angora sweater as soft as angels' clouds, pink and luscious, and she looked at my socks and laughed—and I remember holding back the tears until I got in the bathroom and never wanted to come out. I was eleven also. . . .

Standing in two worlds, Rachel's and her own, one participant (Meg) wrote of the

pain of parallel situations. The “I” of character and the “I” of self seem to hold a conversation saying, “I know you. We’ve met before,” creating an analogy of ages and sensations.

As Meg shared her writing, she was able to move her private experience into the public domain—a common phenomenon in creative dramatics, for as Grumet (1988) reminds us drama “makes comprehension palpable.” As adults and experienced readers, the participants spent very little time on typical comprehension questions (Who was the main character? What was her problem? How was it resolved?), nor were they asked to respond to known-answer information questions (Heath, 1982). Instead, their comprehension emerged from the multilayered contexts for their interpretations. Meg, for example, drew on her own vivid childhood memory to express her understanding of and empathy for Rachel’s viewpoint. For all of the participants, Rachel’s story was not a static set of events to be recalled and restated, it became, rather, a shared experience that enabled many stories to be told and many interpretations to be revealed.

Picking up on subtle hints in the story of Rachel’s close relationship with her parents, another participant (Kate) assumed that Rachel would tell her mother of the incident and that her mother would take action to defend her daughter. Playing the maternal role, Kate called for a special parent/teacher conference outside the twice-yearly meetings. In the ensuing scene, Kate said, “I’m aware that you can’t keep up with all the birthdays . . . but Rachel was crying yesterday and it was her birthday.” In this statement, Kate named the main character as well as alluded to the central conflict and theme. More important, she used this information to challenge the teacher’s practice.

The participant playing the teacher in this conference (Tina) countered with her own view of the situation. As teacher, Tina suggested that Rachel should “speak up” and that she was “frankly, at [her] wits end [trying] to keep track of each child’s needs.” Furthermore, Tina insisted that Rachel wants “to be so grown up and the next minute she acts like she’s three years old.” The teacher’s perspective is one that is only hinted at, for the story is told from Rachel’s point of view. Still, by looking at the situation from the teacher’s stance, Tina was able to refer to her experiences of what it means to be a teacher and extend the author’s portrayal with her own set of understandings, motivations, and intentions. Her shift in perspective allowed her to see potential meanings and realign, at least momentarily, her personal feelings about certain characters. Not only did she employ character and plot information in setting up her position, but she used the language of the story to suggest that Rachel sometimes “acts like she’s three years old.” Whereas Rachel had used this same language to explain moments of despair, the teacher used it to highlight Rachel’s immaturity. Tina, thus, took the words of the story and reshaped them into a new and quite probable perspective—one that reflected and extended the teacher’s attitude toward Rachel.

The educators in the session participated in the dramas with a double awareness: they did not like the teacher but they have stood in her place among children and know how easy it is to overlook or misinterpret children’s actions and words. Rachel’s teacher was consistently portrayed as a detached, impatient person, for whom few had any sympathy. Sara stated, “I hated the feeling of the teacher’s power. [She was] so callous.” Yet, the drama conversations challenged the participants to consider her point of view. As participants “became” the teacher, they tested the range of her power

and callousness and reflected on their own interactions with children and parents. This challenge encouraged participants to relate their personal knowledge of schools and teaching with the “burning hurt” felt by Rachel and the impatience expressed by her teacher. Sam’s response reflects this complex interrelationship among perspectives:

School can be such a painful place. It is filled with booby traps and potholes. The tiniest nudge in the wrong direction and you’re in big trouble. Kids are transparent, layered onions—sometimes opaque. But we are all those layers of people we’ve been.

Sam’s comment not only reveals his empathy with Rachel and children in general, but again uses the specific language of the story to make his point. Sam had, in fact, been intrigued by Cisneros’ use of the onion image, which he pointed out verbally to his group and later incorporated into his own writing.

In general, drama conversations displayed similar solidarity with Rachel. In one scene, two participants played children discussing the day’s events:

Sara: This happened to me, too. The teacher is always trying to blame things on kids. I want to gang up on her. We could write a note.

Dana: We ought to organize and get the other kids together.

Sara: It’s just not fair, especially when it’s her birthday.

Interestingly enough, there are no textual clues for this conversation. Rachel does mention two classmates, but only in terms of her dislike for them. Still, the participants were so involved with Rachel that they gave her pals—comrades who would “organize” to protect Rachel and “gang up” on her enemies.

Another participant (Bess) made a sketch which displayed a sweater with lightly penciled frowning-face patterns across it. The numbers 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 flew from the neck of the sweater as well as a voice bubble saying “Not mine.” From the side of the page another voice bubble stated “Put it on.” The central positioning of the sweater and its downcast pattern highlights Rachel’s perspective. The numbers represent the many ages Rachel feels she stores inside her and they erupt in the story’s situation. The words “Not mine” are the only words Rachel can muster in the face of her teacher’s command, and like the ages, they emanate from inside the sweater. The teacher’s words, though important, are off to the side, for Rachel’s words and feelings are more central to this reader’s experience of the story.

The sketches and drama conversations enabled the participants to reflect on and recirculate their complex private experiences in a public context that encouraged further development of their imaginative engagement with the story. Engagement in reading refers to the intense involvement we experience as we visualize, move through, and sometimes become a part of the world of story. For literary theorists (Benton, 1992; Rosenblatt, 1991), the reader’s imaginative creation of the story world is the text on which any further discussion or critique must be based. The difficulty for educators is finding mediums of expression that maintain and extend the many possible links readers have made with the characters, setting, and their own sense of self. Our work, and the work of other drama educators, describes the potential of drama to move readers across the boundaries of personal and public experiences and interpretations of stories. Drama experiences encourage readers to use their visual, visceral,

personal engagement with the story to make it more vivid and accessible for interpretation. In addition, drama structures ensure that their interpretations are immediately used and acted upon so that more topics, images, attitudes, and perspectives can be shared and explored.

### *Language of Drama*

Dramatic language is often signaled by choices of intonation and accent. Actors decide which words to soften and which to emphasize to communicate the subtext of their lines. Vygotsky (1986) describes the subtext as the message beneath the words; how one says something can drastically alter its meaning. Dramatic language also extends beyond what can be accomplished verbally to include other sign systems—gesture, eye gaze, use of props, sets, and costumes. All of these dramatic languages (or ways of telling the story) weave through the presentation, sending communicative messages to the audience.

Although our participants had no sets or costumes, they made much use of the other available languages in delivering their interpretations. They experimented with accents, facial expressions, and even small props. For example, when Tina played the defensive teacher, she held her body erect with her chin held high, her mouth pursed. She stressed the words “wit’s end” and “three years old” her voice rising to match her frustration. Later, however, when she played Rachel being interviewed by a newspaper reporter, Tina slouched down in her seat, her chin on her chest and mumbled her responses through her down-turned mouth. In one instance, she was teacher, in another she was Rachel—and her body position, her vocal change from high pitch to low mumble, and the shift in the set of her mouth all signaled the transformation of character.

Accents as well as use of colloquial terms and job-related vocabulary were also key in establishing character. When Pat as editor stood commandingly to give her reporters their new assignment, she spoke in a clipped style, her voice deepening. “No photos,” she cautioned as she sent them on their way. One of the participants, Sara, picked up her papers and pen and strode purposefully across the room to intercept Meg. “Excuse me, Ma’am. May I interview you?” Sara began, and explained her newspaper’s desire to do a series of articles on the “recent events” in the local school. Meg rapidly responded, “Certainly. I’m a real estate agent and I’ve got mixed reports.” She proudly suggested that she had “recently sold a \$300,000 house in the area” and was quite knowledgeable about the schools. As Meg provided information on the “problems in the schools,” Sara often politely interrupted to clarify points, “Now are you speaking of . . . or are you saying something different.” Sara diligently took notes and continued to call Meg “ma’am” throughout the interview.

In another interview, Bess played the principal of the school and immediately began by telling Dana, the reporter, that she wanted the conversation “off the record.” Bess had a different vision of the community than one that might have \$300,000 houses, describing many of the parents as “ones on welfare, ones without their green card.” She felt that some of the recent happenings in her school had to do with “racial issues” which may have been why she was so sensitive about where her words would go. When Dana returned to report to her editor, she grimaced as she explained the principal’s insistence on being “off the record.” Dana suggested that the principal had

“seemed pretty firm about this.” Another reporter, hearing Dana’s explanation, rolled her eyes, while the editor curtly nodded as if this was to be expected.

The gestures, expressions, accents, and intonations all constitute language used in the drama, but there is also language that surrounds the drama. This language is marked by mental state verbs as players express their thoughts. As the participants explained their sketches or discussed their dramatic activities, their language was replete with verbs which highlighted their thinking: “It reminded me of the time . . .,” “It struck me . . .,” “I still remember . . .,” “I can hardly imagine . . .,” “I suspect that given what I know about now . . .,” “I need to know . . .,” and predominately, “I think . . .” The “I” in these partial phrases are the personal viewpoints of the participants. Yet, because they were involved in moving into other perspectives than their own—taking on new roles and thoughts—their own thinking shifted as a result. As Dana wrote:

It’s so hard to know what it might be to be 11 years old. This process of stepping into multiple perspectives has taken me farther and farther from Rachel and her experience and it becomes clearer in the larger picture how many perspectives are networked to Rachel.

Although understanding is uniquely situated in the individual, interpretive reading also implies an ability to shift roles and voices and take on the perspective of others. Bakhtin (in Holquist, 1990) argues that a dialogue between perspectives is necessary to the understanding both of self and others and refers to the interlocative self which “can change places with another—that *must*, in fact, change places to see where it is” (p. xxvi).

The critical possibilities of language surrounding drama were not fully explored in this session. The dramatic activities were quick improvisations, with little time for analysis and no time for rehearsal. Although there was some negotiation, most of it consisted of polite concessions to others (“You choose”). When Meg introduced herself as a “real estate agent,” Sara had to base her interview on Meg’s character, just as Meg had to respond to Sara’s clarifying questions. There was no opportunity to verbally negotiate their choices; each had to fit into the flow of decision making. As Sam explained, “I said whatever I thought,” leaning on what made sense in the moment.

Given time, however, the language which surrounds drama often involves more analytical talk about character motivation and intention, hypothetical “if . . . then” statements, and negotiated decision-making, as well as self assessment as actors evaluate their choices. But this occurs in long-term projects such as the formal staging of a play (Wolf, 1995). Fast-moving improvisation calls for much of the language of problem solving that would normally surround the drama to go underground—decisions are made, but rarely voiced.

## CONCLUSION

In this NRC session, participants engaged in, united, and transformed the worlds of story interpretation, group negotiation, dramatic enactment, and metaanalysis through language and art. The session was an introduction to dramatic possibilities in response to literature and an enacted reminder of the continual cognitive and socially

constructed nature of reading and its dramatic interpretation. To engage in a text world and shift into the language of a new character requires an analysis of ways of talking, moving, and relating to others in the world. In drama, this analysis becomes a set of characteristics that the actor dons along with the costume. But the actor cannot slip into a character with the ease of slipping on a coat; the process is more arduous and requires multiple decisions. The coat of characterization is a coat of many colors, and the colors shift and change in different lights. Thus, the words of the text are surrounded by the words, gestures, and designs of other actors and readers. Talk swirls into, through, and beyond the text, which is only a prop for the multiple narratives the actors have to tell.

However, in our own research and in the research we read, we find that children (as well as NRC members) are rarely given an opportunity to try on the multiple perspectives available in dramatic interpretation. Drama (as many of the arts) is seen as an extracurricular rather than a central activity (Gardner, 1989). Yet, the continual cognitive activity involved in drama—the engagement, the personal and negotiated interpretations of story, the shifts in perspective, the extensive problem solving, and the use of multiple symbolic systems—aligns well with current theory which regards literacy as active, strategic, and social in nature. Literacy is not confined to the boundaries of a book, but spills off the page and into the life of the reader.

In the end of Cisneros' (1991) story, Rachel is able to get rid of the sweater, but she is unable to abandon her feelings about the painful situation of school; she wants to be "far away like a runaway balloon, like a tiny o in the sky, so tiny-tiny you have to close your eyes to see it." Yet, as NRC members and literacy educators we should work not to distance children, but to gather in their ideas, actions, and emotions. To do so, we will need to open our own eyes to alternative possibilities—acknowledging that to engage in and talk about text requires dramatic ways of moving between the multiple worlds that are available both outside of and within ourselves.

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