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## *Teaching English*

### **The Magazine of the National Association for the Teaching of English (NATE)**

#### **‘To link (vb): to make, form, or suggest a connection with or between’**

*Clare Lawrence, John Rimmer and Clare Mahon*

I cannot be the only one to feel heartened (and perhaps a tiny bit smug) by the narratives about the relevance of the curriculum being put out by parents who have come up against it due to home schooling during Covid lockdown. These parents have now, in some relief, sent their children back into school, but they are aware of the lack of connection of much of what is taught in those schools as never before. They know now that enjoying a book and feeling it speaks to you is ‘no good’ if you don’t keep the necessary Assessment Objectives in mind; they know that the form of a poem (and the technical language needed to describe this) is so often perceived by the GCSE pupil as far ‘more important’ than the personal relevance of its content.

As a teacher educator I struggle always to support our trainees to understand that they are teachers of English, not teachers of GCSE English. Supporting them to make connection for their pupils between the texts they teach and their pupils’ lives and experiences can be difficult. Traditionally, we do so by starting with the text. ‘I’m teaching Dickens this term; what do my pupils know that might bring this alive for them?’

During the enforced isolation of January 2021 a small group of us – a teacher and two teacher educators – took on an informal investigation to see if we could turn this the other way round. What, we considered, would happen if we started with the absolute present, and made connections outwards? Throughout the month we asked a supporter to email us a news article each day and each emailed back a response to the story in the form of an artefact. This could be text based, literary or not, or visual. We did not share our response with each other until the month had finished, so there was no perception of a ‘right response’ in any of us.

The resulting artefacts from just one day – picked blindly and at random – are discussed here. The news item (12<sup>th</sup> January) was the report that the Irish government had apologised over the mother-and-baby homes scandal, where the babies of unmarried women were forcibly separated from their mother and where many died. The responses to this item are given under.

**Response 1:**

So I I I I I I I I I I  
Hey, I have something to say, will you wait for me?  
It's nothing heavy, nothing bad  
It's something I wish I could say every day but I can't  
Now that I'm trying to say it, my face is turning red  
I'm curious what your reaction will be  
I've been pushing this and pushing this and what I'm trying to say is  
So I I I I I I I I I I  
So I I I I I I I I I I  
...  
I love you, that's what I wanted to tell you  
I love you, that's what I wanted to tell you

[From Vinxen – (English Translation)]

We were struck by the report that this song expresses the love of a child for a parent. Our initial assumption was that it was peer/peer love, and we agreed that we had experienced a similar assumed positionality with the news story by identifying with the mothers who had their children removed rather than with the babies themselves. The protagonist in the song did not say 'I love you' to his parents when he was a child; it is something he can only say (but struggles to say) now he is an adult. This was a luxury the children in the story did not receive. They did not get to be the demanding toddler or the grumpy teenager who can be loved when seemingly unlovable and give that love back later. In this way, all elements of the relationship are lost, not just that between mother and baby. The singer asks, 'Will you wait for me?' and this too was denied to these parents. The singer articulates how he was embarrassed by love when he was younger. This is particularly poignant when a separated child may have a real need to express love to the missing parent but have no conduit.

We made a connection between the song and Causley's *Eden Rock*, with the revisiting to younger parents when the child is mature. Parents have become the shadowy figures to children who were relocated, torn apart. The stammering has an element of straining to articulate, of being embarrassed, but perhaps also an element of being silenced.

## Response 2



What we felt was striking in this image is that the father is absent, is 'clouded out'. Fathers were also absent in the news story. The image retains the mother, although she is faded. The baby is floating, flowing, being 'carried away'. We felt that the figures on the LH side of the image are/were angels. They brandish what appears to be a bloody punishment rod: they are casting judgements. The hoods are reminiscent of the Klu Klux Klan; there is powerful self-justification implied in that they feel that they have right in their actions,

however wrong they may be. The hoods were lifted from paintings by Philip Guston and make the figures sinister – religious, perverse and dangerous.

There are elements remaining in the picture of an Idyllic garden of Eden. The baby is carried away (banished) but does not appear distressed and almost seems to be waving. There is something horrific about its innocence in this context.

### **Response 3:**

Farewell, thou child of my right hand, and joy;  
My sin was too much hope of thee  
To have so soon 'scap'd world's and flesh's rage,  
Rest in soft peace

[From *On my first sonne* by Ben Jonson]

This farewell is addressed to a child who has died, which was sadly another frequent fate for the babies in the homes. We discussed the use of the word 'sin' and the tendency for a parent to feel guilt over the death of a child, even when there is no need. We felt that the poem was a way of giving the Irish mothers a voice of farewell that had otherwise been silenced.

We were interested in the imagery of 'right hand'. We felt that the poem is very masculine, being by a father about his son and capturing echoes of status, of being on the 'right hand of the Father' and wanting to have a 'right hand man'. The news story, in contrast, is very feminine.

We were particularly struck by the word 'joy'. There is no sense of joy in pregnancy and birth in the news story, only of a sense of shame and punishment. We discussed how Satan's punishment when banished was to '*no longer* look upon the face of God'; perhaps the true grief of loss could only happen after the joy of nurturing a life has been experienced. Childbirth is positioned culturally as a joyful time, a time of looking forward. The poet, though, had 'too much hope...'

Having discussed our various responses as articulated through the three artefacts, we decided to look across them to see if themes emerged. The most powerful of these, we felt, was that of **Guilt, shame and Regret**. The protagonist in the song regrets not telling his parents he loved them when he was younger, and the poet acknowledges 'sin'. There were also overtones of punishment and retribution throughout, with the stick in the picture and the 'rage' of the world and flesh in the poem. This links to the prevalence of **Religious imagery**, seen in the Nativity scene with its tree echoing crucifixion, the river carrying Moses away and the echo of 'if your right hand offends you, cut it off' with the casting away of what is blighted or cankerous. A perversion of religion is captured in the visual reference to the Klu Klux Klan although there was some softening of this in the acceptance of the poet's final blessing: 'Rest in soft peace'

Also of interest was the theme of **the masculine and the feminine**. The masculine figure in the painting has been blotted out and the masculine appears to be absent also from the news story. However, we felt strongly that the authority figures implied in the news report were male. Interestingly we took the protagonist in the song to be male without knowing the gender of the singer. It is a song from a boy to his parents, just as the poem is from a father to a son. Even in a story which is very clearly about the anguish of women, our responses tended to remain male-dominated and we regretted that the silenced voice of the mothers in the homes remained silenced in our responses. This had an interesting echo in the stammering of the song and the struggle to get words out.

Finally, we felt that there was a strong theme of **love** emerging from our response to this story. Although a story of destruction and suffering, we each sought a way to articulate the underlying love that makes the story so painful.

We, certainly, found plenty to connect with and thoroughly enjoyed our discussions – not least as an antidote to the isolation and inertia of lockdown. We expressed how, when we first heard this news story, it left us feeling moved but helpless, unable to articulate or even to understand what our response should be. Providing the artefacts, the discussion of these with each other and the themes that we felt emerged gave us clarity about our reactions to the story. It allowed us to connect with it.

It is unlikely that a group of Year 9s would respond in quite this way, but nonetheless we feel that this approach is worth trialling. They, too, have their own narratives and connections, and we feel that it is important to recognise the importance of these, and how these can support young people to contextualise the world they live in. Perhaps, given this approach, they may find connections to the literature we share with them, or may come to understand that literature better through articulating their own responses. We are seeking Ethics Committee clearance to trial this technique with our teacher trainees in the hope that the experience of making connections and exploring ideas in this way may encourage them to use something similar in their classrooms. We look forward to sharing our results.

[1,760 words]

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