

QCR52C Assignment 3: Essay on a topic of interest in literature teaching (Individual)

Title: Literature *Matters*: Materialist Literature Pedagogy

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Literature *Matters*: Materialist Literature Pedagogy

*Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I'll dig with it.*
-- Seamus Heaney, "Digging"

*Perhaps having dealt in things,
Surfeited on them,
Their spirits yearn again for images,*
-- Edwin Thumboo, "Ulysses by the Merlion"

Rationale

Literature is perceived as a lofty subject that spurns Singapore's pragmatist principles (Poon & Choo, 2015). In contrast to Thumboo's assertion, Literature's yearning "for images" appears to burden today's Literature educators. How should I introduce Literature to a new generation, one that utilises a new set of world-creating and -mediating objects?

One answer lies in Literature's material turn. Could we "dig" with the "pen", as Heaney suggests? In a course reading, aptly titled "Teaching so it matters", Smith and Wilhelm recount a perceived "disconnect between the schoolish and the toolish" (2010, p. 56). Borrowing from developments within the social sciences and humanities, I ask: what possibilities arise if we tilt Smith and Wilhelm's focus – and teach Literature's *matter*?

Relevant readings

I engage Materialism through two interrelated strands: regarding pedagogy, I refer to 19th century object lessons; for critical theory, I draw upon the 20th century material turn in the humanities, which later develops into New Materialist approaches. I provide an annotated bibliography in **Annex A**.

Material culture leans upon Hegelian and Marxist approaches to studying the object (Miller, 2010). The field traverses anthropology, archaeology and (art) history: disciplines where knowledge is derived from systematic interaction with objects. One early proponent, Jules Prown, defined material culture in 1982 as “the study through artifacts of the beliefs—values, ideas, attitudes and assumptions—of a particular ... society” (p. 1). This echoes the 19th century object lesson, where students systematically considered an object’s physical qualities before eliciting its abstract qualities (Sengupta, 2003). This principle endures today through Jean Piaget’s cognitive development theories (Tan et al., 2017).

Contemporary anthropologist Daniel Miller further advocates a radical reconsideration of how objects socialise people. In Miller’s view, objects do not merely reflect our beliefs but agentially constitute the very “environment that habituates and prompts us.” (2010, n.p.). In other words, “objects make people” (Miller, 2010, n.p.). New Materialism extends this dissolution of a subject/object distinction by proposing new concepts, including entanglement, to describe relationality (Hodder, 2012).

Recommendations for classroom application

Drama: Situated knowledge

I explored the potential of process drama in a previous QCR52B assignment. Indeed, materialist pedagogy offers a conduit for students' "natural ability to create imaginary situations" (Bowell & Heap, 2013, p. 2). For example, Bowell and Heap advocate using "signs" as one of six principles of drama planning, including providing "artefacts and personal items" to help "bring significance[,] direct the learners' attention and help them to explore actively" (2013, p. 13). Props enhance process drama by encouraging improvisation through material possibilities. Yet, teachers should go further by resisting the Saussurean implications of the "sign" that views objects *primarily* as signs and symbols.

Instead, teachers must recognise that objects physically shape and set boundaries for play. For instance, the tilted wooden stage in the National Theatre's *Macbeth* (2018) not only symbolises Macbeth's transgression of social order through regicide, it physically necessitates Macbeth's uphill struggle as he runs against the parade of Banquo's descendants and, therefore, his fate.

Figure 1

National Theatre's *Macbeth* (2018)



Instead of using tableau to illustrate the scene with Ben's failed prata-making in Desmond Sim's *Perfecting Pratas*, I would task students to perform a modified conscience alley. Here, Albert and Ben's hopes and doubts would confront them while they literally labour away at the stubborn, floury, oily mixture with the agency both to frustrate and (later in the play) to gel in its inherent stickiness. By utilising objects to structure student play within dramatic conventions, students generate situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988). They personally experience the tense intractability of familial relations *from* the prop, rather than from received, abstract, thematic knowledge.

Place-Based Literature

Materialist pedagogy encourages students' development of critical spatial competencies and their understanding of the interrelationship of text and place (Chew, 2020; Whitehead & Tang, 2013). Teachers should direct students to encounter the space around them and understand how these spaces shape and socialise them. In Singapore's housing spaces, for instance, Chew notes that a "forbidding aesthetic" is encountered in "rigid, linear and tessellated" spaces (2020, p. 269). By directing students to record their sensory reactions to these spaces, they can then move toward the abstractions of theme: appreciating how spaces shape the "symbolic-emotional experience[s]" of marginalisation and conformity (Chew, 2020, p. 270).

Such work is especially necessary for place-based literature. Vis-à-vis Miller, teachers should create analogous spaces for students to appreciate how geography shapes text: for schools in the North, a visit to Kranji would have heightened my appreciation of my A-level text, Graham Swift's *Waterland*, set in Cambridgeshire's maddeningly flat fenlands. If students reading William Wordsworth's "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" cannot visit the

quietly magnificent Lake District, perhaps an out-of-classroom lesson within the school's more contemplative spaces would better situate their readings.

Teaching World Literature

Lastly, materialist pedagogy enables students to grapple with World Literature's vast scope and tenuous cultural relevance (Choo, 2020), particularly as Singapore's syllabus adopts World Literature's impetus to read globally without adopting its organising rubrics. Hella Rose Bloom offers a reading strategy resembling a Prownian approach, urging teachers to devote attention to how situated objects, such as *erhu*'s in America, can index the negotiation of diasporic subjectivity (2013). Teachers should attend to the unfamiliarity of the *Mahjong* set in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, for instance, rather than skim past it. Indeed, Bloom argues that careful attention to the origins of objects and their situated meanings allow us to root abstract conceptual encounters within "the material realm", in a way that enables "concrete political understanding" (2013, p. 166).

Extending this notion with Miller, teachers should also attend to the transnational circulation of texts themselves, particularly for texts which spark discussions about colonisation and globalisation. Ironically, a "narrow focus" on a received object can inspire new and surprising insights (Ulrich et al., 2021, p. 3). By directing students to the material text they hold, such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *The River Between*, teachers can elicit questions about the publisher (likely Penguin), the language (English) and the context of reading (Cambridge examinations in a former British colony). By *not* ignoring the edition notice and other paratexts, students can better understand Ngũgĩ's own dilemma about writing in English; appreciating the complexities of Waiyaki's unfettered belief in the colonial god of Education, and more empathetically approaching fraught narratives of "progress" and "development".

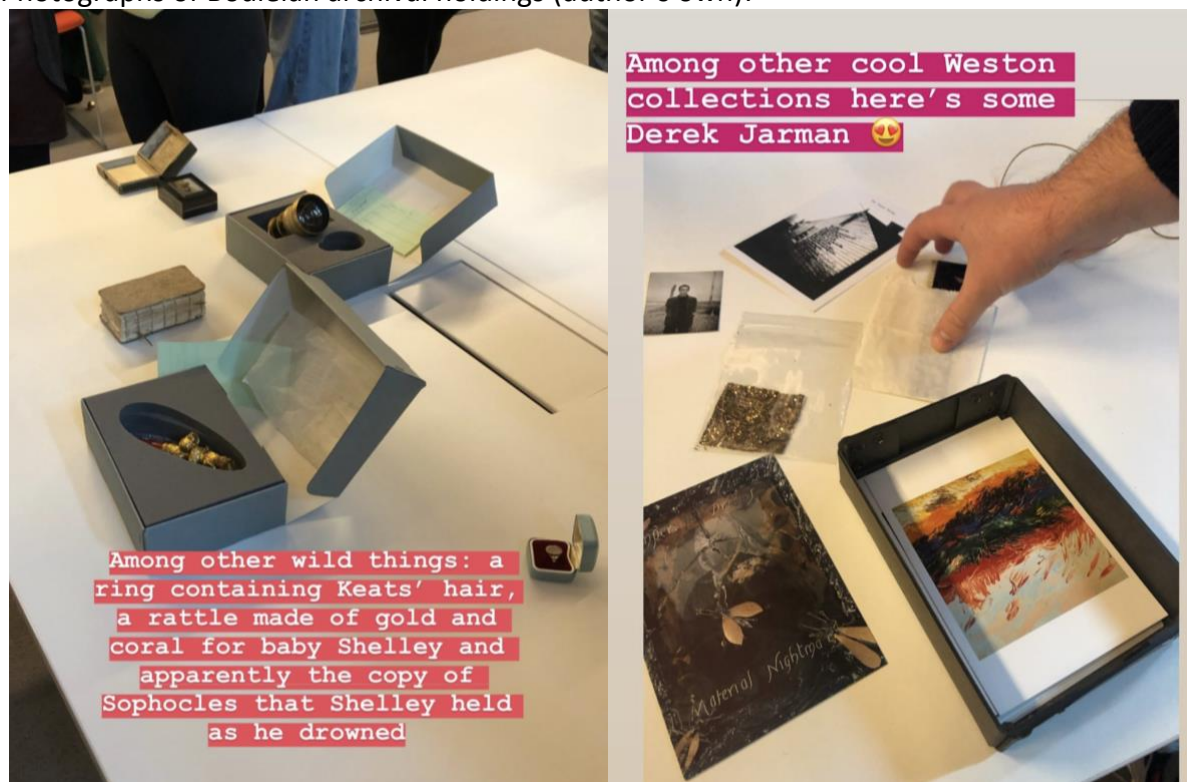
Where students consider their reading practices and the origins of texts, they can “partially answer these questions with which high theory struggles” (Bloom, 2013, p. 168) – without unduly and prematurely attuning themselves to scholarly and critical conversations.

Pertinence to the Literature student-teacher’s personal growth

I was first exposed to this model of literary study while undertaking graduate work in World Literatures. A third of my coursework was devoted to Literature’s material turn in Book History and Bibliography, where we explored print culture, publishing networks and the Bodleian’s extensive archival holdings (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Photographs of Bodleian archival holdings (author’s own).



Similarly, Singapore's arts scene is increasingly producing materialist, place-based works, including Diana Rahim's 2020 work on Singapore's hostile architecture, and the ekphrastic poetry collection *Love and Life at the Gallery* (2020). Cross-genre literature by such authors as Rebecca Solnit, Olivia Laing and Robert Macfarlane, as well as the London Tube's intentionally situated *Poems on the Underground* (n.d.), reflect the growing popularity of material literature.

Materialist pedagogy provides teachers with a middle ground between exciting, university-level critical work, and the joys of introducing young novices to Literary practice. By opening themselves to material-based cultural expressions, teachers will also find that their work resonates with Art, History and Design and Technology (D&T) departments. One of my fondest school memories includes crafting a diorama to illustrate *Macbeth* for a collaborative project between the Literature and D&T departments. By focusing on the worlds that students experience and how they experience it, teachers can then spark the lasting pleasure of being able to express that world in language.

(1350 words)