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Reading: The Development of Literary Concepts

Terms such as plot, character, and setting are familiar to everyone who has been through the slow mill of high school English. Yet they are remembered by most (including many who have become teachers in their turn) as a wooden coinage, a set of rather clumsy labels which seem intended to be hung round the necks of imaginary bottles (as in a lab) containing variously coloured but insipid extracts that once were part of a living story. George Henry is at pains to tease out a process, based on the modern understanding of reality, by which students should be led gradually to develop these concepts as in themselves living elements and essential to the life of any literary work of art: a process that he envisages as spanning all the years of education and never ceasing in development.

The sentence, as it has been traditionally taught, is a "complete thought." This means, syntactically, that there must be present as an absolute foundation, sometimes by ellipsis, a subject and a predicate (NP + VP); and in the English language, a noun and a verb in a given positional order. The epistemological assumption is that the reality behind this syntax is made up of a class of discrete objects (stone, wind, sand) and of abstract conditions of these objects (beauty, running); and a class of activities, processes, and forces (to run, to blow, to beautify) that work upon or emanate from these objects. There is a more embracing assumption as well: this particular syntax of the sentence produces statements and propositions which are the elements of our thinking, and the logic of their relation is the chief means of understanding the world because the world itself is a cosmos, an ordered system of ideas.

This Hellenistic view of language,[1] continued by the trivium and reinforced by Cartesian rationalism, has pervaded the teaching of language for 1900 years or more and for the most part still continues to do so. As a consequence, the language of instruction in the English classroom today is virtually a prisoner of deduction, replete with concepts supposedly of established and definable meanings. Isaiah Berlin refers to this condition as a "pedagogical despotism which

suppresses various other faculties and methods of mental development, especially the imagination."[2] This traditional handling of concepts holds the classroom in thrall in spite of the fact that other contemporary institutions are ever racked by developing interpretations of traditional concepts: the Supreme Court decisions (often 5 to 4) as to what integration means or equality means (the Bakke Case); in theology, the persecution of heretics often depending on shifting meanings of "oi" and "ou," or "con" and "trans."

By and large the present English classroom represents a rationalistic preoccupation with a reality of fixed concepts, even when that reality is a literary work to be explored — that is, to be read. This view often leads to the confusion that the thinking involved in learning syntactical relations is the same as developmental thinking; that the thinking necessary for conveying meaning is the same as that for acquiring meaning; and that, above all, deriving the literal, "basic" sense of a sentence in reading can make the sense itself *grow*. As a result, a generally ignored problem of instruction in reading language is "How can the sense of the sentence, once it has been read, become deeper and richer?" How does the teacher identify deep, rich, critical, profound reading, since these terms are themselves metaphors of degree, not a set of operations designed as instruments to aid the pupil's reading?

Conceptualization

The"new" logic of Whitehead and Russell (1910-12)[3] challenges this traditional philosophy of language. In the "new" reality, an object (a noun) has action too, because energy is implied in its being what it is. Verbs rightfully should be embedded in nouns, not merely predicated of them.[4] As Herbert J. Muller aptly states it, Aristotle's law of the excluded middle (an object is either A or non-A) is turned into an "included middle", for an object or noun can be both A and non-A. In this kind of reality, objects are not only part of other objects but are processes too. It does not ask "What is a stone?" but "What does it mean to be a stone?" Not what is a climax, but what is a climax supposedly doing in literature? How useful can it be as an instrument in reading?

Nothing, neither an object nor a process, is "complete" even in thought. An object may more realistically be called a happening, an event, a process, rather than a state of being. A tree is a happening, so is a stone, so is light, so is tragedy, so is the concept of "setting" in literature.[5] A sentence, too, is a happening in that it is never "complete." The concept of "climax" is never complete.

The traditional classroom, in contrast, generally fails to see that a concept is at best only slightly developed in "vocabulary building" by synonyms, which are approximations and can only identify. Definitions, too, can only locate a concept, but cannot very well reveal its function in a system, which itself is ever a process. And finding cases of it ("application") may make a concept only an ag-

gregate. In reading, too, the same happens if literary concepts are employed only as designators, definitions, and cases. Naming and defining such concepts as setting, climax, motive, voice, simile, hero, irony, and romanticism cannot do all we should want them to do for us in reading because to name a concept, to spot it, to pick it out, is still not to possess it conceptually. These lower operations — translating (saying the text in other words), recognizing and applying — are, of course, necessary elements for developing a concept, but they do not go far enough. They are at the lower levels of Bloom's taxonomy of cognition and if solely relied upon, stop the development too soon, hardly beyond the point of traditional syntactical sense.

Grammar and meaning

The new transformational grammar seeks to understand the nature of "framing" sense by positing a deep structure behind the creation of palpable syntax. This generative grammar, however, does not improve the traditional idea of making syntactical "sense" except that it can account for the creation of an infinite variety of ways of making sense that the inherited Greek grammar could not do. That is to say, as yet no grammar can account for "quality" in creating the sense of a sentence or in reading the sense of a number of sentences. Grammar generally assumes, as does rhetoric, that both nouns and verbs are of known coinage and are stable by nature; or, as Whitehead puts it, that they represent "a world of perfectly defined objects implicated in perfectly defined events" (p. 12). What complicates instruction in reading is, then, that a youth may hold concepts of these objects and actions in varying degrees of development as he reads, and by merely syntactically explaining them give the impression that he "knows" them; not that he wishes to deceive, but that he is innocent of their needed development for the situation. His communication of what he has read may be syntactically clear and correct, but shallow and very limited.

The following pedagogical question therefore immediately arises: What kind of instruction flows from this idea of the "new" reality? This questioning forces us to look at reading afresh. In terms of conceptualization, how does reading *mean* (paraphrasing John Ciardi)? Both the new logic and the new grammar, I think, would be saying this: All reading is creative in that one always takes from the text something more than, and different from, what is "there;" and something more is always left in the text than one can take or does take.[6] To read literally is barely to read at all, because there is no rock-bottom reading of a poem or a story and then an appreciation of it,[7] as if appreciation were a kind of baroque patina. Skill in reading does not depend on more and more skill in reading syntax. Every reader as he reads discovers (analyzes) and organically invents (synthesizes).

The meaning of concept

From the above diagnosis of the new reality, the new logic, and the new grammar, we can draw up a theory of developing concepts in the teaching of literature.

The nature of concepts

1. A concept is a set of relations, not an aggregate of like cases. The Heraclitian "atom" has turned out to be an extremely complicated "universe." After Freud, so has "motivation."
2. A concept is never precisely bound. It has a growing or receding edge, indicating places where it is more, or less, useful. It fulfills itself in degree, not in ideal fullness. Nobody ever knows a concept — that is, not even scholars know how to use one completely. "Integration" represents such a concept; so does "pornography".
3. A concept changes — with varying grammatical syntax, throughout one's life, in different cultures, with different persons, among social classes. "Money" represents such a concept.
4. A concept is a tool or instrument (Bridgman) to explore a situation. It is a set of strategies for the purpose of analysis and synthesis. Such is the concept of "tragedy."
5. A concept always functions in position within a system or organism. It cannot be well learned in isolation. Such a one is the concept of "hero."

The learning of concepts

1. A concept is least learned as a product, or as a finished definition, or as a given meaning.
2. A concept is best learned through a progressive development of its meaning.
3. A concept is best developed as it serves to harmonize or reconcile more and more cases while continuing to discriminate among them (analysis); and then, as it relates to other concepts in the system (synthesis). Consider the concept of "romanticism."
4. After being used in both analysis and synthesis, a concept may be said to be "created" when it emerges as a tentative principle that seems to fulfill certain stated conditions.

Teaching conceptualization

With the above theory of concept development, let us next explore what might be involved in the development of the literary concept of "setting" in the course of instruction in reading.

The act of analysis might first prompt the pupils toward probing stories for "place." The teacher then might develop the concept inductively, not by establishing a ready-made definition and then having the pupils proceed to find examples of it (because correctly to pick out and recognize such examples is not

"to know" the concept). Rather, without mentioning the concept of "setting," the teacher, while probing several stories for "place," could propel the pupils toward a provisional statement. For instance, the teacher might ask such questions as "What do you think is the main location of the events? What is *environment?* Does it differ from *place?* What is it doing during the first part of this story? Are there environments within an environment? Does one environment tend to pull the others into it? In which story? Does any one of the places in these stories seem to be working more strongly than any of the others?

"Why would a story need a place? In any of these stories could the environment be almost anywhere, without changing the meaning of the story? Is there a story where the place could not be interchanged?

"In our lives, are environments usually active? How? In this story, you all agree that the place was a frontier town. What special environmental problems pertained to such a town in those days that would not apply to a small town in Colorado today? Do people respond in the same way to the same environment?"

After such questioning during a number of stories, the teacher might suggest that the class call this kind of influence or element the "setting" within the story. Understanding setting, even at this stage, requires the pupils to do more than merely point a case out as a sample. The pupils might correctly say that the setting is laid in the stock yards of Chicago; in another story, that the setting is in the slums of Chicago; in another, a hotel in Chicago; in still another, the whole meaning of Chicago as a city is represented by a park bench along the Chicago lake-front. Each time the pupils may be "correct," but there may still be little advancement of the concept. They might be able to read twenty short stories in this way and still not develop the concept beyond the identification stage. What then is more sufficient evidence that the pupil "knows" the concept? How far need the development go, for this classroom occasion, for this year, or for graduation?

The teacher might now halt the induction and say, "Would it be possible for us to define 'setting' so that when we talk about it we all may have some idea of what it means so far — that is, what we think it *does?*"And so a tentative definition may be drawn from the above: "The setting of a story is the place or environment in which the events of a story take place." Of course, this is not enough. A transitional question may lift this definition to a higher level of abstraction: "Is setting the equivalent of environment? Are they the same?" This moves the thinking into synthesis. Up to this point the thought has been "horizontal," incorporating more and more data by the act of analyzing more and more stories.

At this next stage of synthesis, still using more stories, and some just read during analysis, the teacher relates the concept, now a provisional definition operationally conceived, to other concepts that make up a story — plot,

character, climax, conclusion, motivation, and so on. Such questions as these now arise: "In Garland's 'Under the Lion's Paw,' in what way is the setting a powerful agent? Does it help create the conflict, the suspense? Does it help shape the climax? Is the 'law' part of the environment? How does the 'East' become an ingredient of the story? Could it all have happened in Maine as well? Is the battle between man and the soil as it is in the Pearl Buck story?

"How does the environment work on the plot in 'A Piece of String'? Could a story aim particularly to explain an environment little known to us, and still be a story? For instance, how does the setting work in *Grapes of Wrath?* For another instance, how does our school differ from the one Jesse Stuart depicts? Are there common elements? Is our classroom an environment?"

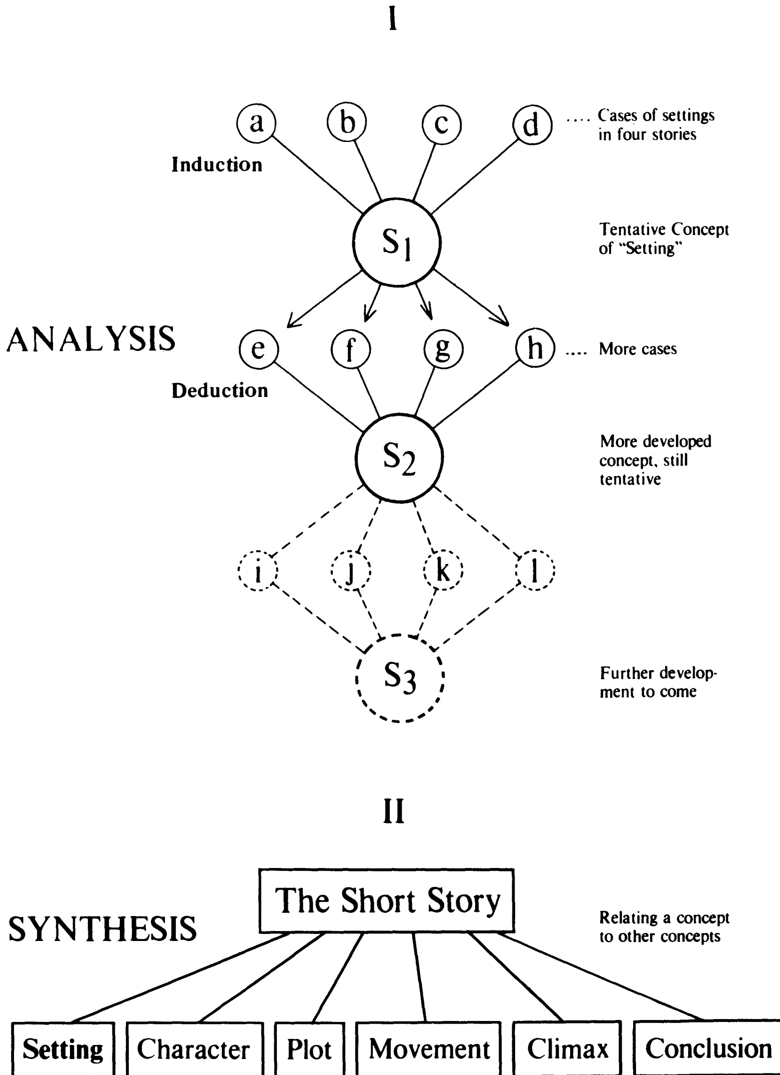
As the pupils advance in reading in this way, the setting can become a very subtle concept in the upper grades. Are the witches in *Macbeth* part of the environment? Is Scotland as a place or culture important to the tragedy? How is determinism reflected in the heath of *The Return of the Native?* Or in *Studs Lonegan?* Could the character have risen above the environment? Is the setting an agent, commensurate with the concept of "hero"?

Can social class be a setting? A social group in a factory? A prison? A whole culture, like capitalism? Is a setting something to be "exposed"? The concept of "setting," in sum, helps make our interpretation of the story possible. At a still more advanced stage, the pupils may be taught to notice, too, that there may be imagined environments in a setting. Why does Hardy take such great pains to depict Egdon Heath and its people, yet so very few on the fashionable diamond business in Paris, which as *place* certainly plays a strong role in the novel? Compare in the Willa Cather story this juxtaposition of two environments in reverse — working years on a farm as against a "moment" at the opera, out of which contrast comes the climax.

And so the teacher should go on pedagogically with other literary concepts — with *hero, climax, comedy, irony. exposition* (in a play), *voice, persona* — the whole range of the "rhetoric of fiction." The pupil reads better as he uses these concepts better ("better" meaning that the pupil is gaining more control of the concept). The concept of "setting" now has for referent certain kinds of questions (a set of strategies) such as those offered above in the act of reading *any* story. Observe that the concept of "environment" and the concept of "story" have "grown" too. In the accompanying Figure there is an attempt to plot the thought process in concept development that the pupils have now been through.

Whereas, as concepts met in the course of a reading, *setting, environment,* and *story* may still remain the same syntactically, for one person each concept will immediately raise numerous questions, both analytical and synthetical; but for another the concept may conjure up no more than a few examples. So, of course, in the classroom. A revised definition may now shape itself: setting is the

Figure I
THE LOGIC OF EXPERIENCE
IN THE USE OF CONCEPTS
("Setting")



Setting: its place in the organic form of the short story.

use of environment in creating a story. Some day the pupil may achieve, perhaps, this kind of sophisticated use of "setting":

> To some novelists the city is more than a setting: it is a main character, one is tempted to say, in spite of the obvious category error. Actually, in those prime novels of city life — Balzac's Paris novels, Bleak House, Ulysses, Mrs. Dalloway or Manhattan Transfer — the city becomes either a concrete embodiment of fate or a configuration of fate or a configuration of the psyche, sometimes both.[8]

An entry to the moral imagination

In this manner, literary concepts such as "setting" become ways of reading that help the pupil explore the literary work so that he can, in turn, use more of the fullness of the work to explore himself or society, or both. The supreme pedagogical question in reading by concept development may be this: How does the art of this work act upon you in achieving the encounter you say it provoked in you?[9] This question sets us apart from the position of Northrop Frye. Although both of us would agree that the essence of the discipline of English is the study of literary concepts, I believe that these concepts make up more than the millennial realm of literary art — a world of its own in which all is related by cycle, metaphor, and archetype. These concepts should above all help pupils to enter into the moral imagination by which we come to judge ourselves and our age, or as Peter Brooks stated in 1970 in *Partisan Review,* "Concepts to engage pupils in reading need not become autotelic activities sterilized and insulated from the views from which they arose, and those amid which they live."

Our emphasis then on the development of literary concepts does not imply that such concept development is the total response of the act of reading. Engagement, certainly a more important element in response to a literary work, cannot be forced or willed, but it does depend greatly on the heightened perception of the work that concept development brings, and, as we pointed out, it may lead to a more relevant interpretation of the work, and serve, too, as a basis for evaluation. The supreme skill in teaching the reading of a literary work thus becomes the teacher's ability to perceive the essential part that concept development plays in the total response of the reader to a literary work.[10]

Obviously, this kind of development of literary concepts should not lead to an English curriculum made of lists of literary concepts, or to the creation of units on setting, hero, climax, etc. Nor is our model a proposal for teaching these concepts formally and systematically as sheer processes. But it does imply that these concepts are basic to the discipline, and that a curriculum of English should deliberately direct all teachers to use them, spaced and spiraled over the four years; so that an English department is aware that by graduation every student has had experience in handling these literary concepts, and that these concepts have been taught with the full resources of the logic of our age. When the

pupil graduates, the hope is that he may have a repertoire of strategies that he can use and improve upon for the rest of his days — at plays, in reading, and while watching television.

NOTES

1. See C. K. Ogden and I. R. Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1923).

2. Isaiah Berlin, "A Note on Vico's Concept of Knowledge," *New York Review of Books,* April 24, 1969.

3. Alfred North Whitehead and Bertrand Russell, *Principea Mathematica* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1910-1912).

4. Notice the increasing tendency to convert nouns to verbs to get around this dichotomy. "Can you hairdo me tomorrow?"

5. The concept of statistical probability admits such inclusions as A 20% and non-A 80%; or, A 75% and non-A 25%. In literary terms this may mean, less quantitatively, that some settings in the short story are very powerful influences while others are but slight agents; but no story is completely without environment, and no story is all environment (all description!). Of this new logic, Suzanne Langer writes: "This pursuit . . . made tremendous demands . . . which their former aim, the analysis of discourse, rhetorical argument, certainly did not do." *Introduction to Symbolic Logic* (New York: Dover Publications, 1953), p. 313.

6. There continually appear new readings of much-read literature even among scholars. Edmund S. Morgan observed this about Gary Wills' new book on Jefferson: "Every scrap relating to the Declaration of Independence has been savored like holy writ, and the document itself is probably better known than any other in our history. But Gary Wills has now given us a reading of it that may radically change our perception . . ." *New York Review of Books,* August 17, 1978, p. 38.

7. There are of course "bare" (unrhetorical!) military orders, and "raw" departmental memoranda, and "sheer" exposition as in a set of directions and the objective account of an experiment; but few of these are crystal clear or free of connotation, either in the reading or in the writing.

8. Alfred Corn, reviewing the novel *Petersburg,* by Andrei Bely, *The Nation,* September 9, 1978.

9. See Archibald MacLeish, *Art Education and the Creative Process* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1954).

10. George H. Henry, *Teaching Reading as Concept Development: Emphasis on Affective Thinking* (Newark: International Reading Association, 1974).