

Do I dare / disturb the universe? Critical Pedagogy and the ethics of resistance to and engagement with literature

Tzina Kalogirou

National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece

and

Konstantinos Malafantis

National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece

Words without thoughts never to heaven go

(W. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, act 3.sc.iii. 100-103)

The game of reading requires you, the reader, to take an active part, to bring to the field your own life experience and your own innocence, as well as caution and cunning.

(Amos Oz)

Abstract

According to Johnson and Freedman (2006, p. 16), “when teachers decide to embrace a critical pedagogy, they are deciding to bring a questioning stance into their classroom”. Critical pedagogy advances the belief that all students should be taught the skills and strategies needed to acquire a critical/questioning attitude towards the texts and the world. By addressing issues of social power and oppression or issues of class, race and gender, critical pedagogy promotes student practices that help them become active and engaged readers as they search for meaning and question the ideologies inherent in the texts they read. Students are asked to stand outside the textually or professionally inscribed reading position and offer new interpretive perspectives.

Throughout the present paper we highlight the idea that when we teach literature our primary concern should be to help students learn how to experience literary texts actively, not to provide them with an authoritarian type of reading or mere information about what a text means.

Therefore, the principal aim of this paper is to offer a theoretical framework and some practical applications in teaching literature that will allow students to move beyond solipsistic reading and will strengthen their interpretive capacities in the act of reading.

From *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* by T.S. Eliot

Key-words: critical pedagogy, poetry-study and teaching, reader-response theories.

Introduction

As teachers who have firsthand experience with various educational theories and practices, especially in the field of literature pedagogy and teaching at the university level, we generally admit that literature (or other equally valued cultural artifacts) can be used and should be used in the classroom in order to sharpen students' thought, to broaden their imagination as well as their perspectives in actual thinking and learning. We are also generally optimistic that the more our students read and get acquainted with the multilayered and deeply interwoven *texture* of the literary text, the more they become adept at questioning texts to find as many meanings or interpretations as possible. However, given the controversial or the "open" (Eco, 1989) character of the literary work it is not surprising at all that the act of reading habitually poses challenging questions to the reader and problematizes him/her in a highly sophisticated way. Every time the reader enters into the terra incognita of the work of art faces myriad enigmas or endlessly unanswered questions at the same time: *Do I dare/disturb the universe?* (T.S. Eliot); *Now, what's going to happen to us without barbarians?* (C.P. Cavafy); *Who's suffering behind the golden silk, who's dying?* (G. Seferis).

This study is informed by a theoretical and pedagogical framework about how the art of questioning ¹(Burke, 2010) and interrogating the text could be implemented to literary reading and teaching in order to further students' understanding, appreciation and even passion for literature. We also employ concepts borrowed by two different epistemological paradigms, namely critical pedagogy (Appleman, 2010; Groenke and Scherff, 2010:93-110; Christensen, 2009; Wilhelm, 2008; Monchinski, 2008; Jonhson and Freedman, 2006; Wolf, 2004; Shannon,1990; Freire, and Macedo,1987) and reader-response theories (Probst, 2004; Probst, 1990:27-37 and Probst, 1988:32-38;).

It is a matter of great importance for teachers in any educational level to have access to the reading/thinking processes that students are actually using when they read a literary piece. These responses are valuable as far as they reflect the deeper understandings that students are attempting to express, the insights given to them by the experience of reading.

We would like to thank our students in the Faculty of Primary Education at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, for sharing with us their valuable thoughts and insights into literature. Their remarkable response to literary texts, either these are poems, or novels, folktales, short stories, etc., give us encouragement and urge us to consider that our students will benefit from every good teaching technique we can put into action in our own classrooms. Although in this paper our dominant frame of reference is literature reading and teaching in the University, we strongly believe that the following teaching practices can easily be adapted for all other educational levels, from Primary to Secondary school. Nevertheless, our primary goal is to provide a theoretical framework and not a concrete teaching plan or specific

¹ The art of teaching questions goes together with the pedagogy that gives prominent position to circumstances of lively discussion/dialogue/conversation, taking place in the classroom. The contributions to the subject are vast. See, for example, the classic study of Applebee, 1996. For a more recent contribution to the subject, see Wen Ma (2008:220-249). Useful also to this context is the notion of "grand conversations" about literature, elaborated by Peterson and Eeds (1990) and Tomkins (2006) and (2004).

writing, speaking and listening activities that can be derived from the literary texts used in the classroom.

We should also suggest that in this paper we used poetry to apply critical pedagogy and reader response theories, despite the fact that, especially critically oriented disciplines, usually are applied to narrative texts which are engaged to explicit social and political commentary. We did this because both of us realized (Malafantis, 2008:92-115; Kalogirou, 2008:435-452) that poetry is the most neglected or badly taught genre in schools. Otherwise, poetry in itself is not an engaging and enjoyable reading for the majority of the pupils. It is often considered by them as an elitist reading habit, only for the “happy few”. In the University level on the other hand, we have been noticing that our students love reading poems, even the “difficult” ones. They love struggling to unravel the intricate syntax and negotiate a path through the complex interplay between content and form. Additionally, poetry can be seen as a vast repertoire of perplexing ideas and complicated questions. It is often reflect the political and cultural struggles which are its context. The poetry of Maya Angelou for example, gives the reader the opportunity to challenge prejudiced ideas and to reflect upon the struggle of black Americans to overcome racism. There are many challenging and fruitful poems to study with students of all ages. The influential work of Linda Christensen (2000) has already proved that reading and writing poetry can be emancipatory acts for the students. The poems we have chosen to discuss in this paper can be considered as modernist artifacts that provide many gaps and discontinuities over which students can speculate. For purposes of communication with the wide English-speaking audience, we deliberately chose to present Greek poetry translated into English. It should be clarified that the students do not study these poems in English but in its original language. Nevertheless, we hope that we deliver some of the best and highly canonized English translations of Greek poetry.

Critical Pedagogy, Reader-Response, and the Art of Questioning the Text

According to Burke (2010:3) “questions are the Swiss Army knife of an active, disciplined mind trying to understand texts or concepts and communicate that understanding to the others”. The tradition of using questions for learning may at least be traced back to Socrates as a persona of Platonic Dialogues as well as to the so-called Socratic dialogue in itself used by teachers to teach their pupils by asking open-ended, thought provoking questions instead of providing ready-made knowledge through explicit instruction. Undoubtedly, only by inviting and encouraging an interrogating process, teachers can really support active learning(that means genuine learning) through a process of infinite discovery in which student is the main agent. But the art of questioning is not only an efficacious tool in teacher’s hands used to enhance his/her disciples’ act of reading and reflecting upon a text; it is also a strategic skill utilized (or might be utilized) by the students in order to interrogate the texts they read, to critically interact with them. Questioning is an aspect of a critically conscious act of reading. A critical reader, as Shor (1987, cited by Groenke and Scherff, 2010:105) reminds us, “does not stay at the empirical level of memorizing data, or at the impressionistic level of opinion, or at the level of dominant myths in society, but goes beneath the surface...”.This deeper and more insightful reading leads not only to a deeper understanding of literature in general but also to a meta-cognitive understanding of the reading process in itself.

In the context of our discussion about the stances and habits of critical readers, it might be useful to highlight the importance of critical literacy² theories, as well as the embracing discourse of critical pedagogy (see references above and the Bibliography cited at the end of this paper), according to which all students should be taught the skills and strategies needed to acquire a critical/questioning attitude towards the texts and the society. By addressing issues of social power and oppression, or issues of class, race and gender, critical pedagogy promotes student practices that help them become active and engaged readers as they search for meaning and question the ideologies inherent in the texts they read. Students are asked to stand outside the textually or professionally inscribed reading position in order to offer new interpretive perspectives. Critical pedagogy opts for creating opportunities for change and for students to become more critically conscious as far as issues of tolerance, diversity, social justice, are concerned.

As we have already seen critical readers always adopt “a questioning stance” (Johnson and Freedman, ²2006:16) toward texts, ideas, or the world in general. Coming to terms with text, usually they rely upon their own socio-cultural beliefs, personal memories, literary experiences, preconceptions and habits and they are engaged in a constant dialogue with the text. In this process they do not simply generate ideas: rather transform and reshape them, drawing different trains of perceptions and implications from them.

According to Naylor and Wood (2012), the Socratic Seminar is a method by which students are encouraged to question each other and as such is a particularly useful tool for teaching poetry. The students run an open discussion about the poem, put questions to each other and become active participants to the discussion. It is important that students have already prepared open-ended questions that encourage discussion. The open agenda of the Socratic Seminar allows students “to take ownership of the poetry and become committed to it” (Naylor and Wood, 2012: 64).

But in what ways all the aforementioned intellectual processes of interrogating texts can pragmatically occur in the literature classroom? According to Burke (2010:12-13) students should be accustomed, after reading any given text, to contribute three major types of questions to class discussion, namely:

1. Factual or verifiable questions that respond to matters of *who, when, what, where, how?* (Examples referred to the well-known poem of C. P. Cavafy, “Gray”-1917). In this particular skillfully constructed poem the reader must be able first to trace the factual elements or the narrative instances behind the poetic surface. In “Gray” a poetic persona while looking at a grey opal, remembers the beautiful gray eyes of a lover he had twenty years before and lost after a brief affair.

² It is undoubtedly true that critical literacy is one of the most fundamental theories associated with education and contemporary didactics. It blends the skills of critical thinking along with an attention to matters of social justice. Critical literacy, according to its major advocates, attempts to engage students to critical readings of literature that directly address issues of social justice and exploitation. For critical literacy in general, see, for example: Matsagouras, 2007; Trilianos, 2007:393-394; Malafantis, 2006:64-78; Carr and Kemnis, 2002.

Gray by C.P. Cavafy

*While looking at a half-gray opal
I remembered two lovely gray eyes—
It must be twenty years ago I saw them...*

.....
*We were lovers for a month.
Then he went away to work, I think in Smyrna,
And we never met again.*

*Those gray eyes will have lost their beauty—if he's still alive;
That lovely face will have spoiled.*

*Memory, keep them the way they were.
And, memory, whatever of that love you can bring back,
Whatever you can, bring back tonight.*³

2. *Inductive questions* that are still verifiable but respond to matters of *why, how, so what?*, allowing reader to evaluate and interpret. Examples (from C. P. Cavafy's, "Gray"): Why the poetic persona feels so frustrated because of this memory? How he compensate the grief that the separation caused to him? How does convey his attitude toward the fading memory of his beloved? What sort of person do you imagine the author of this poem to be? Why the significance of Time and Memory is so important to the construction of meaning? How could we deal with the transient nature of erotic affairs?

3. *Analytical questions* that connect the text to other texts, ideas or situations. The reader should be able to find similarities, differences, affinities to other texts. Examples (from C. P. Cavafy's, "Gray"): In what ways "Gray" is similar/different to other poems of Cavafy (see for example "Before Time Altered Them"-1924) or to other erotic poems? What does this poem tell us about Love, Time, or other notions related to human existence?

Questioning is one of the Eight Comprehension Strategies, according to Tomkins (2006: 228-232), utilized by the readers in the process of meaning making. According to Tomkins, they not only use literal or inferential questions about the text but also respond to it by making three particular types of connections: text-to-self, text-to-world, and text-to-text (cf. The kinds of criticism by Wolf, 2004:23-39) connections.

1. In the first type of connections, readers personalize what they are reading by connecting it with their own experiences and memories. This is the more idiosyncratic aspect of reading and maybe has little to do with the challenging questioning process

³ In: C.P. Cavafy, *Collected Poems*, translated by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard, edited by George Savidis (revised edition). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992. Available at: <http://www.cavafy.com/poems/content.asp?id=19&cat=1>

of critical reading. Let us meditate upon the following exquisite poem by Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke:

Interlude by Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke

*Honest are angels, honest,
For even when
They blind you with whiteness
They whisper 'I don't exist'⁴.*

It might be possible that a reader (especially an older one), when reading this poem, recollects nostalgic memories of Christmas past, reminiscences of childhood's innocence, pictures and images of guardian angels met in the pages of old religious books or among the leaves of those childish vintage scrapbooks that are full of transfers of benign cupids and putti⁵. Because text-to-self connections are highly personalized, another reader would probably made totally different mental images or clusters of recollections under the guidance of the poem.

Possible questions: What memories/personal experiences does this poem call to mind? (It might be people, places, events, sights, feelings or attitudes). What feelings did the poem awaken in you? How did your personal reaction to the poem differ from that of another reader?

2. In making text-to-world connections the reader goes beyond personal experience to relate the text to social, historical, cultural, political, etc., aspects of world. In the above poem, a reader could relate the refusal of poetic persona to find support from faith with the inability of modern man to adhere to a certain metaphysical belief. An allure of subtle existential anxiety pervades this bold poetic interlude.

Possible questions: What ideas/thoughts are suggested by this poem? What, according to your opinion, is the most important word/verse of the poem and why? What do you the overall message of this poem is? What sort of person do you imagine the author of this poem to be and why do you think she wrote the poem?⁶

3. In making text-to-text connections the reader links the text to a cluster of other texts and cultural products. The poem of the Greek poetess Anghelaki-Rooke can be conceived as part of a wide intertextual net including other modern existential poems, romantic poetry of the 19th century which contains references to angels (e.g. poems by D.Solomos) etc.

Possible questions and assignments: What other poems or texts or other cultural products (paintings, songs, scenes from movies, commercials, etc., does this poem call to mind? If it does, what are these works and what is the connection you see between them? Compare this poem with the following verse by Odysseus Elytis:

⁴ Translated by Kimon Friar. In: Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke. *The Scattered Papers of Penelope. New and Selected Poems*, introduced and edited by Karen van Dyck. London: Anvil 2008, p. 38.

⁵ Putti (in plural) is a term that denotes the figure of the winged Eros, often depicted as a cupid, or a mischievous boy. The figure of the putto makes frequent appearances in the art and literature of Renaissance Italy. Putti are commonly called spiritelli, or sprites. The most important book on the subject is: Dempsey, Charles (2001).

⁶ Many readers grasp a pun hidden in the poetess' own name: "Anghelaki", which in Greek means "little angel". Maybe it is no accidental that she wrote a whole series of "angel poems".

My beautiful archangel hello, with pleasures like fruit in the basket!

(XIX-The Little Seafarer, 1985)⁷

What are the significances of the angel in the poem by Elytis? What are the things the angel of the poem associated with? What are the things an archangel commonly associated with? (according to religion⁸). What kind of relationship is established between the poetic persona and the angel? Do you know other poems of Elytis in which the poet makes extensive references to angels?

It is obvious that, reading the poem, according at least to this sort of intertextual reading, readers have the chance to increase their critical awareness and robust their interpretative or reforming capacity. (Nevertheless the same could happen also when the reader makes text-to world connections and tries to apprehend the overall significance of the text). All these practices are mostly justified in the frame of critical pedagogy's discourse. But we can also realize that even a leading advocate of reader-response theory such as R. E. Probst, goes far beyond students' personal associations with texts or simple "likes" and "dislikes" of them. He claims (Probst 2004, p. 93-94) that personal responses to literature are unquestionably valuable, but the teacher might be alert of some possible problems. One problem is that the students may use personal digression in order to avoid serious discussion about literature. "Responding only with personal opinions and feelings is not the sum total of reading. Students also need to learn to analyze, to interpret, and to seek evidence for their conclusions". (p. 93)

According to his own theory of response and analysis in the literature classroom, the whole range of responding to literature can be divided into four principal categories:

1. Personal response (which is referred to the most intimate associations with literature).
2. Topical response (focusing on issues raised by particular literary works -e.g. issues of metaphysical hope and faith, as far as the poem of K. Anghelaki-Rooke, "Interlude" is concerned).
3. Interpretive response (focusing on the significance, on the allusive character of the figurative language of the text, etc.).
4. Formal response (which is referred to the formal aspects of the text, such as sound, rhythm, recurring images, etc.) It is easy to detect that students should be encouraged to articulate their personal responses to literature, to recognize and make use of literary conventions, to be aware of issues of social and cultural influences that underline any work of art.

Elaborating Dialogue with a Text

R.E. Probst (1988:32-38; see, also Probst 2004:81-83, for adapted portions of the 1988 article) proposed a list of questions to frame and guide reader's response to the literary text. It is worth noting that the threefold categorization of reader's response we examined before (Tomkins, 2006) has many affinities with Probst's "questions that encourage students to dialogue with a text".

⁷ Translated by Jeffrey Carson and Nikos Sarris. In: *The Collected Poems of Odysseus Elytis*. Revised and expanded edition. Translated by Jeffrey Carson and Nikos Sarris. Introduction and notes by Jeffrey Carson. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press 2004, p. 481.

⁸ According to Orthodox Christianity archangels are military angels.

It might be interesting to see how one of our students (a nineteen-year-old female student on the second year of her studies at the Faculty of Primary Education) responded to the “Dialogue with the text”, as articulated by R.E. Probst (1988:35-36), answering freely to the questionnaire. It follows below (along with her written response to the text) slightly adapted and abridged for the purposes of our study. The text given to the student was a poem by K. Anghelaki-Rooke, namely the poem number VII from the sequence of “The Angel Poems”⁹. We can see that the student, profoundly an experienced and well-educated reader of poetry, blends idiosyncratic and more systematic and articulated ways of reading to achieve a fuller, rich interpretation that does justice to the artistic complexity of the poem.

*K. Anghelaki-Rooke (from “The Angel Poems”)
VII*

For Alekos Fasianos

*When an angel grows red
and walks on tiptoe
on the well-scrubbed white,
believing in his inner flame
and airing it out of the window,
this is because he has fallen so much in love
with worldly things
that he avoids comparing them
with those in heaven.
Neither I nor anyone else
know what dangers
lie lurking for him
behind kitchen curtains
clay flower pots
and swollen-bellied girls
when their glances stray
into their inner
chaos pregnant with hope.
As for me, I only know
the babbling of the commonplace
when my dear aunt
is deified by death:
like a slim spider
she puts her closets in order,
myopically adoring their contents.*

*When the angel
turns ultramarine toward evening
and finishes his cigarette,
he will leave.
He will have conquered the temptation,
the magical spell,
that season after season
induces him
submissively to await his dying.*

⁹ Translated by Kimon Friar, in: Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke, *The Scattered Papers of Penelope. New and Selected Poems*. op.cit., pp. 36-37.

Framing Dialogue with the Text: a student's response to an "angel poem"

First reaction What was your first reaction or response to the text?

I think that it is a very interesting poem that excites the mind and the imagination. I wanted to read it repeatedly to grasp the imagery, the allusions, and the rhetorical tropes of the poem and also to "feel" the poetic atmosphere.

Feelings What feelings did the text awaken in you?

It is hard to express my emotional response to the poem; it moves me deeply with its profound inwardness and its imperceptible alternations of sentiments it entails. I feel the joyous erotic anticipation of life as expressed by the young girls and also the sadness and the loneliness of the old woman: she is not deprived of riches (her closets are full of clothes and garments), she is deprived of love and erotic fulfillment. Maybe once she was pretty and coquette; now is old and she ends her days in loneliness. A thought really depressing for me is this: What happens to a man's or a woman's belongings after his/her death?

I feel also that the poet wants to make us subconsciously ask, as we read, to what degree we imagine ourselves as the secret lovers of a mysterious fallen angel or as just plain girls sitting in the kitchen of our home, expecting interesting things to happen to our lives. I like to think that somebody would sacrifice something so enormous and even unconceivable like eternal life and youth, in order to be erotically united with his/her beloved.

Perceptions What did you "see" happening in the text?

What is "happening" in the poem is that an angel chooses vicariously to abandon Paradise and to be banished from Heaven in order to live an earthly life of sensual pleasures and erotic fulfillment. The poetic speaker remembers her late beloved aunt. She seems to have a secret communion with angels; maybe she herself is the female presence behind the kitchen curtains, lurking for the lover-angel.

Visual images What image was called to mind by the text?

The images of A. Fasianos' paintings (given to me along with the poetic text) stuck on my mind. I "see" red and blue winged figures with their hair streaming in the wind. I also "see" the girls in the kitchen and the aunt in her chamber opening up the closets. The closets are packed with beautiful, vintage clothes, magnificent hats and gloves.

Associations What memories does the text call to mind?

It calls to my mind mostly memories of other texts, paintings, films, etc. (see below).

Thoughts, ideas What ideas or thoughts were suggested by the text?

I think that the poem denies the common perception of angels as asexual beings. Or maybe it expands ironically the idea that angels usually described or represented like

male human beings and they bear masculine names. The poet imagines them not as benevolent messengers of God but as lovers and –why not? - as habitual smokers. The poem urges us to reconsider some of our common or stereotyped beliefs. It makes us to imagine angels not according to religious doctrines usually found in Bible and New Testament, but according to some eccentric poetic vision.

Maybe the poet wants to communicate a distrust of metaphysical faith in an age when experience seems either too intricate or too appalling to find adequate consolation in faith. Another main idea of the poem is erotic love and the importance of it in justifying human life. In our unredeemed and evanescent condition only love and its sensual pleasures can offer us a sense of happiness.

Maybe the poem could be considered as a recapitulation of the well-worn idea of “carpe diem”. It encourages us to live, and love, and seize the day, before the inevitable decay and death.

Selection of textual elements Upon what, in the text, did you focus most intently as you read- what word, phrase, image, idea?

I found very interesting the verses “this is because he has fallen so much in love/ with worldly things». Maybe there is a verbal effect here, an ambiguity of the word “fallen”-fallen angel/an angel fallen in love. Of great importance is also the colloquation “worldly things”. It implies that Paradise is here, in earth and into this world; our world with all its inconsistencies can be considered as a Garden of earthly delights.

Judgments of importance What is the most important Word / Phrase/ Aspect of the text?

The verse “is deified by death” is perplexing and striking. The last verse also is very important; it is the climax of the poem. The angel chooses the brevity of life, with all its sensual features, and rejects immortality.

Identification of problems What is the most difficult word in the text?

The verse “is deified by death” is complicated. It demands to be read several times and it can be interpreted in many ways. I am thinking that it means that death is not something alien or frightening, but an integral part of life. Another “difficult” collocation is [girls] “inner chaos pregnant with hope”: Woman is the spring of life; she is an unfathomable vessel.

Author What sort of person do you imagine the author of this text to be?

I am acquainted with the poet’s life and work and I like to imagine her as an unconventional, free-minded person. She could be considered also as feminist. I have read that a serious illness in childhood left her with a serious limp and a withered arm. This is the reason, I suppose, she so frequently refers to sexuality and also to the sufferings of the body.

Patterns of response How did you respond to the text, emotionally or intellectually?
I felt to communicate deeply with the poem's imagery and ideas, both in an emotional and in an intellectual way.

[...]

Literary associations

The poem reminds me of plenty paintings and images of angels taken from byzantine religious iconography, from western Renaissance art or from other historical periods (sf. the angels with their gigantic wings in the paintings of El Greco or the angel paintings of the French painter W. Bouguereau).

*I also found extremely interesting the suggested "readings" on the subject of angels, especially the contemporary anti-military young adult novel by Angeliki Darlasi *Τότε που κρύψαμε έναν άγγελο* (Πατάκης, 2009-When we gave shelter to an angel) and the film by Wim Wenders *Wings of Desire*, in which an angel falls in love with a beautiful trapeze artist and chooses to become human. I also realized that the novel of Darlasi actually makes a tribute to the film of Wenders, by referring to a particular trapeze girl who is one of the main characters.*

[...]

Framing a Critical Questioning Stance toward Literature

Another interesting taxonomy of responding to literature influenced by the critical literacy definitions as well as by the critical questioning stance toward texts was proposed by Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002, cited and adapted by Groenke and Scherff, 2010, pp. 105-108). It is a four-dimensional model that emphasizes readers' critical response to literature as a chance for them to become well aware of various societal and ideological discourses constructed by the literary language. It follows below slightly adapted for the purposes of our study:

1. Disrupting the common place. Literature encourages readers to defamiliarize the quotidian, the ordinary aspects of things and to overcome the conventional ways of thinking.
2. Interrogating multiple viewpoints. A literary work offers to its readers multiple, differentiated, and even contradictory perspectives at the same time.
3. Focusing on sociopolitical, cultural and anthropological issues. Reading literature is a dynamic process through which readers challenged to investigate and scrutinize further the vast anthropological field of literature.
4. Taking action. This is the ultimate goal of critical reading according to critical pedagogy discourse. The reader through his/her enlightened consciousness takes active part to the world, questions and tries to transform several conditions of injustice, oppression, or social malevolence. Common teaching practices of critical pedagogy culminate to activities for the students such as: Write a letter to the editor of a popular women's magazine /create a media clip which reverse and deconstruct the stereotyped icons of female beauty as predominantly represented in the media. Or: Discuss in the class what the dominant beliefs about people of color are and how do these beliefs affect the lives of colored people? Or: Discuss

the impact that media have today on advocating standards of beauty and perfection, thereby influencing the self-esteem of all women.

Critical pedagogy theories and practices are more easily adapted to texts (mostly novels) that highlight in a controversial manner various social, ideological, political, etc., issues, such as diversity, racism, discriminations, violence, oppression, etc. Although this kind of texts appears to be “canonical” for critical pedagogy’s criticism and teaching applications,¹⁰ we deliberately shall apply the four-dimensional model of Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (cited and applied by Groenke and Scherff, 2010, pp. 105-108) to a modern poem that entails complex existential and anthropological issues and has less to do—at least in an overt manner—with sociopolitical aspects. For purposes of coherence and economy of our paper we shall put under discussion the same poem (number VII) from the sequence of the “The Angel Poems” by Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke¹¹.

In what ways you think that the poem disrupts common place beliefs or attitudes?

This poem is a totally alluring one but in a discomfoting and radical way. A reader already quite familiar with the poet maybe should know that she utilizes a modernist poetic idiom characterized by a suppressed and hollow lyricism. A sober, conversational tone pervades her poems. She usually draws on fragments of received culture, from mythology, European poetry, and autobiography, merging them with glimpses of modern contemplative life. Her style could be generally described as “woman’s writing” as far as her poems take as a starting point female’s experiences and bodily matters to transform them into allegories of human condition. According to her poetic vision, the female body constantly is mystified and demystified to express some vital and transgressive questionings of the meaning of life.

The poem obviously avoids “the babbling of the common place” and it totally breaks or subverts the sustained theological belief that angels are essentially incorporeal, ethereal and celestial beings, obviously not belonging to either gender. In the poem angels become handsome and highly eroticized males who fall in love “with worldly things”. They are also not represented in a conventional iconographic way as creatures with long robes and large wings. The poetic speaker fantasizes them like the ageless and surreal figures of the painter Alekos Fasianos to whom the poem is dedicated. Like the heroes of Fasianos’ pictorial fantasy, or the winged Eros’ figures of his paintings, the angels of the poem are demystified smoking silhouettes and they also appear in bold, striking colours, such as well-scrubbed white, red and ultramarine, borrowed directly from the painter’s own chromatic palette.

¹⁰ The texts that are more easily follow the conceptual categorizations of critical pedagogy are not at all, authoritarian, or “annoyingly didactic” (the expression belongs to S. Rubin Suleiman-preface, p. xiii) like the “romans à thèse” the aforementioned professor examines in her classic study *Authoritarian Fictions. The Ideological Novel as a Literary Genre*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1993. The texts under consideration should be as open as possible, offering ambivalent, multiple options of problems.

¹¹ Op. cit., pp. 36-37.

The poem is semi-ekphrastic¹², using allusions to art and implementing a diction that draws directly on the art and craft of painting.

The poem in itself encompasses an unconventional and daring meaning, proclaiming the erotic and earthly delights of human life, instead of the eternal but immaculate life in heaven. The poet could be seen as someone who rejects common religious or eschatological faith.

We might also say that the poem could be considered as a reversion of the well-known Psalm (8:4-5): You have made him [man] a little less than the angels. In the poem the angels long for an inferior, mortal life. They prefer to be unperfected and vulnerable humans. They reject eternity by appealing to the earthly privileges bestowed on them by the status of a human being. The poem constitutes an extraordinary, undoubtedly worldly and erotic, pre-lapsarian Eden.

Does the poem interrogate multiple viewpoints?

Anghelaki-Rooke invites us to become co-creators of the poem, as we jump, following the poem's verses, from one point-of view to another, from one heterodox perspective to another. Actually, the poem represents different women's perspectives and spaces: from the domestic space of kitchen-a typically female place-to the enclosed chamber of "dear aunt"; from the young woman who is lurking behind the curtains for a lover, to the girls associated with birth and hope, to the old aunt almost described as a myopic spinster, or, according to the figurative language of the poem, as a "slim spider"(maybe we should notice an alliteration between "spider" and "spinster") close to death. Difference on the basis of their overall poetic significance could be detected between female and male population of the poem, as men and women represent different values, although both sexes are inseparable in the perpetual flux of life. Women represent love, domestic values, fertility and life, although men seem to adhere more to the role of a transient lover. Women are associated also with love and death, as the erotic element in them is sublimated and obliterated in the regression of the abyssal womb (their inner chaos pregnant with hope).

Additionally, the poet may want us to recall that in older times women had been widely represented as "angels in the house".

The poem in general articulates its meaning through several binary oppositions such as: earthly versus celestial things, angels versus humans, man versus woman, domestic angels versus urban angels, erotic abundance versus erotic sterility, inner flame of Eros versus everlasting fire of Hell, young age versus old age, life versus death.

What cultural, social, anthropological, philosophical, etc., issues are raised by the poem?

The poem poses us to consider a lot of complex matters and to meditate on several issues, such as: What is the role of love /faith/metaphysical belief in our lives? Should

¹² We mean here that the poem is not exactly a typical "ekphrasis", in other words a poem which refers directly to a specific painting or sculpture or other work of art.

we yield to temptation or resist it? What connotations we commonly attribute to words such as “temptation”, “sin”, “eternity”, etc. What are the connotations of words such as inner flame and temptation into the semantic structure of the poem?

Maybe the poem conveys a hedonistic aspect of life that reminds us of the famous “Conclusion” of Walter Pater’s *The Renaissance* (1873), in which the author proclaimed that the ultimate goal of life should be “To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy...”¹³ Should we justify this view of life or not?

In what ways the poem encourages us to take action upon the world?

The poem encourages us in many ways to be active through research and enquiry, pertinent reflection and celebratory creativity, in order to fully understand the concerns of the poet.

The students can conduct research in the Internet in order to find paintings, images and other cultural products that subvert the traditional representations of angels in the way the suggested poem did the same. A comparative reading of the poem along with the film of Wim Wenders *Wings of Desire* (1987) would be interesting and thought-provoking. The class can also discuss about the contemporary meanings of the expression “fallen angel”. What sort of person we would describe as such? They can also prepare a multimodal presentation of the poem, using different recourses such as pictures, music, clips from YouTube, etc.¹⁴

Engagement with and resistance to literature

Critical readers of literature recursively engage in intellectual practices such as experimenting with new ideas, seeking different points of view, challenging dominant readings or stereotyped beliefs. They also are capable of turning literary expressed issues and ideas into open-ended cases that could generate powerful discussion. Undoubtedly, critical, interrogating reading is not only an activity but also a skill that can be learned, although we need to keep a sense of freedom and play in reading in itself. Readers (students of any age could be considered primarily as readers of texts) should be instructed to read actively and laboriously, keeping at the same time their enthusiasm and freshness. We strongly believe that our primary concern as teachers is to inspire and help our students to read in a way that shows engagement with and resistance to literature. Engagement with literature means that readers should be able to move themselves beyond mere solipsistic reading (see, Rabinovitz and Smith,

¹³ Walter Pater (1873). *The Renaissance. Studies in Art and Poetry*, edited by D. L Hill, Berkley: University of California Press, 1980, p. 189 (cited by Colin Cruise. In: *The Cult of Beauty. The Aesthetic Movement 1860-1900*, edited by S. Calloway and L. Federle Orr. Victoria and Albert Museum Publishing 2011, p. 61.

¹⁴ The scholarship on multiliteracies, multimodality, and semiotic design is vast. The works of Kress (2003) and Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001) figure prominently in this field. An excellent paper about what happened when students used digital tools to read, interpret and represent poetry is Mc Vee, Bailey and Shanahan, 2008:112-143.

1988, for a well-documented critique of this kind of reading and meaning making) taking into account the particular (generic, formal, lexical, thematic, etc.) conventions of the literary text. Reading should be considered as a slow, thoughtful process, not merely an idiosyncratic enterprise but a deliberate attempt to pay attention to textual elements such as allusion, imagery, intertextuality, form, etc. (see, for a similar argument, Sloan, ⁴2003:49-50). The skilled readers are able to leave themselves into the mesmerizing power of story-telling but at the same time are ready to break down their habitual reading practices to become reflexive, active meaning-makers, capable of recognizing the literary devices or engaging in the arguments the literary text implies. They should also be prepared to recognize the ways the text is expected to be read according to its generic typology.

Critical readers could be described also as resisting readers (see, Rabinovitz and Smith, 1988: passim). This notion of resistance doesn't in anyway mean reluctance or refusal attitudes in reading; it rather signifies an empowered and vigorous reading stance. Resisting readers are capable of questioning arguably the dominant interpretation of the text or what others see as the "singular" or the "correct" textual meaning. They are encouraged to read literature using the cultural values and the belief systems of their era, and thus they are able to question and critique the ideology proposed by the text. This kind of reading involves "a New Historicism's¹⁵ perspective" (Johnson and Freedman, ²2006: 49-51) that allows readers to interpret the text, even a classic or a canonical one, according to current beliefs and attitudes about work's premises. The literary work is seen not merely as an artifact of a certain time period but as a product eventually open to new interpretations along space and time. We have noticed that very often our students adopt instinctively this revisionist stance, this relatively historical view in their readings of literature. Consequently, *Antigone*¹⁶ can be considered as a rebellion young adolescent of our century, and the wonderful poem of G. Seferis "Eleni" ("Helen") can be read and analyzed -as one of our students actually did-as an anti-military piece, in the modern sense of the latter term, that reveals the disasters and the absurdity of war. She chose this dominant reading and supported it with great consistency, bringing the poem's mythological symbolism to the present.

In the frame of her own reading of the poem, our student, namely Maria Magoula, pores over various representations of atrocity from Goya's *The Disasters of War* to the photographic documentation of Nazi death camps, to current day war images of Bosnia, Serbia, Rwanda, Afghanistan, Iraq, and New York City on 9/11. She accompanied the poem by Seferis with some very uncompromising photo-journalism pieces that include still images of contemporary war scenes. Her approach to the poem adds to the universalization of war, pointing that, no matter the location, the time or who is involved, the drama and atrocity of war always stays the same, and the futility of war and the pain it causes never change.

Our student's response to the conflicts of War is totally un-heroic, fully unmediated and uncompromising. She chose to address the topic of War across time and space,

¹⁵ In this paper we only restrict ourselves to some pedagogical uses of New Historicism, which of course is an influential school of literary theory associated with philosophers such as L. Althusser, R. Williams, and T. Eagleton.

¹⁶ *Antigone*, the daughter of Oedipus, secretly buried her brother in defiance of the order of Creon, king of Thebes.

epitomizing what the 20th century often concluded about war: it is not an epic and heroic adventure, or a patriotic endeavor, but chaos, catastrophe and death. In circumstances of war, people are militarized, victimized and subjected to unthinkable horrors. The technological advances of modern warfare changed radically the nature of war ever since Homer wrote (or rather sung) his *Iliad* and even since Seferis wrote his own poem, using the premise of Euripides' tragedy *Helen*, in order to allude to historical situations and to emphasize once again the futility of war. In Euripides' play, Helen never went to Troy, instead by order of her father Zeus, she was taken, under the cover of a cloud, by Hermes, to Egypt. In the meantime Hera created a phantom of the beautiful Helen out of cloud. By reading at the very beginning of the poem a conversation between the mythological hero Teucer and Helen, about the phantom upon which the Trojan War was fought, we immediately see the futility of it all, something that Seferis wants to make explicitly clear:

TEUCER: . . . *in sea-girt Cyprus, where it was decreed
by Apollo that I should live, giving the city
the name of Salamis in memory of my island home.*

.....
HELEN: *I never went to Troy; it was a phantom.*

.....
SERVANT: *What? You mean it was only for a cloud
that we struggled so much?*

— EURIPIDES, *HELEN* (...)

*Great suffering had desolated Greece.
So many bodies thrown
Into the jaws of the sea, the jaws of the earth*

*So many souls
Fed to the millstones like grain.
And the rivers swelling, blood in their silt,
All for a linen undulation, a filmy cloud,
A butterfly's flicker, a wisp of swan's down,
An empty tunic — all for a Helen.*

(Fragments of G. Seferis', "Helen")¹⁷

Maria Magoula's reading of the poem by Seferis highlights the fact that we should not hide the nightmare of war from the children. We should be honest with them.¹⁸, if we really want to help them deal with this painful subject ,gaining a deeper understanding of the real reasons and conflicts that generate war in our societies.

When teachers encourage students to think critically about literature, as our student actually did, they are asking them to become aware of themselves as social beings that have the power to challenge stereotyped ideas; to become "attentive to realities,

¹⁷ George Seferis , *Collected Poems*. Translated, edited, and introduced by Edmund Keeley & Philip Sherrard. Princeton ,NJ:Princeton University Press 1995(revised and expanded edition),p. 177-178.

¹⁸ The same opinion was expressed by the acclaimed author of the novel *War Horse*, Michael Morpurgo(see,Naylor and Wood,2012,p.121).

penetrating and interpreting what is happening to them; and to possibilities, to the means in which the world can be transformed” (Wilhelm, 2008²: 198).

Conclusion

We deeply believe that literature has an impact on our students’ lives. By reading literature they have the chance to encounter myriad examples of concepts, structures and voices that shape our understanding of the world. Reading is a way of encountering the world and making sense of it. It is a medium available for the students to examine the world from a number of different perspectives and to interrogate and scrutinize the puzzling questions (see, also the “big questions” according to Burke, 2010, pp. 170-174) of our condition in humanity: Are people more alike or different? How powerful is love? Where do people find hope? What’s worth the effort? What does it mean for someone to live at the margins? Who owns the island, Prospero or Caliban, Robinson Crusoe or Friday? What makes a memory? Memory is something we possess or something we’ve lost forever? To love or to be loved? To love or to hold? To be or not to be?

Literature may have a potentially liberating effect in the lives and the minds of its readers. According to Christensen (2009:8) literature can teach students how to use knowledge to create change. Literature prevents intellectual idleness, spiritual deprivation and indifference, transforming readers into actively thinking individuals with a purpose in this life, preparing them to be free and independent parts of society. It helps students to maintain their curiosity, keeping themselves -according to Neal Postman, (Burke, 2010: 1) - in the condition of *question mark*, not in the state of *period*. Literature can offer to its readers panache and audacity, instructing them how to position themselves in the world. Because, unlikely to T.S. Eliot’s indecisive poetic persona, (J.A. Prufrock,), critical readers of literature are always ready to leave a bold, distinctive imprint in the world; they are ready to pose the ultimate big questions and live with them: *Do I dare disturb the Universe?*

Author Details

Tzina Kalogirou, Ph.D.

Associate Professor of Modern Greek Literature and Literature Teaching
Faculty of Primary Education
National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece
gkalog@primedu.uoa.gr

Konstantinos Malafantis, Ph.D.

Associate Professor of Education
President of the Hellenic Educational Society
Faculty of Primary Education
National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece
kmalafant@primedu.uoa.gr

References

- Applebee, A. (1996). *Curriculum as Conversation: Transforming Traditions of Teaching and Learning*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Appleman, D. (2010). *Adolescent Literacy and the Teaching of Reading. Lessons for Teachers of Literature*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Burke, J. (2010). *What's the Big Idea? Question -Driven Units to Motivate Reading, Writing, and Thinking*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Calloway, S., and Federle Orr, L. (2011) *The Cult of Beauty. The Aesthetic Movement 1860-1900*. Victoria and Albert Museum Publishing.
- Carr, W. and Kemnis, S. (2002). *Becoming Critical: Education, Knowledge and Action Research*. Translated by A. Lambraki-Paganou, E. Milingou and K. Rodiadou, Athens: Kodikas.
- Christensen, L. (2009). *Teaching for Joy and Justice: Re-imagining the Language Arts in the Classroom*. Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Rethinking Schools.
- Christensen, L. (2000). *Reading, Writing, and Rising Up. Teaching about Social Justice and the Power of the Written Word*. Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Rethinking Schools.
- Eco, U. (1989). *The Open Work*. Translated by A. Cancogni with an introduction by D. Robey. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Freire, P., and Macedo, D. 1987. *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World*. South Hadley, MA: Bergin and Garvey.
- Groenke, S.L. and Scherff, L. (2010). *Teaching Young Adult Literature through Differentiated Instruction*. Foreword by A. Sitomer. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Johnson, H. and Freedman, L. (2006). *Developing Critical Awareness at the Middle Level. Using Texts as Tools for Critique and Pleasure*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Kalogirou, Tz. (2008). "Poetry in the Classroom: Meditations on a "difficult" as well as "useless" Art, and on its Teaching". In: *Why Poetry. Proceedings of 27th Poetry Symposium*. Patra: Peri Technon Editions, pp. 435-452 (the article has originally published in Greek).
- Kress, G. (2003). *Literacy in the New Media Age*. London: Routledge.
- Kress, G. and Van Leeuwen, T. (2001). *Multimodal Discourse: The Modes and Media of Contemporary Communication*. London: Arnold.
- Lewis, M., Flint, S.A., and Van Sluys, K. (2002). "Taking on Critical Literacy. The Journey of Newcomers and Novices". *Language Arts*, v. 79, n. 5, 382-392.

- Ma, Wen (2008). "Participatory Dialogue and Participatory Learning in a Discussion-Based Graduate Seminar". In: *Journal of Literacy Research*, v.40, n.2:220-249.
- Malafantis, K. D. (2008). "Preferences of children and adolescents to poetry: Annotated bibliography of researches and pedagogical implications". In: *Nea Paideia*, n. 125, pp. 92-115(the article has originally published in Greek).
- Malafantis, K. D.(2006). "Pedagogical Aspects of Literature". In: *Nea Paideia*, n. 119, pp. 64-78(the article has originally published in Greek).
- Matsagouras, E. (2007). *Theory and Practice of Teaching: The Critical Thinking in Teaching Practice*. Athens: Gutenberg
- Mc Vee, M.B., Bailey, N.M. and Shanahan, L.E. (2008). "Using Digital Media to Interpret Poetry: Spiderman Meets Walt Whitman". In: *Research in the Teaching of English*, v.43, n.2, pp.112-143.
- Monchinski, T. (2008). *Critical Pedagogy and the Everyday Classroom*. New York: Springer.
- Naylor, A. and Wood, A.B.(2012). *Teaching Poetry. Reading and Responding to Poetry in the Secondary Classroom*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Peterson, R. and Eeds, M.(1990). *Grand Conversations. Literature Groups in Action*. New York: Scholastic.
- Probst, R.E. (2004). *Response and Analysis: Teaching Literature in Secondary School*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Probst, R. E. (1990). "Literature as Exploration and the Classroom". In: Farrell, E.G. and Squire, J.R. (eds) *Transactions with Literature*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Probst, R.E. (1988). "Dialogue with the text». *English Journal*, v.77, n.1, pp. 32-38.
- Rabinovitz, P.J. and Smith M.W. (1988). *Authorizing Readers. Resistance and Respect in the Teaching of Literature*. Forward by W.C. Booth. New York: Teachers College Press/Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Shannon,P.(1990). *The Struggle to Continue. Progressive Reading Instruction in the United States*. New York and London: Heinemann.
- Shor, I. (1987). *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Sloan, G. (2003). *The Child as Critic. Developing Literacy through Literature. K-8*. Forward by B. Cullinan. New York and London: Teachers College Press.
- Suleiman, R. S. (1993). *Authoritarian Fictions. The Ideological Novel as a Literary Genre*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1993.

- Tomkins, G.E. (2006). *Literacy for the 21st Century. A Balanced Approach*. (accompanied by DVD). Columbus, OH: Pearson/Merill Prentice Hall.
- Tomkins, G.E. (2004). *50 Literacy Strategies. Step by Step*. Columbus, OH: Pearson/Merill Prentice Hall.
- Trilianos, Ath. (2007). "Critical thinking". In: Xochellis P.D. (ed) *Lexicon of Pedagogy*. Thessaloniki: Kyriakides editions, pp. 393-394.
- Wilhelm, J.D. (2008²). "You gotta be the book". *Teaching Engaged and Reflective Reading to Adolescents*. Forward by M.W. Smith. New York and London: Teachers College Press.
- Wolf, S.A. (2004). *Interpreting Literature with Children*. Mahwah, NJ, London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Primary Sources/Poetry**
- Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke, *The Scattered Papers of Penelope. New and Selected Poems*. Introduced and edited by Karen Van Dyck, London: Anvil Press 2008.
- C.P. Cavafy, *Collected Poems*, translated by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard, edited by George Savidis (revised edition), Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992. Available at:
<http://www.cavafy.com/poems/content.asp?id=19&cat=1>
- T.S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co 1952.
- The Collected Poems of Odysseus Elytis*. Revised and expanded edition. Translated by Jeffrey Carson and Nikos Sarris. Introduction and notes by Jeffrey Carson. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press 2004.
- G.Seferis, *Collected Poems*, translated, edited, and introduced by Edmund Keeley & Philip Sherrard. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1995 (revised and expanded edition).
- Walter Pater [1873]. *The Renaissance. Studies in Art and Poetry*, edited by D. L Hill, Berkley: University of California Press 1980.