

## London in space and time: Peter Ackroyd and Will Self

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*ABSTRACT: This paper explores the treatment of London by two authors who are profoundly influenced by the concept of the power of place and the nature of urban space. The works of Peter Ackroyd, whose writings embody, according to Onega (1997, p. 208) “[a] yearning for mythical closure” where London is “a mystic centre of power” – spiritual, transhistorical and cultural – are considered alongside those of Will Self, who explores the city’s psychogeography as primarily a political, economic and cultural artefact. The paper draws on original interviews undertaken by the author with Ackroyd and Self. Both authors’ works are available for literary study during the 16-19 phase in the UK, and this paper explores how personal delineations of the urban environment are shaped by space and language. It goes on to consider how authors’ and students’ personal understandings of space and place can be used as pedagogical and theoretical lenses to “read” the city in the 16-19 literature classroom.*

*KEYWORDS: literature, London, place, space, psychogeography, language, 16-19 literary studies, culture, reading theory.*

### INTRODUCTION

Place and space, the primary foci of this edition, are fundamental elements of literary texts. The ways in which place and space are represented by authors, the ways in which they are understood by readers and the relationship of these writerly and readerly constructions to real places and spaces are fascinating issues for teachers and students alike to consider. As such, it is essential that teachers develop pedagogies that reflect and actively address these complexities. Authors’, teachers’ and students’ personal experiences of place (or the lack of such experiences) lead to personal assumptions and expectations that are fundamental in shaping how texts are received and approached in personal reading and in the classroom.

Urban space and theories of spatiality, therefore, provide particular pedagogic challenges for teachers in the 16-19 phase, but also offer great potential richness as teachers and students engage in more theorised paradigms of literary study. How, for example, is the city to be understood as place? Does place remain constant over time? Is place a purely physical concept, or does it also comprise social and even spiritual elements? Is the city indeed comprehensible as a “place”, or is it rather a “space”, albeit a space of places? How are urban environments shaped and how do they develop over time? Such concepts are not the sole preserve of human geography and of urban development, but also inform literary studies. How, for instance, do literary representations respond to and shape perceptions of the urban topos? And beyond this, what are the respective roles of writers and readers (including teachers and students) in constructing the meaning of place and space through literary texts?

Notions of pedagogy are also developing to embrace the idea of spatial turn (Wyse *et al.*, 2011; Charlton *et al.*, 2011). In the classroom, when students read – and respond through their own writing – to texts about the city (such as the writings of Will Self and Peter Ackroyd), they become personal constructors of urban spatiality. In contradistinction to the rhetoric of globalisation, therefore, which tends to trivialise the notion that place is important (Kostogriz, 2006; Cresswell, 2004), students often encounter the urban environment in very “local” and personal ways through their literary studies. The works of Self and Ackroyd insist upon the importance of the unique nature of place, entering into an intimate dialogue with the city spaces they inhabit, and as such provide a rich source for developing students’ understanding of the interaction between people and places.

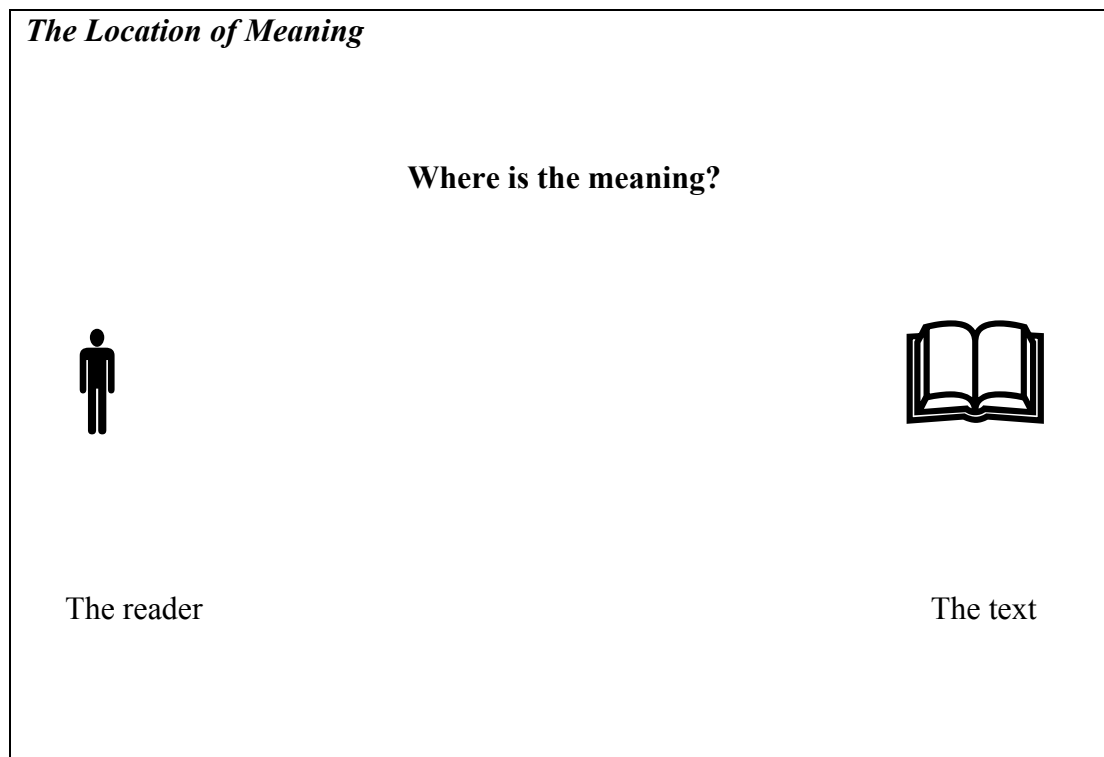
### **READING THE CITY: CONSTRUCTIONS OF MEANING**

Reading and writing are integral processes through which learners interpret and create the world around them, including their sense of space and place (Bavidge, 2006; Leander & Rowe, 2006). Literary studies in the 16-19 phase incorporates a broadening focus upon the social functions of literature (and, indeed, the Arts in general). As students explore the purposes and effects of literature within our society, they need also to consider how this reflects upon recreations and perceptions of space and place. The actual world and the world as it is represented in literary texts are substantially different (Bakhtin, 1981), and responses to both will vary according to the time and place of textual reception. The time-place connection encoded at the point of writing and the time-place connection decoded at the point of reading may be very different, and it is the pedagogic work of the teacher that makes fruitful use of the hiatus between these two points in assisting students to develop their own personal responses to urban space. The works of Ackroyd and Self, which draw across time on the potentialities of London, are self-consciously aware of this hiatus and use it to considerable effect. The dialogic possibilities of the classroom provide ample opportunity to explore such issues creatively through students’ own reading and responsive writing.

Classrooms are vital spaces where, through reading, students and teachers collaborate with writers in actualising the visions of text. In many ways they reflect the situation Philip Larkin envisages in “The Pleasure Principle”: “the recurrent situation of people in different times and places setting off the device [the literary text] and re-creating in themselves what the poet felt when he wrote it” (Larkin, 1983, p. 81). Place has a central role to play in this, and is perhaps best conceived, not as a fixed and unchanging entity, but as a process (Wyse *et al.*, 2011) – a locus of multiple and constantly changing interactions, of which the literary text is one manifestation and the classroom another. Readers in the classroom enacting, with their teachers’ guidance, the kinds of readerly re-creations Larkin envisages, take on a dynamic role in shaping textual meaning.

This relates not solely to the representation of urban space, but to fundamental issues relating to reading processes, the construction of meaning, and the locus of literary and textual meaning. Students in the 16-19 phase (if not before) need to tackle philosophical questions about meaning-making in reading, considering whether meaning is locked into the words on the page, whether it is in the reader’s head, or

whether it is somewhere in between. Theorising textual production and reception and how both relate to the making of meaning is central to students' development as readers and writers (see Figure 1). If Eaglestone (2001) is correct when he asserts that "all seventeen year olds are natural theorists" (p. 7), then teachers at 16-19 level have not solely a duty, but also much to gain from making their classrooms places where students increasingly theorise both process and subject.



**Figure 1. The Location of Meaning (Atherton, Green, & Snapper, 2013, p. 128)**

Figure 1 is a useful resource throughout the process of studying any literary text. It encourages students to explore the extent to which they see themselves as active meaning-makers in relation to texts. It highlights, in other words, the reader/author dialogue in creating possible textual meanings. By locating where on the diagram they believe "meaning" lies (from all with the reader at one extreme to all with the text at the other), students interrogate the roles and responsibilities of readers and authors in constructing meaning from text. This opens up a plethora of classroom dialogue and actively theorises both the literary text and the process of reading. Naturally, such an approach also has many possibilities in exploring the creation and reception of urban space within literary text. Holloway and Kneale (2000) envisage just such a Bakhtinian dialogic in the construction of the city, and Massey (2005) suggests that it is through such intimate interactions and not only through larger political, social, physical and economic gestures, that urban spaces (and our conceptualisations of them) are shaped.

In exploring issues of textual reception, it is also useful to consider whether classrooms are themselves liberating or limiting as environments for reading and meaning-making. Teachers can fruitfully consider how the urban space itself could be used to enliven reading. Both Self's and Ackroyd's works can be very effectively read *in situ*, using the textual locations they employ (for example, by visiting Nicholas

Hawksmoor's churches when reading *Hawksmoor*), immersing the literary text and its readers in the realities from which the text took its inspiration. As Charlton *et al.* (2011) argue: "[b]eing socially constructed, place, identity and literacy are open for reconstruction" (p. 71). By engaging students with their identities as readers of place alongside the methods of artistic representation authors employ and in the very places they represent, teachers in the 16-19 phase can create rich reading and learning environments. By taking literary texts to the places and spaces they represent, teachers can encourage students to deepen their understandings of urban space and of themselves as consumers and co-constructors of literary meaning.

## CONSTRUCTIONS OF URBAN SPACE

As Massey (2005) has observed, space "is always in the process of being made. It is never finished; never closed" (p. 9). One of the major – and perhaps most intimate? – ways in which culture informs our sense of the urban environment and what it means to inhabit such a space is through artistic (re)creations of the city. Writers and other creative artists play a central role in building perceptions and understanding of the urban environment. When they take on the recreation of the city they do not simply adopt or reflect urban space, but become "makers" of it. In the case of London, writers enter a literary domain spreading across the centuries, an evolving dialogue of space and place through which the city has been continually (re)negotiated and (re)constructed.

Self and Ackroyd both work within the continuum that is London literature. The London that they write about is a city that has already been envisaged and shaped in the cultural imagination by countless other authors. Literary works, in other words, function in and of themselves as shapers of urban space. As Dolezel (1998, p. x) observes, "fictional constructs deeply influence our imaging and understanding of reality". Study of the works of Ackroyd and Self, who self-consciously relate to previous literary (and other) manifestations of the city, is not simply an ontological proposition, but is also essentially epistemological. As teachers and students forge meanings from text, narratives become a means of locating and shaping identity. The act of reading is an internalisation of and a response to the possibilities of space and place, and shapes emerging personal narratives of place (Gulson & Symes, 2007). These emerging subjective narratives, if carefully captured, become powerful pedagogic moments allowing students to deepen their relations to the space/place of the city and also to enhance their comprehension of themselves as readers.

Text, as Charlton *et al.* (2011) suggest, is a significant means by which the world is represented and by which children are often taught to interpret the world. Sheehy and Leander (2004) see the act of reading as an active form of engagement with other space-times. Within the dynamic process that is reading and textual interpretation, students and teachers draw upon personal imported senses of space and place. Knowledge (or lack of knowledge) of the particular locations with which writers deal, and readers' resultant attitudes towards and responses to texts, is active in the creative function of reading. Readers draw upon three levels of meaning in relation to place/space when they approach literary texts:

- the factual “realities” of the space/place represented – place as it exists and/or existed in the real world;
- the space/place as it functions within the textual narrative – place as it is reproduced and used (for a variety of social, political and pedagogic functions) by the author; and
- the space/place as it exists or does not exist within the “known” world of the reader – place as lived experience.

The co-existence of these multiple layers of space/place within heterogeneous classrooms provides a wealth of opportunity and challenge in pedagogic terms as teachers and students elicit personal understandings of the multiplicity of identities and histories that feed into the artistically unified vision of the city in literary texts. Place/space, identity and time are fundamentally inter-related (Massey, 2005) within the literary text *and* within the space of the classroom. The interaction of urban space and classroom space can be utilised to frame students’ approaches to text, drawing on the social, public and cultural narratives they employ in the reconstructive act of reading (Somers, 1994).

Both Ackroyd’s and Self’s works explore the extent to which identity, space and time relate intrinsically one to the other. The urban spaces the authors create, of course, function according to their own “literacy”. The historical “presence” of place and the ubiquitous presence of words (contemporary and historical) within urban space are significant in the work of both men and provide fascinating means of exploring the city. Ackroyd pursues this most strikingly in works such as *Hawksmoor* and *The House of Dr Dee*. As he observes, speaking of *Hawksmoor* during the course of interview: “[t]he language of the eighteenth century still exists in countless books and documents as well as in the language we speak every day. It may look different, but it still exerts influence, as my novel shows.”<sup>1</sup> The language of the city and the language of the past, in effect, become lenses through which to read the contemporary city.

Self and Ackroyd are both clear about the importance of such connections in artistically creating place and in understanding the nature of London. Works such as *Hawksmoor*, *The House of Dr Dee* and *Umbrella* bring together inter-connected individual stories, which the writers use to project their understandings of urban space. Through the interaction of these stories *of* place (London) *in* place (the classroom), we approach Featherstone’s (1995) conception of how plural subjectivities interact with multiple identities of place.

It is from the kinds of intimate connection Massey (2005) envisages as one of the most powerful shaping forces of the urban environment that Will Self begins when asked during an interview to describe the London he recreates in his Booker shortlisted novel *Umbrella*. For Self, the city emerges not only as a place or a collection of variously connected places, but also as a space where he could experience “a very intense communion...with other people’s minds”. The city as he conceives it is primarily a place of relational creativity – a medium through which “you can meet people whether they are existent or non-existent or inexistent”.<sup>2</sup> These

<sup>1</sup> Where unattributed quotations of Ackroyd appear, they are material derived from an original interview undertaken for the writing of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Where unattributed quotations of Self appear, they are material derived from an original interview undertaken for the writing of this paper.

are rich ideas, positing the literary text as a creative extension of the urban environment and very useful in framing dialogic discussion of literary response in the classroom.

In *Umbrella*, Self particularly explores the issue of mental illness – both how the city may be a reflection of such states, and how mental illness can shape our response to the city – and he sees in the topography of London an analogue for the mental disturbance and reconstruction of his characters. Students in the 16-19 phase should be encouraged to explore how such views of London emerge from a long urban artistic tradition, going back through Virginia Woolf, Wilkie Collins and Charles Dickens to William Hogarth (see Figure 2), Henry Fielding and beyond. They may also be introduced to other interesting contemporary examples, such as Iain Sinclair’s use of mental illness as urban metaphor in *London Orbital*, where he explores the powerful symbolism of the city of London surrounded by a ring of asylums, and *Rodinsky’s Room*, which explores the obsessive possibilities of the urban environment and traces the eponymous Rodinsky to his final home in an Epsom asylum.



Figure 2: *The Rake's Progress*, Plate VIII "Scene in Bedlam" (William Hogarth)

Illegality and the use of narcotics are also powerful repeated motifs in Self’s work and provide students with interesting ways of approaching his delineation of London. Like mental illness, such motifs represent destabilising forces at work on the streets of the city and Self uses these tropes to force his readers to explore the relationship between continuity and disjunction in the city. His vision of London, however, is not all about subversion and psychosis – except in so far as these may be taken as inherent in the “nature” of the city. His work, in fact, confessedly draws upon the idea of urban and literary continuity and he points to “a growing interest in psychogeography”. By this

he seems to mean something rather distinct from the quasi-spiritual “spirit of place” invoked by Ackroyd, or the urban arcana so favoured by Sinclair. He goes on to explain at greater length:

It is about the nature of places and their influence. For me that is quite political. It is very much connected with a personal sense of alienation, particularly from London – the city where I was born and have lived all my life – and a sense of the city as a kind of economic and cultural artefact. It is an attempt to understand its physical geography and topography and the shapes that exist beneath its streets.

In some ways, this seems to relate to Gottdiener’s (1994) work, which emphasises the sociospatial nature of urban space, particularly in its focus upon the role of political economy as a shaping imperative upon the city and its individual residents. This raises interesting possibilities for teachers and students in terms both of emerging personal responses to urban space and urban texts and the relationship of Self (as long-term London resident) to the city he represents. Asked if *Umbrella* is as much a project in making sense of himself as it is an attempt to elucidate the nature of the urban environment of London, Self initially demurs: “No, as a person, as somebody who lives in the city in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and feels alienated from it.”

He is open to the suggestion, however, and changes tack, exploring the idea that the city and isolation are prerequisites for the role of the urban author: “Maybe you’re right, though. Maybe it *is* connected with being a writer, which is an isolated occupation, so maybe that sense of alienation is connected with what I do for a living.” He pursues this sense of Durkheimian anomie (1893, 1997) further still, drawing on the kinds of deterministic economic forces Gottdiener (1994) envisages, both of which provide useful theoretical standpoints for use with 16-19 literature students:

Psychogeography emerged from a group of French Marxists – the “situationists” – who saw the city and the ways we move around it as being determined by economic imperatives. These control our movements and emotions – we go to one place to work, another to shop, another to be entertained and another to live. That kind of way of being in the city is inherently alienating and controlling – any commuter on the tube, the trains, the buses or in a 100-mile traffic jam on the M25 understands that.

Charlton *et al.* (2011, p. 65) ask us to consider the “power-geometries” that go into the construction of place, and observe that central in understanding these power-geometries is a sense of “the connections between places”. This resonates with Self’s vision of London as an atomising force, as a spatial imperative shaping space/place and the people who inhabit it. The city somehow portions out the lives of its inhabitants according to the demands of its functionally differentiated “sectors”. This takes us back to Self’s focus, in *Umbrella*, on psychosis and its treatment. London is constructed as a vast yet claustrophobic mental “space” – a disturbingly brown, Hogarthian asylum. Self pursues the genesis of this metaphor at length:

Over the years as I read and thought about London, I became very interested in modernity as a phenomenon. For me, London was at about its most modern in 1905. All the things we think of as being the contemporary city were effectively in place by then – a deep level electric tube system, instant messaging via pneumatic tubes connecting loads of businesses, telephones, stock market quotes coming in from Wall Street and the Bourse in Paris instantaneously. It was also a huge port in a way that it

isn't any more. If you want to look at it that way, the city has retreated from that over the last hundred years in some ways. I was very interested to try to capture the changing city. In Edwardian times if you took any square acre of London you would have found at least four centuries of housing existing. It was a very textured and multi-layered city. That richness was lost in the inter-war period. It wasn't the Blitz, it was development in the 20s and 30s that did for it. I didn't feel that anyone had quite dealt with that in a way that I found worked for me in fiction, so *Umbrella* is my attempt to dig out the layers. The asylum, individual pathology and illness in some way encode social, cultural and economic change.

Such a conceptualisation of urban space provides rich potential for exploration and encourages understanding of how “layers” of urban space/place are constructed both in the city itself and in literary texts.

## LONDON AND NARRATIVE CONSTRUCT

Self's narrative methods in *Umbrella* are also interesting to consider in relation to notions of the city. Although he disingenuously eschews the idea that the epigraph of the novel (taken from *Ulysses*) is setting up a deliberate comparison with Joycean Dublin or indeed Joyce's methods of representing the experience of inhabiting the urban environment, he goes on to discuss his narrative method in terms that warrant debate in the classroom:

Some people have referred to the narrative as stream of consciousness, but stream of consciousness is a very slippery customer. I guess I'd say the book is written in what Kafka critics call a monopolised narrative with stream of consciousness frills. I mean what is the content of our consciousness? It's seldom verbal. It's often intensely imagistic or sensory, and how do you put those things into words? So there is always compromise. I use the continuous present, which I think is perhaps more important. The subject of modernity seemed to demand the continuous present. It reflected what I wanted to explore through linked consciousnesses over time.

Self sees his use of the continuous present as a means of superseding time, as if the urban space exists outside conventional notions of the space-time continuum. Space is thus conceived in Masseyan terms as the sphere of the possibility of the existence of multiplicity. The city – its places and spaces – is a realm “in which distinct trajectories coexist”, an axis “of coexisting heterogeneity” (Massey, 2005, p. 9).

For Self, therefore, the proliferating voices, places and languages of the city function in a distinct relation to space and time. His literary representation of London in this sense relates to the work of Peter Ackroyd – a parallel Self himself acknowledges – and is also similar to Massey's (2013) understanding of filmic representations of space, when she observes that, “[w]hat is at issue in representation is not in fact the spatialisation of time but the representation of time-space”. As Self explains: “I was very concerned to present that idea of the transcendence of time, which writers like Ackroyd do in *Hawksmoor*. Those were emotional decisions about how I wanted to tell this particular story.”

In this sense his narrative method in *Umbrella* is, he claims, “inflected by and influenced by the high modernists like Joyce and Woolf”. For Self, however, the narrative method of the book reflects the city and the inhabitants of the city it seeks to



represent and is not simply a programmatic response to previous literary representations of the city. Such literary comparisons, hingeing upon modern-day interpretations of the urban environment and their impact upon the individual, do, however, provide a useful means of developing students' reading of literary urban space. By reading a novel like *Umbrella* alongside works such as *Ulysses*, *The Waste Land* and *Mrs Dalloway*, students are able more effectively to locate Self's work within a tradition of urban modernism without reductively seeing the novel as a mere "response" to the classic urban works of the modernist canon.

London also plays an enormous part in Peter Ackroyd's work. In many ways the city is almost a character throughout his fiction and biographies and in his sequence of historico-cultural writings specifically about the city and its topography – *London: The Biography*, *Thames: Sacred River* and *London Under*. Thrift (1996) suggests that cities are inhuman or transhuman entities, and Ackroyd's vision of the powerful, quasi-spiritual qualities of the city seems to relate to such a conception. This emerges particularly strongly in *London: The Biography* (Ackroyd, 2001, p. 779) where he observes: "London goes beyond any boundary or convention. It contains every wish or word ever spoken, every action or gesture ever made, every harsh or noble statement ever expressed. It is illimitable. It is Infinite London".

Ackroyd's vision of the city is certainly shaped by a Catholic-inflected spirituality. Onega (1997, p. 208), who has written widely about Ackroyd's urban mythos, identifies in his delineation of London "[a] yearning for mythical closure" where London is "a mystic centre of power", as if London were some modern-day Blakean Jerusalem. The arcane spiritual yearnings of Mirabilis and his disciple Nicholas Dyer in *Hawksmoor* and of the Elizabethan magus John Dee in *The House of Dr Dee* reflect this and also chime with the monadic mysticism of Soja's (1989) vision of urbanity, and these provide interesting theoretical perspectives from which students may explore the urban environment.

However, Ackroyd's vision of the city is not merely spiritual. When asked to explain what he means by the "illimitable" and "infinite" dimension of London, he goes on to define the city in more earthly terms that echo yet also move beyond Thrift's essentially political paradigms and Self's emphasis on London's political, commercial and temporal imperatives:

London is a city of so many aspects and times. It is a city that has changed beyond recognition, but that has also retained a distinct nature. It is a dark city of trade and money, a place often built on hardness and self-interest. It is a place that casts shadows over time. These shadows live in the fabric of the city, and sometimes these shadows emerge to exert their influence on people and places. London is like an echo chamber where elements of the past and the present coexist, creating a complex music of the city.

The rich image of a city "that casts shadows over time" seeks to deny neither the force of time nor the force of place, but seems rather to realign them in our imaginations, and reflects Charlton *et al.*'s (2011) emphasis upon the importance of allowing students' personal lived experiences of the city (their personal "shadows") to interact with literary reconstructions.

Both Ackroyd and Self are engaged in a process of what Massey (2013) has termed the “spatialisation of time”. This is very literally evoked in *Hawksmoor*, through Nicholas Dyer’s attempt to draw a spiritual map on the face of 18<sup>th</sup>-century London using the churches he is charged to build, through which he seeks to create a door into eternity. Similarly, John Dee’s quest in *The House of Dr Dee* for the entrance to a mythical eternal city somewhere beneath Elizabethan London creates firm connections between the realms of space and time. Ackroyd expresses the belief that “There is a territorial imperative at work that makes the city a powerful and mysterious place.” This imperative he describes as “a kind of ‘spirit of place’ or *genius loci*”, by which he means that “[t]he city seems to embody certain historical continuities and imperatives which continue to exert their influence over the inhabitants of the city.” As suggested previously, using the city itself as a location for reading with students may prove a powerful pedagogic method in eliciting this influence and in considering how space and place shape both writing and reading.

## LITERARY LAYERS

Ackroyd’s oeuvre represents a Borgesian enterprise to capture and distil the complexities of historical and contemporary London. This is the fundamental principle underlying his recreations of the city’s past. Ackroyd confesses to “an enduring fascination with the ‘presentness’ of the past”. And he goes on to explain how this influences his work: “It is my job as a writer to recreate the presence of the past, to allow the reader access to the layers of the past which exist within the city.” Sometimes he achieves this through the physical surroundings of the urban environment. The continued existence of the city of the past within the city of the present in the form of buildings, street names and the map of the city proves a rich vein for exploration both in the classroom and in the city itself.

Ackroyd’s construct of contemporary London, like Self’s, encodes layers of the city’s historical past. Subterranean London holds a particular significance for him. *London Under*, an exploration of the tunnels, bunkers, rivers and other buried features of the city, provides a fascinating factual exposition for students to read alongside fictional representations of what lies beneath the surface of the city in *Hawksmoor*, where Nicholas Dyer desires to build an eternal city on the foundation of a mystical pentagon of burials, *The House of Dr Dee*, with its buried mythical city, and *The Plato Papers*, where the eponymous hero gains access to the buried city of the past. Through a study of Ackroyd’s fiction and non-fiction, 16-19 literature students can be introduced to the complex relationship between place, space and time, and can build their sense of how they as readers are agents in constructing the historico-contemporary space/place they inhabit.

Ackroyd has frequently sought to explore the nature of London through the lives of its writers and other artists, both fictional and real. As he observes when asked about this, “[T]he layers of the past...are often best captured through the lives of artists and the ways they sought to represent the city.” In *Eliot, Dickens, Blake, More* and his other biographies, Ackroyd seeks to build bridges to the past by finding analogies not only with the authors’ lives, works and urban environments (though these are all, of course, central to his vision), but also with their written styles. The cadences of each of the writers he has dealt with in his biographies and fiction are brilliantly captured

as Ackroyd recreates their preoccupations and inflections within his own writing. By this means, he dramatises both his characters and the city they inhabit. This represents an important pedagogic possibility.

(Re)creative writing (Knights & Thurgar-Dawson, 2006) is a powerful method by which students can activate their understanding of writers' representations of the city. By entering into writers' language-worlds, and by seeking to capture these within their own writing, students can gain a powerful understanding of how language and place interact. This is a significant element of Ackroyd's urban project: "I see the authors and artists I've written about, including people like the comic artiste Dan Leno, as what I call Cockney Visionaries, people who encapsulate something of the vibrancy and harshness of the city they inhabited and represent."

Given this emphasis on the relation between people, place and art, it is significant that Ackroyd does not draw a distinction between his fictional and non-fictional writings:

I see all my writing as being of one piece – fiction, biography and the more historical books like *London*, *Thames* and *Albion*. They are all part of the same process and I hope that they work together as sequence. I think that the distinction between fiction and biography is more or less artificial. Both depend strongly on character and narrative and are about the building of convincing representations. Biography is not only the study of a person; it is also the study of period and place.

In the cases of *London: the Biography* and *Thames: Sacred River*, Ackroyd states that he "was looking to discover continuities so that the story of the city and the river could be reanimated". His purpose is to that extent historical, as he goes on to suggest:

I wanted to create an organic whole out of the city and the river and through them to tell a different story. For me, I suppose, it was trying to write a different form of cultural history. I think they are innovative in creating a different form of genre related to fiction, biography and history that draws together threads of the city's and the river's existence across time. The same process was at work in *Albion*, which looks at the particularities of English cultural heritage.

By encouraging students at 16-19 level to explore the potential of different genres and by exploring how and where genres blur, both in the act of reading and in the act of writing, teachers can engage their students in high-level, conceptual thinking about both the nature of literature and the nature of urban space.

## CONCLUSION

Paradigms of literary study in the senior years of schooling need to evolve to encourage students to engage subjectively with a range of critical and theoretical agendas and how these function in literary representation and critical response. Scholes (1985, p. 153) observes the fundamentally "political" nature of such processes, asking his readers to consider:

who [what and where] is represented, who does the representing, who [what and where] is object, who [what and where] is subject – and how do these representations connect to the values of groups, communities, classes, tribes, sects and nations?

As this paper suggests, teachers and students approaching literary representations of urban space benefit from bringing such questions to bear on the texts they study. Pedagogies that actively require students to utilise their own lived experiences of the city in their readings of urban texts engage them in critical dialogue, not only with literary representations of the city, but also with themselves and learners and readers and with the city itself. They become, to borrow a phrase from Freire (1970, p. 34), participants in “the transformation of their world”, creating a critical and creative interplay between real and literary worlds.

Self and Ackroyd use the act of literary creation to delve for the shapes that exist within and beneath the streets of London, seeking to make sense of how the city continually “reshapes” itself. The historical, vocal, linguistic, temporal and spatial echoes that resound through the pages of their work encode their perceptions of the influence of place, and all of these emerge from a powerful pedagogical impulse that connects both ontological and epistemological dimensions of their subject. The 16-19 literature classroom offers an exciting space within which such impulses can be explored. As students subject literary reconstructions of the city to theories of urban space and their own lived experiences of the city through mediated acts of reading and writing, they bring personal subjectivities to bear in newly theorised and powerful ways. In so doing, as this paper has argued, they become more informed as co-constructors both of the urban environment and of their own learning.

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