

Dr Joshua Lobb

‘But if the author is dead, what are we doing here?’: Teaching Critical Theory in a Creative Writing Program

Abstract:

Students often see theory as something to be endured, that gets in the way of the ‘real work’ of writing. As Creative Writing Programs become more integrated into the Academy, it is necessary to reflect on the most productive approach to overcome student resistance. This paper proposes two ‘authentic learning’ approaches: student-driven activities that explore theory at work in existing creative texts and that make connections between scholarly and practical writing work.

Biographical Note:

Dr Joshua Lobb is Lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of Wollongong, where he is Co-ordinator of the Theory Program. His Ph.D was in Narrative Theory and the Novel. Between 2003 and 2007, he was Writer-in-Residence for State of Play. This position produced the plays *Still at Aulis*, based on the Euripides’ *Iphigenia at Aulis*, and *Wilde Tales*, based on Oscar Wilde’s fairy stories. *Wilde Tales* was selected as part of Belvoir Street Theatre’s B Sharp season in 2004, and, subsequently, in a NSW tour as part of Critical Stage’s Best Independent Theatre season in 2007.

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Introduction

The title for this paper comes from a comment made a Creative Writing student taking part in the third-year subject Writing Theory: Structuralism to the Postmodern, one of the core courses in the Creative Writing Program at the University of Wollongong. The student's ire wasn't directed solely at Barthes: she was frustrated by what she saw as material that was irrelevant or—worse—antithetical to writing practice. She couldn't see that Barthes' concept has very practical ramifications for writers, and offers new models for writing. I wanted to make the students engage with theory on its own terms, but also to see the value in the theory for them as writer. The paper traces some of the strategies I used to counter student opposition to theory, through a series of 'authentic learning' activities that took place during the lectures for the subject. Specifically, it describes two tasks: the first is a directed creative activity based on the post-colonial notion of counter-discourse; the second is a much looser 'heuristic' task exploring Derrida's notion of the aporia. In order to explain my impulses behind these tasks, I will first place the subject in the context of the Creative Writing Program at UOW, and then outline the pedagogic theory that grounds my practice. I will then describe the activities and their intended outcomes.

Teaching Context and Obstacles

UOW divides its Creative Writing subjects roughly into three categories: Creative Practice (writing workshops), Professional Practice (editing and publication) and Theory. Essentially, then, the theory I teach is a specific kind. The theory of 'how to write' is included in creative practice; while the 'theory' I teach is similar to traditional English Literature subjects. In other theory subjects we examine the development of the novel form, or study texts clustered around historical moments/movements: the Classical period, or Modernism, etc. This is a common structure of many creative programs in the Academy, particularly those which operate out of English or Cultural Studies departments.

An obvious problem with this model is the way that separates the act of writing from the process of reading. This model can be seen to impair student engagement with the material: Whitehead assesses that such an approach promotes an environment where "knowing" and "doing"...[is] separate, and the knowledge thus remain[s]..."inert" (Whitehead, quoted in Herrington et al. 2000: 23). My first aim, then, has been to make the theory 'operationalized' (Brown and Duguid, quoted in Herrington et al. 2000: 25): that is, to forge connections between the Theory and the Creative subjects and to expose the practical applications of theory.

Another obstacle is the teaching structure established by the Academy. Like most universities, UOW Humanities subjects are founded on the Lecture/Tutorial model: in the case of this subject, the format is one two-hour lecture, followed by an hour-long tutorial. Clearly, this framework is not conducive to 'active learning'. As Herrington reveals, in such an environment, 'there are few opportunities to reflect because of an emphasis on pre-determined content that needs to be learned' (2000: 7). Such a format only confirms students' opinion of theory as a concept separate from their intellectual reflection. By identifying the inappropriate nature of the teaching model, then, I recognise the need to 'break away from

traditional, teacher-centred approaches' (Herrington et al. 2006: 1). This confirms my aim: the need to make theory something you can use, not something that you should endure.

Pedagogic Theory

The philosophical base of my approach is the belief that learning is cultural: as Bruner declares, '[the] mind is both constituted by and realized in the use of human culture' (1996: 1). In other words, not only does a cultural context inform our knowledge, that knowledge itself is only formed through cultural interactions, through debate and discussion with others. Such a belief is clearly a constructivist viewpoint: Borthwick comments that the constructivist framework 'provide[s] students with opportunities to drive their own learning in ways that encourage them to make connections...to their potential professional lives, and their broader participation in social and cultural life' (2007: 15).

Specifically, the approach uses the neoconstructivist principles of 'authentic learning'. Tochon explains: 'the neoconstructivist conception of education is founded on the assumption that knowledge is constructed...pragmatically rather than semantically' (2000: 331). An authentic learning project provides the student with the application of the theoretical context: it reflects the way the knowledge could be used in 'real life'. It offers not just an example from the 'real world', but 'encompass[es] a physical environment which reflects the way the knowledge will be used' (Herrington et al. 2006: 4). Of course, such activities pose significant challenges for both lecturers and students. But these challenges can be met if the learning and teaching model is shifted from their conventional frameworks.

On the teaching side, the lecturer moves from a position as authority figure, in charge of the information, to the role of mediator. The lecturer works, as Herrington and Oliver put it, 'not to provide assistance to students by supplying them with the solution, but by giving just enough guidance—the scaffolding—to get them to the next stage' (2000: 40). The lecturer must be open to questions, and engage in discussion with the students as an equal. The shift also has several ramifications to the way lectures are designed. In order for students to feel comfortable with interrogating the information openly, classrooms must be a 'low-risk environment': as such, the activities provided should avoid 'correct' answers and make it acceptable for students to 'make mistakes' during the process of investigation (Stein et al. 2004: 250). More radically, lecture structures need to be flexible: rather than a linear essay-like structure, lectures must operate as what Borthwick calls 'indexes': modular blocks of information that can be moved about depending on the way the discussion turns (Borthwick et al. 2007: 17).

The shift in learning is greater. For a start, learning is fostered through collaboration rather than passive reception. Information is 'transformed' through discussion: as Herrington and Herrington claim, 'providing a multitude of perspectives...is more conducive to sustained and deep exploration of any issue or problem' (Herrington et al. 2006: 6). In an environment which is less about formal lectures and more about collaborative activities, students engage with information much more actively: students have the opportunity, as Stein argues, 'to wrestle with theoretical ideas and frameworks of understanding, to analyse and critique, and to synthesize ideas to make them their own' (2004: 249). Information is revealed to have

many implications and applications, as the students explore ‘alternative routes of traversal...criss-crossing a topic in many directions’ (Spiro et al. quoted in Herrington et al. 2000: 37). This has many benefits for students: students learn to be ‘critically reflective of [their]...discipline, and to develop the skills to bring the discipline into their subjective experience’ (Borthwick et al. 2007: 14); and students are able to articulate their reflection: van Boxtel states that ‘in a collaborative learning situation, students will verbalise their understanding’ (2001: 313).

In the next section, I will outline two possible models for authentic learning that admit these pedagogic shifts.

Authentic Learning Activities: Two Approaches

Borthwick (2007) perceives several kinds of authentic learning approaches. At one end of the spectrum are the ‘apprentice’ projects: what Brown calls a ‘situated’ model. Wiggins, who was one of the first to theorise authentic learning, emphasised this vocational approach. Tochon explains that Wiggins ‘drew inspiration from studies of experts in specific disciplines and showed that pupils benefit from being placed in roles and faced with situational challenges that correspond to those of daily life’ (2000: 333). Such activities are valid: in fact, this approach is often taken in Creative and Professional Practice subjects where students are placed in the professional worlds of writing and publishing (for further analysis, see Borthwick et al., 2007: 16). It is also appropriate for the study of several critical theories, where the theory has emerged from an immediate creative need. Post-colonial theory, for example, was extrapolated from creative texts and the analysis of the strategies of specific writers (see Ashcroft et al. 1989: 1-11). The proposal here is not to recreate a literal ‘post-colonial environment’ (as one would replicate a newspaper room for a Journalism subject), but to design a task that exposes the practical implications of the theory: the theory is, as Stein states, ‘expressed through planned and enacted pedagogical context and events’ (2004: 240). The results are a clear improvement on the passive learning model: a student surveyed by Stein comments that ‘there’s a focus on taking what you’re learning and applying it to yourself...to take the theory and apply it to what you’ve actually seen in practice...you’re encouraged not just to accept what’s written in the literature’(2004: 253). I will offer a ‘situated’ model activity for a theoretical concept in a moment.

However, much of the content of ‘Writing Theory’ does not lend itself to pragmatics of this kind. It is not simply a matter of replicating a professional environment; rather, it is necessary to create an intellectual space where the ideas and interconnections between ideas can be perceived. At the other end of the authentic learning spectrum sits Tochon’s ‘enminding’ model, which is more useful for this kind of theory. Adapted from the word embodies, Tochon’s concept requires the student to enter into the conceptual realm of an idea: what Tochon describes as the creation of ‘experiences [that] submerge...[students] in the mind of the discipline’(2000: 336). Where the simulated model embodies the theory (the student performs or applies the theory in a practical way), the ‘enminding’ model allows students to take their practical knowledge and apply it to the theory: to realise that actions (like reading and writing) are part of a larger theoretical discourse. As Tochon declares: ‘action is but an

expression of...inner culture, of the ‘mind’ of the disciplinary understanding of... situations and events’ (2000: 335). There is a different focus, then, to the situated model: as Borthwick puts it, ‘authenticity comes from the connection between a student’s experience and the disciplinary “mind”’ (2007: 16).

Such an approach is not, in fact, all that different to what occurs in a conventional Literature subject. It can be argued that the act of reading, is a kind of ‘enminding’. Fitzsimmons declares: ‘literature is and has always been a form of authentic learning’ (2006: 162), because the process of reading is a process of entering into a discursive space, situating oneself in this space, and exploring concepts within the rules of that discourse. Fitzsimmons reflects that ‘an engagement with...[the] themes of literature requires a conversation between the world of the text and that of its readers, thereby fulfilling one of the major requirements of authentic learning—situating content in context’ (2006: 162-163). Like the collaboration that occurs in authentic learning, the reader must negotiate several opinions about the meaning of the work. As Kundera perceives, a literary text contains ‘a welter of contradictory truths (truths embodied in *imaginary selves* called characters)’ (Kundera, quoted in Fitzsimmons 2006: 165). Critical texts, I proffer, can also be envisaged in this way. A critic proposes a discursive space, in which the material of the world is represented in a new way; as readers, we navigate this space, interacting and cooperating with the text’s key concepts. In order to facilitate this collaboration with the critical text, the authentic learning activity must allow students to ‘operationalize’ the process: an activity may be as simple as verbalizing the key concepts, engaging in questions about the text, or participating in debates that make manifest the contradictions in the text (for further discussion, see van Boxtel et al. 2001: 314). In the case of some theories, though, the text demands more flexible approaches.

What follows is the description of two activities employed in the subject Writing Theory. I will articulate the aims of each activity and summarize my teaching plan.

A Situated Model: Teaching ‘Counter-Discourse’

My aims were three-fold. The first was to introduce the concept of counter-discourse into the class’ vocabulary. In the previous weeks we had explored Foucault’s notion of discourse, and Said’s study of dominant discourses, so I was able to build on these discussions to demonstrate that counter-discursive practices ‘work to *transgress* discourse by reclaiming...the representational strategies....in which it is grounded’ (Slemon, 1987: 3). Specifically, I wanted to identify counter-discourse as a post-colonial activity: as Tiffin perceives, ‘once colonial Calibans transported the language or had it imposed on them, they used it to curse and to subvert’ (Tiffin, 1987: 19). Second, I wanted to expound the fact that discursive/counter-discursive operations are produced by stylistic choices: I wanted students to manipulate textual properties in order to present new meanings. Third, I wanted to allow students to assess the ideological implications of counter-discourse, and to recognise their own position in a post-colonial culture. Students are often dismissive of counter-discourse as a political gesture, seeing it as something fun (as in a text like *Clueless*). Worse, they can recognise the politics of texts set for study (*Wide Sargasso Sea*, *Foe*), but don’t apply these impulses in their own writing: I wanted students to uncover the political motivations behind

their writing strategies, rather than see the politics as ‘an issue for an essay topic’ (as one of my students put it).

My starting point for the design of the activity was Biggs’ notion of ‘building on the known’. Biggs argues that ‘cognitive growth lies not just in knowing more, but also in the restructuring that occurs when the new knowledge base becomes connected with what is already known’ (2003: 75). As well as using theoretical concepts from previous weeks, I took advantage of students’ experience in writing workshops. I devised a situated task: a writing activity that encouraged students to engage with the theory practically.

I designed an activity based around the re-writing of the Grimms’ ‘The Frog King, or Iron Henry’. I hoped that the basic story was familiar, although I deliberately chose a version that included aspects that differ from the ‘Disneyfied’ text (The Princess does not kiss the Frog—rather, she transforms him by throwing him against a wall; there is an epilogue involving the Prince’s faithful servant, Henry). Before the activity, I introduced a brief definition of counter-discourse. I did not present it in a post-colonial context, but in relation to Richard Terdiman’s original postulation of the term, because I wanted the class to engage with the re-writing without any preconceptions about the specific outcomes. This also justifies my choice of text: there are a number of diegetic incidents of domination in the text, they are not explicitly post-colonial, and the writing strategies are seemingly neutral. Students were placed in teams of three and asked to construct a plan for a re-written version (teamwork was chosen to foster discussion).

The activity was presented in as open a way as possible. Nevertheless, I did guide the re-writing by offering several ‘trigger’ approaches (for further discussion of ‘trigger’ questions, see Lauer 1979: 269). I find that students often begin the re-writing process by concentrating on the plot: I allowed for this by asking them to make clear their protagonist, and to identify a central symbol. But I also wanted to expose the political motivations of formal devices, so asked them questions about narratorial voice and spatial/temporal position, kinds of focalisation, use of dialogue and plot structure.

Students were given fifteen minutes to complete their plan, after which they presented their version to the rest of the class. This evolved into a general discussion about general strategies for re-writing. This was directed through more ‘trigger’ questions: I asked students to identify openings in the text where re-writing was possible. Some of these were plot-dependent: the illogicality of the King’s treatment of his daughter, or Henry’s relationship with his master. I asked students to describe social and political context for these moments, which developed into a conversation about gender and class relations. Students could easily recognise the political implications of the plot re-writings, but the aim was to expose the same political impulses in the writing, so I triggered discussion with questions about the relation between narratological strategy and plot, such as: ‘What is the best narratorial voice from Iron Henry’s perspective?’ and ‘What is the Princess’ relationship with the narrator?’ I also asked students to identify places where the narrative voice was inconsistent: places where the narrative skates over implausibilities, contradicts itself or tries to assert its own authority too forcefully. From here, I brought post-colonial theory into the discussion, particularly Slemon’s argument that certain European texts (Leavis’ Great Tradition) operate as

Monuments of Empire: the textual structure of these works assert a particular ideology. We discussed specific conventions of prose fiction (retrospective narration, omniscient narration, first-person narration) and the way these seem natural. I asked if students used these conventions in their own writing: most students expressed a tendency towards them. By now, most students had acknowledged their position under textual Monuments of Empire: obeying certain practices assigned to them, operating under the burden of previous texts (the weight of other genres, writing strategies).

The method used here was what Van Boxtel calls ‘cumulative talk’: ‘the accumulation and integration of ideas’ (2001: 313). Although much of the theory was delivered by the lecturer, it was incorporated into an examination in which the students were ‘stakeholders’. The task put the theoretical ideas into practice and implicated the students own work directly: situating the theory in authentic creative context, then, produced a deep and personal understanding of the theory. One of the difficulties of sustaining a successful result of this activity, though, is the dependence on students to be willing to engage with the topic, as well as the lecturer’s ability to lead the discussion in a timely manner. Tochon has exposed this difficulty as the tension between student ‘discovery’ and pedagogical constraints (2000: 349). Moreover, if we depend too much on this model, such activities can become as predictable and passive as conventional lecture: students learn what kind of response is valid in discussion and don’t explore outside the parameters. And, as discussed, there are certain kinds of information that do not function in a simulated environment. Therefore, we should also consider authentic models that allow for greater flexibility and more encompassing. I argue that the ‘enminding’ model is one way of overcoming these problems.

An Enminded Model: Teaching the ‘Aporia’

Derrida’s notion of the aporia is notoriously difficult to explain, probably because it resists explanation. The aporia is the place where meaning is never fixed; where meaning is endlessly deferred through a series of ‘traces of traces’ of meaning (Derrida 1981: 26); where the reader says ‘I’m stuck...I cannot get out, I’m helpless’ (Derrida 1993: 13). Derrida’s theories are even more difficult to place in a creative writing context. In practical writing subjects, students are told to ‘fix’ their meaning. Students learn to pare and polish their texts in order to deliver the most definitive narrative representation. Derrida, on the other hand, promotes the deferral of meaning: to uncover the points where ‘the very project [of writing]...becomes impossible’ (1993: 12). It’s clear, then, that a situated creative writing task is an inadequate model for an authentic learning model based on Derrida. It is not a physical framework that needs to be provided; rather, a conceptual one. My starting point, then, was Tochon’s enminding model: I required an activity that would require students to enter into the discipline of Derrida’s theories and explore the ways his theory operates.

Specifically, I wanted to demonstrate that Derrida’s theory can in fact be utilised by writers: the aporia can be seen as a liberating rather than a destabilising aspect of writing. The problem with paring creative texts, I argue, is that it works to block out certain meanings (in Derrida’s terms, it creates texts with ‘limits’ or ‘borders’ (1993:15)). Utilising aporias may allow writers to create more engaging texts for readers: as Derrida explains, aporias do flummox us, do momentarily arrest us, but that they also ‘paralyz[e]...us...in a way that is not

necessarily negative' 1993:12). I wanted to allow students to explore existing creative texts that use the aporia in this way, so that the positive notions of the aporia could be made manifest. For the task I chose J. M. Coetzee's novel *Foe*. This was partly to build on the previous discussion about counter-discourse, but also because the text uses aporias in a dynamic ways. The text is full of 'unpassable paths': stories set up by some characters that are subverted by others, characters that resist conventions and resist fixed meanings. In particular, the character of Friday is unreadable: he writes, he draws, he dances, but the reader is never given the tools to translate his actions. The text can be seen as a battle between Foe and Friday: Foe seeks to lock Friday into a meaningful position, Friday resists.ⁱ

To reflect full 'enminding' of Derrida's endlessly deferring theory, and to encourage free 'play' in the creative text, the activity needed to be as open as possible: to use 'exploratory talk' rather than the cumulative discussion used in the counter-discourse activity (Van Boxtel, 2001: 313). To a certain extent, the activity compelled an unstructured approach, where 'there [would be] no summarizing question or topic for the investigation...students needed to work out exactly what they were required to do' Herrington and Herrington, 2000: 35). Nevertheless, the task demanded a starting point from which students would want to enter the text. The activity, then, would function as a heuristic task. As Lauer points out, heuristic exploration is 'neither a set of mechanical steps nor trial-and-error searches, [but] conscious operations that are useful in open-ended inquiry which seeks new meanings' (1979: 268). Both the theory and the text contain conceptual conflicts: moments where two ideas (fixed meaning/deferral) struggle with each other. These conflicts provided a useful access point for students, and—serendipitously—also provided a way to construct a productive authentic activity. Van Boxtel submits that 'the important role of conflict and controversy that appears in social interaction...can generate explanations, justifications, reflection and a search for new information' (2001: 313). Considering these ideas, I settled on a game structure. Games are based on conflict; games are both directed and open: they demand that players obey the rules, but they are also loose enough for players to conceive their own way through the game, to adapt, to explore different tactics.

The Game of Foe requires two players: one student plays Foe, a logical strategist; the other plays Friday, a subversive tactician. The aim of the game is different for each player: Friday tries to destabilise the text; Foe must restore order. Players read aloud a passage from Coetzee's text (Coetzee, 1987: 141-152). Friday looks for an aporia: an image, action or concept that challenges the internal logic of the text (the text is full of slipping metaphors, unreadable actions, multiple meanings); when one is uncovered, Foe must provide a logical explanation for these 'unresolvable problems'. The game is won/lost when Foe cannot provide a logical answer. A typical game move was when one Friday identified Foe's attempts to cover up the fact that he keeps shifting metaphors: first, the character Foe talks about 'the heart of the story', then he corrects himself with 'the eye of the story', then the text replaces it again with 'the mouth' of the story (Coetzee 1987: 141). Friday's argument was that Foe establishes himself as the authority of writing, and yet even he can't confirm the meaning of the text.

The game was played for about twenty minutes. Students found the process difficult initially: to counter this, I had compiled a list of what I considered 'aporetic moments', and prompted

the students with specific questions like ‘What about the description of the log?’; if students wanted further help, I offered more general questions like ‘What action does Friday take in the text?’ or ‘who has control of the text at this point?’. But, generally, students responded to the spirit of competition and soon found moments that were not on my list.

After the games of two or three pairs had been ‘lost’, I instigated a casual debrief on the activity: I asked the winning Fridays to describe their victorious aporia, and for the losing Foes to describe their best move in the game. We discussed the dramatic action at these points. One successful moment for a Foe player was also a point when the character Foe was dominating Friday: in the section where Foe mixes his imagery (heart/eye/mouth), Foe is clearly attempting to speak for Friday, and to deny his authentic voice. Conversely, the moment that the power shifts to the character Friday also correlates to a winning move for Player-Friday. Towards the end of the passage, Friday is seen writing: a series of o’s, tightly packed together (Coetzee, 1987: 152). The writing is illegible, so could hardly be called writing: this produces an aporetic paradox for Player-Friday. Player-Foe was unable to fill this hole, in the same way that the Character Foe was unable to decipher Character-Friday’s writing. Through this discussion, students became aware of the usefulness of aporias as a device for more active reader engagement: readers are placed in a similar position to the character Friday as he is dominated/liberated. We then talked about the conflicts in students’ own work and the ways in which aporias could be similarly utilised. Through this, I hoped that students would discover that the reader’s process of ‘struggling’ with these kinds of aporias actually produces the meaning: and that students’ own process of writing can allow for such participatory reading practices.

Conclusion

I end this paper by moving from my specific circumstances, to a reflection on the larger implications of authentic learning in the Creative Writing context, and in the broader framework of teaching Creative Writing within the Academy. In many ways, the concept of authentic learning is already an essential part of Creative Writing pedagogy. Indeed, as I have mentioned, the core of the Creative Writing program—the workshop—is a form of authentic learning. However, I believe that we can build on our experiences in leading workshops, to offer a more complex and intellectually-stimulating education to our students. We can, for example, broaden the kinds of authentic experiences for our students. Our teaching need not be limited to the ‘situated’ end of the authentic spectrum: rather, by using the ‘enminding’ approach we can allow students to engage with the philosophical as well as the pragmatic side of writing. More importantly, we can use the authentic learning approach to *connect* the philosophic with the pragmatic: through authentic learning tasks like the re-writing activity, students can begin to see that they are part of the production of culture and not operating independently from ideology; through tasks like ‘The Game of *Foe*’, students may begin to see that theory is not something separate from the process of writing, but can be something writers actually use. As Stein puts it, ‘educational institutions are not just places where subject matter is passed on...but places where the culture is refreshed, renewed and reinvented’ (2004: 241). As Creative Writing becomes more and more present in University Programs, we can use teaching models like the ones I have presented to engage students as scholars as well as practitioners.

Of course, this pedagogical shift is not easy. One of the difficulties of employing authentic learning activities is that there is no guarantee that the students are going to get ‘the right answer’ out of the activities: as I’ve already touched on, students could be apathetic or obstructive, and discussions could deviate from the teacher’s plans in surprising ways. As Tochon concedes, ‘one plans an activity and it suddenly sprouts into something quite different’ (2000: 339). There is always a tension between wanting to allow for genuinely open exploration, and planning contingency to keep students ‘on track’. Tochon explains that one wants it to be genuinely experiential—for the student to discover the meaning—but at the same time ‘one has to *design* disciplinary practices in order to teach it’ (2000: 337). Nevertheless, I believe that the benefits of the authentic approach clearly outweigh the problems. One of my proudest moments as a teacher was when the student who was furious with Barthes, suddenly exclaimed: ‘Who cares about the dead author: it’s the reader who’s alive!’ We may not always elicit such perfect responses, but I believe that authentic tasks promote them more urgently: as Biggs states, authentic activities ‘*require*...students to question, to speculate, to generate solutions’ (2003). These, I believe, are essential qualities for scholars, but also—and more importantly—for writers.

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¹ Of course, since Coetzee is aware of these 'holes' in the text, it could be argued that these are not aporias at all: one of my students wittily called these constructed aporias 'fauxporias'. Nevertheless, I argue that Coetzee is utilising Derrida's theory in his writing: indeed, it is this kind of adaptation of theory which is perhaps the most useful way writers can use post-structuralist ideas.