

Teaching ideas

AS/A Level English Language and Literature 7706/7707

Imagined worlds: Beginnings

Introduction

These teaching ideas can be used with students when exploring the beginning of their set novel. They offer students the opportunity to explore the significance of a good beginning and explore the notions that it has a **privileged position** in the structure of a novel itself, and is important in presenting key aspects of themes, places, times and characters. They also encourage students to think about how the building up of fictional worlds relies on very specific and conscious language choices and how authors rely on readers' knowledge to help build up a storyworld and achieve intended effects.

The suggested activities are intended to span two lessons lasting one hour each.

Learning objectives

Students will:

- consider the importance of the beginning of their set novel
- explore how authors rely and build on readers' schematic knowledge in creating a storyworld
- evaluate the significance of specific language choices used and their likely interpretative effects.

Prior knowledge needed

Students should have some knowledge of the following:

- narrative discourse
- foregrounding
- schematic (background) knowledge
- language levels.

Lesson preparation

Teachers will need the following resources:

- the beginning of *Almost Moon*, cut into seven strips/sections (as detailed below)
- A3 paper
- a selection of openings to films and TV programmes
- any film versions of the set novel studied.

Activities

Lesson 1

- Ask students to discuss what makes a good beginning. Students can draw on their own experiences and/or examples can be used from any suitable TV programmes and films. Discuss in terms of:
 - readers'/viewers' expectations
 - the setting up of themes, characters and events,
 - the use of specific strategies to engage and interest a reader/viewer.
- Cut the opening paragraph to Alice Sebold's novel *The Almost Moon* into seven sections and then present these to students (working in pairs) with each pair taking a different section (for a class of 28, each section would therefore be covered by two pairs of students). Ask pairs to explore what they notice in terms of:
 - specific lexical choices: what they mean and the kinds of knowledge that they evoke
 - any theme, character, event that is foregrounded
 - their own ideas as to what this novel might be about from the part that they have.

The beginning/opening paragraph to *The Almost Moon* (available on *Google Books* <http://goo.gl/Drnuxf>) split into seven sections (opening words to each section shown below):

1. When...done,
2. Killing...easily.
3. Dementia...by it.
4. My mother's...flowers.
5. She ...met her
6. and...child,
7. but...mattered.

For example, students might pick up on the conversational register of section one, the apparent tension between 'killing' and the remainder of the clause, and the fact that the narrator has confessed to murder in section two, the personification of dementia in section three, the simile used to describe the narrator's mother in section four, and a range of references to family, love, relationships and so on across the entire extract, and the perspective 'trick' in section seven – it's still the same narrating voice but the use of the perception verb 'gazed' with 'up' invites us to conceptualise the scene to some degree as the mother.

- These ideas can then be shared as a class. Students can discuss the specific features of their section, consider the ways the parts connect in terms of themes, characters and events, the types of knowledge that a reader needs to make sense of the paragraph as a whole and what they feel this paragraph foregrounds or signposts in terms of the rest of the novel.

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- The remainder of this lesson can be spent undertaking some rewriting activities to further explore the effects of particular choices. Working with the same or another section of the beginning paragraph, students can make subtle and more radical alterations (see below) and think about the consequences of their choices
 - a shift in perspective to a different narrator
 - different metaphors to describe dementia and the mother
 - a different register (eg a more formal style of speaking or the use of a particular vocabulary: legal, medical and so on).

Preparation for next lesson

- Students should return to their own novel and think about what specifically is foregrounded and why at the beginning. They could either do this by thinking about the opening paragraph(s) as a whole or replicating the activity above and taking one small part on which they could work and be ready to discuss in the next lesson.

Lesson 2

- In the subsequent lesson, students can work on their own set novel. Start the lesson by drawing on Peter Rabinowitz's notion of the **privileged position** (the idea that beginnings and endings draw attention to themselves because of their placement in a text). Point out to students that this is a form of foregrounding and draw on the discussion from the previous lesson on what a beginning should do, its dramatic and thematic potential and so on.
- Students can then work on their own novel in a number of ways, depending on time and the amount of previous work completed:
 - work on a section for the beginning of the novel in the same way as they have done with *The Almost Moon*. This could build on work they have completed as preparation for this lesson. As before, encourage students to think about what is foregrounded/signposted and what kinds of knowledge the reader is being asked to draw on to make sense of and help create the storyworld
 - explore the notion of a privileged position in more detail by looking at the beginnings of each chapter in the novel (for novels where there are too many chapters, the teacher or students might have to do some prior selection). In what ways do these beginnings work? How do they relate to each other? Students could experiment by 'swapping' opening words or lines: what would happen if the beginning of chapter 2 became the beginning of chapter 1 for example? Can they make a short poem or story that captures the essence of the novel out of the first word (or first few words) of each of its chapters?
 - students can continue to work on the beginnings of chapters by producing an A3 collage (using cut outs from newspaper and magazines) that present what for them are the foregrounded elements of each chapter and exploring how they feel the chapters fit together into a coherent whole
- Finally, round off the learning by asking students to write up an analysis of the beginning of their novel. In line with the specification requirements, this should be focused on an aspect of point of view, character, place, time, or the representation of speech and/or thought

Further work

- Similar activities can be undertaken on endings (both to the novel per se and to individual chapters) which also, in Rabinowitz's terms, hold a privileged and attention-seeking position.
- Students can read the rest of the opening chapter of *The Almost Moon* where Helen (the narrator) describes the build up to and carrying out of the killing of her mother. It would be interesting to do some similar work on the ending of this chapter.
- Ask students to find a selection of their own beginnings and endings, drawing on the work they have done, and bring these in to share with others. A-level students could begin to think about possible areas of exploration for their NEA (it would be possible to explore in detail the openings to chapters of a novel and then do some comparative work with non-literary material).

Version 0.1

First published (01/05/15)

Last updated (01/05/15)