

Case study – Cultural Capital

Teaching ‘The Gothic’ in preparation for studying ‘The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde’

Introduction

When starting out on the project we were unsure how to precisely define ‘cultural capital’. We had an awareness that it linked to context and asked colleagues, from various schools and subject areas, but they were equally unsure. After some initial reading we began to understand the idea of ‘cultural allusions’ being a barrier or gateway to social mobility, and to greater understanding of the world we live in. From our experience, many schools help students to develop cultural capital implicitly, often without drawing the students’ attention to it, and often without the teachers knowing they are addressing it also. The exception to this is English, when context is taught explicitly with a view to unlocking authorial intent, or some background information on a time period relevant to a text, but cultural capital is far more than this.

Our school population has a high proportion of students for whom English is an additional language. For these students, the study of English Literature can pose additional challenges, especially when faced with curriculum content that would have been taught in Key Stages 1-2. For instance, comprehension of many 19th century texts requires some understanding of what life was like in Victorian England. We find that it can be challenging to balance teaching students enough relevant historical background to be able to access the text while still focusing on the universal ideas within the text.

Our initial thinking was to recognise that ‘The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde’ is part of a canon of Gothic literature. We felt that genre and a text’s literary context could offer a ‘way in’ for students to access the text when they reach GCSE study. In the two-year GCSE course, teachers have a lot of content to cover and don’t always have time to read ‘around’ the text and explore the wider genre. We felt it was important that students got the opportunity to explore the Gothic genre more broadly so that they were fully prepared for the reading of Jekyll and Hyde.

We wanted to instil a deeper understanding of the Gothic genre so decided to write a series of Key Stage 3 lessons that focused on some of the basic elements, for example characters and settings, and introduced more challenging concepts, such as duality. We also wanted to expose students to as many different types of traditional and contemporary Gothic texts as possible, as a way of practising reading skills that link to both the English Language and Literature GCSEs (see suggested texts on the last page). The idea was to begin with a blank canvas, a simple ‘noticing’ activity to draw out students’ prior knowledge of the Gothic genre. From that point we could develop specific elements of the genre to enable students to identify cultural allusions within texts and use their newly acquired knowledge to further their appreciation of Gothic texts

We had originally focussed largely on Victorian literature and using the more traditional Gothic texts but following feedback, added some more modern examples. Making the additions was successful as this made an interesting talking point for the pupils. One student added in her feedback, “I hadn’t realised that there were new Gothic books, I thought they were all just old.” This opened up discussion in the class about books, films and TV programmes that they liked that could

be classed as Gothic and we put together a ‘modern Gothic book box’ for their KS3 library lessons that proved popular.

Activities and implementation

The unit of work we produced is designed to lead into GCSE in many ways: introduction to reading complex vocabulary and critical reading to encourage analysis. We also used short tasks designed to familiarise students with the skills required for GCSE English Language. All of the lessons were designed so that when students encounter ‘The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde’ as part of their GCSE studies they have a sense of familiarity and are equipped to identify the ideas and concepts alluded to in the text more readily, such as Darwinism.

One success of the scheme was the students’ exposure to and engagement with the variety of Gothic texts on offer. At first some students were resistant to the Victorian pieces and felt they were too challenging, but they became more positive throughout the process, showing more resilience and independence with each lesson.

We had worried that the scheme involved too many extracts but it was beneficial exposing students to a range of works of fiction and authors that they may not have otherwise encountered. It was pleasing how many questions students of all abilities had about the texts, for example wanting to know what happened to the characters or what happened next in the plot. In one class, 80% of the students said that they would go on to read at least one of the texts we had looked at.

Extracts from the lessons and student work

Stage 1 – Exploration of wide range of texts

We chose to start and finish the scheme of work with an assessment of students’ knowledge of the Gothic genre so that we could measure the progress students make over the series of six lessons. We also asked students to write a definition of the Gothic in the first lesson which they added to and evolved as each lesson was taught and they acquired a more developed understanding. After defining the Gothic, students read a number of extracts which were rich in atmospheric descriptions of settings. We then asked students to discuss and analyse the extracts, using their prior knowledge to recognise some Gothic conventions.

We found that students needed lots of scaffolding in their reading of the extract during the first lesson, however, the majority of the class became more independent with each lesson taught and developed a resilient ‘give it a go’ attitude.

“In terms of changing it, I’d perhaps include some more visual and auditory stimulus for our students, eg clips from adaptations, music influenced by the genre etc as our lower attaining students tend to engage with that kind of a hook.”

The students then worked together to draw out the common conventions of Gothic settings, with a view to using these to write their own Gothic description in the following lessons.

Building on the conventions defined in lesson 1, we asked students to use the knowledge they had gained to analyse a different Gothic extract. Teachers particularly liked the starter activities where students were given the independence of reading an extract and saying what they noticed – they elicited some really nice responses with the safety of the openness of the task. We chose to refer to the GCSE assessment objectives (AOs) during the Key Stage 3 scheme as we didn’t want to

make the GCSE link explicit, but it was clear from their written work how well the students were engaging with the writers' ideas and why they'd chosen particular methods.

Stage 2 - Application and development

The understanding of Gothic conventions, ideas and methods developed during the analysis lessons led to students writing their own Gothic description, implementing the knowledge they had gained so far. We then encouraged students to reflect and edit their work, using an image of Angela Carter's redrafting of 'The Bloody Chamber' (available from [The British Library](#)) as stimulus. After students had an understanding of Gothic conventions and could apply these to their own writing, we further developed students' learning by analysing other ideas / concepts linked to the Gothic genre and Jekyll and Hyde, such as duality and Darwinism.

Finally, students were given a 'noticing' task, identical to the initial assessment made at the beginning of the unit, as a way of measuring how much impact the unit had had on the students' awareness and understanding of the Gothic genre and associated allusions.

How did students cope with the idea of duality?

Of all the key concepts and themes covered, 'duality' is the theme that all students were able to connect with on some level. We decided to introduce it through the idea of superheroes and all abilities engaged with the idea of duality in superheroes. For instance one class had a lovely discussion about the Marvel character the Hulk, the two sides of his personality, and how that made the 'whole' character. Higher attaining students were able to apply the concept to a range of fictional characters they'd encountered in wider reading, with whole-class discussions bringing in characters that they'd previously studied together in KS3.

It proved beneficial for students to explore the more challenging concepts through a range of extracts from different authors and eras, rather than seeing it as fixed to 19th century fiction or one particular text. Hopefully this will encourage students not to 'compartmentalise' their learning and therefore make the skills more transferable. This approach has made us reflect on our teaching practice within the department, and now we're wondering if we should teach key ideas more generally across multiple extracts and types of text before applying them to the main Key Stage 3 text or GCSE texts. We have already started to adjust our long term plans to accommodate this approach.

"It would be good to have moved into reading a Gothic short story that covered similar themes to see how well they can apply the skills. I'd certainly look at building more mini-schemes into our long term plans and provide opportunities to re-visit the more challenging content to try and help with student understanding at KS4."

Does it address gaps in cultural context?

The unit specifically focussed on Victorian ideas around criminality, duality, evolution, physiognomy and religion. These elements are vital to assist their students in their understanding of the allusions in the Gothic texts throughout the unit.

Teachers:

In terms of cultural capital, the unit did change the mind-set of the teachers involved and therefore their delivery. We received feedback that suggested the teachers normally focused on why *they* love a piece of writing rather than the wider cultural significance of the text. The project

encouraged the teachers to think about the 19th century texts from a cultural capital standpoint, leading them to reflect on why these texts are culturally significant in contemporary literature and culture, and how they've elicited modern references with which students are familiar.

“The Dracula extract was really successful. It really helped with the students’ creative writing and improved vocabulary. We kept a dictionary of Gothic words in the back of their books and had a ‘Gothic word of the day’ and it really helped to build their understanding and appreciation of the genre.”

Two staff members said how useful they'd found it to explore context themselves and to get a deeper understanding of what it actually means and how to deliver it. One said it made her feel reassured that 'context' marks on the Literature papers were not constrained to historical information and facts and to think more about the bigger themes within a text.

Students:

The initial assessment at the beginning of the scheme of work indicated that some groups of students already had a more developed cultural understanding than others. In particular we found that lower attaining students didn't have such rich cultural capital to draw from which highlighted the importance of developing this knowledge at Key Stage 3 to offer all students the best opportunity when they begin studying for their GCSEs.

“I had heard the word Gothic before but didn't know what it meant, I thought it just meant scary.”

Some students had heard of lots of the famous Gothic characters before without really knowing anything about the plot/text/context and it was interesting how many questions they had about the extracts. Our school is in Yorkshire and our students were interested to find out more about the local links to many of the Gothic extracts we studied, such as Whitby's link to Dracula and especially about the Brontes and Haworth, a town less than 10 miles away from the school but that most of our students knew nothing about.

Concluding remarks

This was an eye-opening project – seeing the ways students learnt from, and engaged with, a broad range of texts and concepts without teaching to the specific GCSE text will change the way I approach this from now on. Students who had very little or no awareness of the genre at the start of the unit produced some incredibly high-level analysis of Gothic texts, referencing allusions that they wouldn't have identified before the scheme of work. They also wrote, and enjoyed writing, their own Gothic descriptions, incorporating elements of the genre they'd just identified in others' work. Finally, the concluding activity showed a marked improvement in the students' understanding of the Gothic and its conventions, and we hope they will apply this knowledge with confidence when they study 'Jekyll and Hyde' at Key Stage 4.

Suggested texts

The lessons delivered as part of this project featured extracts from the following classic and modern Gothic texts:

Northanger Abbey, Jane Austen (1817)

Wuthering Heights, Emily Bronte (1847)

The Strange of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, Robert Louis Stevenson (1886)

The Picture of Dorian Gray, Oscar Wilde (1890)

Dracula, Bram Stoker (1897)

The Bloody Chamber, Angela Carter (1979)

The Woman in Black, Susan Hill (1983)

The Radleys, Matt Haig (2010)