



# Transformations: individual activity

**Collection:** Small group teaching

**Resource:** Transformative Writing

## Approximate duration

1 - 2 hours

## Learning outcomes

To develop 'out of the box' or 'left field' thinking about ways of articulating and punctuating learning in literary studies.

## Introduction

This activity, like most of the activities in The Pool is offered as an exemplum. Something that might stimulate ideas, that you can re-orient, turn round, play with. The assumption is that there is enough time within your module to set your students the challenge of a different task, and a different modality of learning for at least one week - or introduce a workshop type activity within a single session.

## The activity

A number of literature lecturers have used techniques variously referred to as critical-creative writing, textual intervention, and so on, in order to give their students an opportunity to work with literary text in a way different from the conventional analytical essay. Such approaches may be seen as a complement to the essay, or they may move off in a direction of their own. (Or indeed converge with 'Creative Writing'.) Here we attempt a 'worked example' of a complementary approach, an interval, or temporary shift of mode and register within a critical module. This can enable students to build bridges between different aspects of their learning: here between 'creativity' and



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analytical performance. Again, different lecturers have tried different approaches, and you will need to turn over in your own mind what it is you would like to achieve. For example, if the point is to better understand or become 'inward' with a literary form, attempting to write in that form (e.g. Heroic Couplets, or the Shakespearean sonnet), can provide a valuable complement to textbook learning. But there is also an approach - briefly exemplified here - which has more to do with motifs and narrative formations. There is a sequence of steps involved here.

1. You need isolate a motif (there is an example below) which appears to carry dynamic force within the text being studied. You summarise this motif in a few lines, and give the summary to your students.
2. They then (either in class, or in the VLE, or simply privately) write a couple of paragraphs taking their starting point from the chosen motif.
3. You then - as it were - open the book, and guide them back to the occurrence of the motif in the text. The critical discussion then opens out from there. How far does this motif generate or divert the narrative? What might one mean by generative kernels? etc.

## Example

Almost certainly, lecturers will want to come up with their own examples. But here is a sketch, to give the general idea. It involves working with those moments of revelation or epiphany so characteristic of the modernist short story in the Katherine Mansfield or James Joyce moulds, but also powerful within the work of Henry James. Such an item of work could therefore become an element within a module on James, on Lawrence, or Joyce, or on the short story more generally. You could begin by offering an example: glimpsed betrayal. Something like the moment when Isabel returns early and glimpses Osmond, her husband, sitting and Madame Merle standing:

*Just beyond the threshold of the drawing-room she stopped short, the reason for her doing so being that she had received an impression. The impression had, in strictness, nothing unprecedented; but she felt it as something new, and the soundlessness of her step gave her time to take in the scene before she interrupted it. Madame Merle was there in her bonnet, and Gilbert Osmond was talking to her; for a minute they were*



*unaware she had come in. Isabel had often seen that before, certainly; but what she had not seen, or at least had not noticed, was that their colloquy had for the moment converted itself into a sort of familiar silence, from which she instantly perceived that her entrance would startle them. Madame Merle was standing on the rug, a little way from the fire; Osmond was in a deep chair, leaning back and looking at her. Her head was erect, as usual, but her eyes were bent on his. What struck Isabel first was that he was sitting while Madame Merle stood; there was an anomaly in this that arrested her. Then she perceived that they had arrived at a desultory pause in their exchange of ideas and were musing, face to face, with the freedom of old friends who sometimes exchange ideas without uttering them. There was nothing to shock in this; they were old friends in fact. But the thing made an image, lasting only a moment, like a sudden flicker of light. Their relative positions, their absorbed mutual gaze, struck her as something detected.* (Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady* chapter 50)

Students are then invited to write individual paragraphs about some moment of being taken aback by something suddenly realised. There is a twist, though. They are only allowed to describe the physical scene, not to engage in narrative reflection about what they were thinking. The trick is to try to suggest as much as possible without narrative overview. They then compare their paragraphs (in pairs if in class; or in the VLE). You then move to a story, encourage them to isolate one or more such moments, and pursue into a critical study informed by their own pieces of writing.

## Links & References

- Knights, Ben and Thurgar-Dawson, Chris. *Active Reading: Transformative Writing in Literary Studies*. London: Continuum. 2006.
- Pope, Rob. *Textual Intervention: Critical and Creative Strategies for Literary Studies*. London: Routledge. 1995.
- Scholes, Robert. *The Crafty Reader*. New Haven CT: Yale University Press. 2001.

## Relationship to the Professional Standards Framework

- **Core Knowledge 2:** Appropriate methods for teaching and learning in the subject area and at the level of the academic programme



- **Professional Values 3:** Commitment to the development of learning communities
- **Professional Values 4:** Commitment to encouraging participation in higher education, acknowledging diversity and promoting equality of opportunity

More information about the Professional Standards Framework can be obtained from the summary factsheet in the *Subject & Pedagogy* collection in HumBox.

<http://humbox.ac.uk/2731/>

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## Resources in the Small group teaching collection

- Small group teaching: introduction to the collection
- Seminar design: resource overview
  - Seminar design: individual activity
  - Seminar design: group activity
- Peer reviewing a seminar: Oliver Twist : resource overview
  - Peer review: individual activity
  - Adjusting the level
- Peer reviewing a seminar: The Bonesetter's Daughter : resource overview
  - A complex dialogue
  - Negotiated authority
- Thinking about seminars: resource overview
  - Relevance and red herrings
  - Weighing up the elements
- Nightmare scenarios: resource overview
  - Facing up to nightmares: group activity
  - Comparing notes
- Transformative writing: resource overview
  - **Transformations: individual activity (\*you are here)**
  - Transformations: group activity



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