

Fracturing essayist conventions in Comp I: narrative poetry – a textual analysis of response, meaning and form

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Abstract: *This article first analyzes the differing responses of three individuals who have read the same first draft of a paper assigned in an ESL college composition class. The analysis highlights the multiple ways in which a text can be read and how these “readings” are ideologically driven. The first reader reads the text from the perspective of a prescriptivist, the second reads for meaning though is sidetracked by mistaken assumptions regarding text structure, and the third reads the text for what it is: a poem. The author then provides a detailed thematic and linguistic analysis of the same student text and, in so doing, fractures preconceived notions of how meaning is conveyed, cohesion maintained, and sense made of experience, in this instance, when a student has been asked to write a memoir. The highly detailed analysis illuminates the complexity inherent in a text that in some contexts might draw little, if any, attention other than a request for a rewrite. In the end, the article raises concerns about the constraints academic essayist literacy imposes on some of our most basic and potentially, creative writers.*

Keywords: *teaching writing in a FL, narrative analysis, response to student writing, creative vs. academic writing*

Few write in the way in which an architect builds; who, before he sets to work, sketches out his plan, and thinks it over down to its smallest details.
Arthur Schopenhauer

Here, then, we conclude something fundamental about reality. The least adequate form of existence - complete frustration - is chaos, confusion; the acme of existence is a perfect fitting together. Within our human experience, beauty is a triumph, for wherever there is beauty, chaos has been banished, the impotence of confusion has been overcome, and a vital integration has been achieved.
H. A. Overstreet

During the years I taught writing to undergraduates who were non-native speakers of English I read many a paper that had been written without first sketching out a plan (Schopenhauer, 1936, p. 25). Often these papers were difficult to access, seemingly

chaotic, confused, leaving me in the end, filled with frustration. But I would work with each student, seeking to uncover the main topic and the writer's intentions leading, with hope, to a draft along the way that would fit my notion of academic prose. Then there were those rare instances in which I would read a paper and understand that even though the writer had not fulfilled "my expectations", nonetheless a certain beauty appeared, "chaos banished," "confusion overcome, and a vital integration" achieved (Overstreet, 1936, p. 525). This was the case when I read the paper, *A New Life*, which is the topic of discussion and textual analysis herein.

TEXT IN CONTEXT

I most generally began the semester with an assignment that allowed students to draw from their own lived experiences as the foundation for their writing (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Giroux, 1993; Macedo, 1994; Shor & Freire, 1987). Gradually I changed the naming of this first assignment from "a personal narrative" to a "memoir", in an effort to use the assignment not only as an opportunity for students to write from personal experience, but also to open access to a more specific characterization of the genre required and the expansion of students' "literary" vocabulary. Memoir just sounded more sophisticated than the mundane "personal narrative", and I wanted to create a sense of validation for my students through the enactment of a simple linguistic turn-of-phrase. Of course I explained that a memoir emerged from one's own memory of a personal experience, thus it was, in a sense, an experience known first and foremost to the student writer who was then charged with communicating to me and others in the class – the intended audience – information previously unknown to us (Heath, 1982; Mitchell, 1999). This need to communicate something to which I and others were not already privy encouraged – I hoped – students to be as explicit as possible in their writing. All this I explained as well in an effort to highlight for students the need to banish any assumptions that one's writing was to emulate the language one would use when communicating to a friend face-to-face. First and foremost students were not to assume shared background knowledge, thus all language used in the memoir was to be explicit and decontextualized, hallmarks of academic discourse.

I gave examples to illustrate the literate structures I hoped to see in the memoir. One I typically used was the following meant to represent a possible opening line: "The day before I left my country . . . (and so forth)". Since many of my students were quite new to the United States their memoirs often dealt with the experience of leaving one's country or with encountering a new land, thus I had read and heard on more than one occasion opening lines similar to the one begun above. First I would write the words - "The day before I left my country. . ." - on the board, and then ask a volunteer to read/say the words out loud. The class was then asked to focus on the reader/speaker and to interpret the meaning of the words as if they were the speaker's own. I would dig deeper and deeper to elicit an explicit interpretation by focusing specifically on the words "my country". Students would soon realize that understanding "my country" required knowledge of where the speaker was from. Since, in most instances, all members of the class knew this information they realized that "my country", when spoken, became known, i.e. explicit though not stated - as in "El Salvador" - for example, through reading the context, as in knowing where the person who spoke the words was from. Students knew the speaker, thus the context communicated the specificity of "my country" without difficulty. Had students not known the country from which the speaker had immigrated, it would have been quite easy to ask directly what country it was of which he spoke. Students shared background knowledge and a context which allowed for an explicit understanding of an implicit utterance. However, when students were asked to read to themselves the words I had written on the board while imagining they had no idea who had written them, they understood immediately that the same words, now decontextualized - utterly apart from the imagined writer - failed to render an explicit interpretation of their specific meaning. The class did not have access to the imagined writer in order to ask: "Where is it that you came from?" or "What country did you leave?"

Once the discussion of explicitness concluded I moved on to a more direct discussion of memoir and asked that students bring to the following class a photo - having asked before hand if all had access to a photo - that they could use as a prompt for a discussion of a memorable event, person or experience. I handed out the assignment in the format that follows:

Assignment #1 – MEMOIR
Memory is a kind
of accomplishment
a sort of renewal.

William Carlos Williams

I would like you to write a memoir – a narrative detailing an important event, a period of time, or a person from your past. In order to begin the process I would like you to look through your photographs to find a favorite. You will use this photo to stimulate your memory. Look at the photo and think about the following: When was it taken? What was your life like then? Who is in the photo? Why is this photo important to you? Does the photo make you happy, sad? Why? As you look at the picture and think and remember begin to take notes. Bring the notes and picture to class next week so that we may talk about your memories. The photo, thoughts, notes and discussion will be the first step in the process of writing your memoir. Once you have gone through this process you will begin to write a draft. You will more than likely write three drafts of the memoir. A fellow writer in the class and I will provide feedback after each draft is written. After the second draft is written and you have really begun the process of narrowing down the theme of your memoir I would like you to think of a title for the paper. Your final paper should be approximately 5 pages in length, double-spaced and typed. Draft # 1 due Week 4. (1)

STUDENTS WRITING

The following class students each in turn showed their photo to classmates and spoke a bit about the experience it represented. Students were encouraged to ask the speaker questions in an effort to elicit further detailed information regarding the event or experience. The first draft was due the following class allowing for two days in which to write. A typical introductory paragraph for the assignment read as follows:

The evening of December 14, 1993 was a memorable one for me because it was the night of the wedding reception following my church wedding ceremony. It was a wonderful night for many

reasons. It was a night of dancing, eating and drinking, laughing, talking and being with friends and family.

Less typical is the first draft of a memoir entitled “A New Life” which was written by a 20-year-old Argentinean woman who had missed class the day students discussed their photos, though she had been present when the assignment was first given. Her first draft was written on three-holed, lined notebook paper in pencil even though, as noted above, the assignment was to be typewritten. The student, who I will call Felicity, stapled the three pages of her assignment together in the upper-left-hand corner. Two pages were devoted to the text; the third was an appropriately structured title page that included, centered and one quarter length from the top of the page the title – “A New Life” – with each word capitalized as I have done. Centered beneath the title were the words, as required, “DRAFT #1”. In the lower right hand corner of the page Felicity wrote her full name, under which she wrote “101E” which was the course number, under the course number was the date written as follows: 2 – 19 – xx. (2) And finally, under the date was my full name written in all capital letters. I had made a point at the outset of the semester that all written assignments were to follow a prescribed format emphasizing to the students that often professors made immediate judgments regarding a student’s ability to write, and even their intellectual capacity, based on the presentation of their work. Title pages with all necessary identifying information were required, as was the staple to hold the pages together. I wanted my students to learn to signal membership in the discourse community of academia before a single word of their paper had been read. (Gee, 1996, Mitchell, 2003) Now Felicity was almost where she was expected to be in terms of formatting except, as mentioned above, for the fact that the assignment was handwritten in the verboten pencil and on notebook-paper no less. The pages also were not numbered.

FELICITY’S FIRST DRAFT

Felicity’s assignment read – and I will try to remain as true to the original as possible despite the fact that this version is typed – as follows:

A New Life

Being outside , in a beautiful landscape was the reward for my boring job. I was by the Charles River; almost ready for a concert in the Hatch Shell in summer time, the best season of the year.

One of my coworkers, a shining black young woman, for the first time in my life, made in my hair a comforting braid. This little braid divided my life in two parts. At that time forgetting the past was a sedative for my broken soul

The braid made me feel p. 2 different. Other person was born. Newness of my life open my eyes, making a new beginning. At that time, I grave the sadness of a betrayed heart. The struggle was not easy, but finally it worked. Nobody recognized me. it was so wonderful.

Felicity had obviously been rushed when she put this assignment together. In fact one could tell – and she confirmed this – that the writing had occurred in a hurry and at one sitting. The work was not what one would characterize as a mess, however. Felicity did indent for paragraphs except for the beginning line of the second page, and she maintained clear, linear, appropriately spaced margins throughout the paper. The lines as I have typed them remain true to the handwritten lines of Felicity’s work, lines that extended from the right to left margin of the paper as expected. Felicity wrote on every other line, and skipped four lines between her first and second paragraph. I would assume that she was making an effort to conform to the requirement that the paper be double-spaced, or if more cynically approached, the assumption

could be that she was making an attempt to have her draft appear longer than it was in reality as students sometimes do through the choice of oversize type. Big letters, or over-spacing between words and lines, will help students reach the page length required more quickly than not, though little do they realize that their teachers are not duped by the ploy. Felicity consistently left an inch and a half margin on the left side of the text and a half inch margin on the right. For the most part the work was printed with words often containing a mix of capital letters with lower case yet the capitals were sized appropriately to conform to the size of the lower case letters. The words tilted to the right and the spacing between them was larger than one would normally expect; it appeared as if her hand had flown across the page as she wrote.

ANALYSIS OF THE TEXT – TWO PERSPECTIVES

In what follows I will discuss Felicity's text from two perspectives: first from the perspective of reader response. I include an analysis of an ESL tutor's reaction to the text, an analysis of a peer tutor's response, and my own written response to the paper and my efforts to take the text beyond the classroom to seek for it a larger audience. I argue that student work is read at multiple levels, and that each reading is driven in good part by the ideological perspective of the reader in relationship to perceived notions of what counts as appropriate prose, in this instance in a comp I class (Faigley, 1986; Mitchell, 2003). Second, I present an in-depth textual analysis arguing as I do that no text is trivial, but to the contrary each represents the entire set of an individual's social, linguistic, cultural, and psychological identities. Though I recognize that the deep reading and analysis in which I engage is not possible within the overenrolled writing classes instructors most often teach, nonetheless I offer it as a cautionary example of the linguistic potential our students may possess, yet may not be recognized or acknowledged as so often student papers are read through the lens of the genre assigned. To read in such a manner disallows the possibility for entrance into the writing class acceptance of, if only for a moment's time, a genre more reminiscent of oral culture than literate.

READING THE TEXT

James Paul Gee argues that reading is a social act in that when one reads the reading of the word, what is taken from the text, how the text is interpreted, depends upon one's experience of the world (1992, 1996, 2003). Thus any text no matter how short and seemingly simple or lengthy and apparently complex will be read and interpreted as such by individuals who share assumptions regarding simple, short, long, and complex. If I, for example, were asked to read a single page on particle physics, I would find the task complex, tedious, and no doubt frustrating as I am not privy to the discourse of the field, yet since I can read in multiple complex discourses I would draw from the text a superficial taking in of meaning. A physicist, on the other hand, would read the single page with ease, understand its place within the larger discourse, recognize whether or not the single page introduced a startlingly new issue, or was just a reiteration or summation of a taken-for-granted principle. So, within this theory of reading is the notion of the interaction between reader and text and the possibility therefore of multiple interpretations and readings, and responses to the reading of the text. This concept is illustrated in the three readings and the responses to the readings of Felicity's text discussed in what follows.

THE GRADUATE TUTOR READS AND RESPONDS – AN EYE ON ERROR

Before I even saw the paper the tutor assigned to the class met with Felicity, read and then marked her paper with "corrections" which included a number of word order changes such as the following: Where Felicity had written "black young woman" the tutor changed the order by marking the text with arrows to indicate the structure should be: "young black woman". This change, while providing Felicity with the proper word order for adjectives in English, served to flatten her more wrenchingly poetic phrasing. In another instance the tutor changed Felicity's word order from "For the first time in my life, made in my hair a comforting braid." to "For the first time in my life, made a comforting braid in my hair". Again the change serves to transition Felicity's structural choice into the preferred, taken-for-granted word order in English resulting

again in a conformity that disallows the reader from being at all jarred by the writer's choice of wording. The tutor also changed Felicity's "I grave . . ." to "I grieved . . ." making note of the fact that "grave" was a noun and "grieved" a verb. In this case the change, which obviously provides for Felicity the correct form of the past tense, serves as well to undermine the alliterative affect of the sound /e/ in grave which is repeated in "br[e]d" used three times, again three times in "m[e]de", once in "m[e]king", and once again in "betr[e]d". The elimination of "grave", though it is incorrect, diminishes the alliterative power of the /e/ sound, particularly in the sentence: "At that time I gr[e]ve the sadness of a betr[e]d heart." Further, Felicity's "The struggle . . ." was crossed out by the tutor and in its place was written "The grief . . .", which changes completely Felicity's meaning: it is a struggle she is recounting; one between the old life and the new. In fact this is the principle theme of her work. By changing "struggle" to "grief" the tutor attaches an entirely new meaning to the text, one which really does not make sense at all. The tutor also changed Felicity's "it worked" to "I felt secure . . .", and in so doing again completely appropriates her original meaning: the braid worked by providing for her "a new life". Maybe in this new life she will feel more secure, but that is not addressed at all in Felicity's writing until the tutor makes this assumption, and then the change. Further, the tutor put a line through "almost" indicating that the word should be eliminated in the next draft. Again, in so doing, the tutor undermines the original message: Felicity was "almost ready" which is far different from being "ready". This distinction is not a trivial one. Being almost ready to leave the house, for example, is a far cry from being ready to leave - the distinction is an important one. In the same way, "almost ready for a concert" may conjure an entirely different image in the reader's mind, than the "ready for a concert" the tutor imposed. Felicity's image evokes multiple interpretations: perhaps she and others were talking and laughing, finishing a picnic dinner, smoothing the blanket upon which they might sit during the concert, and so forth, all images the reader who has had the experience of attending a concert outdoors would be able to evoke. In contrast, the image of being "ready for the concert" conveys a sense of stillness, a settled quality, and a quiet that would have descended over Felicity and others attending the concert, for such

quiet is necessary for the concert to begin. Audience and orchestra work in conjunction to create the context for the opening orchestral piece: all must be settled before the conductor raises his baton, and then lowers it marking the opening of the musical score both to the instrumentalists and the audience. “Almost ready” and “ready” are indeed very different in meaning. Yet for the reader who has never attended a concert, the distinction may be meaningless. Finally, in Felicity’s first paragraph she wrote “In summer time, the best season of the year.”, the tutor wrote in the words “which is” between “summer time” and “the best season” so the sentence would read: “I was by the Charles River ready for a concert in the Hatch Shell in summer time, which is the best season of the year.” This change is totally unnecessary from a prescriptive perspective, and serves only to make Felicity’s original sentence now overwordy and less grammatically sophisticated.

The tutor has read this paper at a surface level only, and in so doing, neglects to consider how his word selections denude the author’s original intentions – though these intentions are of course based upon my interpretation of the text. Nonetheless, I am quite sure that the quick read, and the crossing out of words, was done without attempting to see this text through, so to speak. By this I mean that I believe the tutor was so intent on correcting errors, that he failed to read for meaning, and may not have made an effort to elicit from the writer what she meant before making a change. To the task of reading, the tutor takes with him the charge of “correcting” this text, making it right, thus he reads it differently than would one who did so without a prescriptive charge.

PEER RESPONSE – YOU HAVE A NICE LITTLE ESSAY HERE, BUT TELL ME MORE

The next reader/responder to Felicity’s draft of the memoir was a fellow student who exchanged papers with her in class during peer conferencing so that each could comment on the other’s work before it was handed in to me. I encouraged these multiple readings prior to handing in the assignment for a number of reasons. First, I wanted to fracture the unidirectional, typical reading of student work: the student completes an assignment, and the teacher reads and comments. I wanted students to become comfortable with sharing their work so that they would understand

that written work could have multiple readers, and I wanted students to understand that it was all right to seek support and feedback from others as long as the work, in the end, was fundamentally their own. I had provided models for peer conferencing which emphasized that responders should focus on meaning-based questions of the writer, and to focus as well on eliciting more detail with the notion on my part that the solicitation of further detail would make the writing more explicit. Student readers were asked not to attend to word level issues such as spelling, verb tense corrections, capitalization and so forth, all of which, interestingly enough, were the principle issues the tutor assigned to the class addressed. I had not thought to provide guidelines for the tutor as he had had taken a tutoring seminar, a full semester course to prepare students to tutor ESL students at the university where I was at that time teaching. My assumption – quite mistaken as it turned out – was that the tutor would have acquired the responding behaviors that I emphasized, and which conformed to the writing program’s overtly anti-surface-level-feature-correction ideology of responding to student writing. Instead, it was the graduate student tutor who essentially appropriated Felicity’s work through the corrections and over attention to detail that I would argue flattened her work to the degree that her voice was silenced by the tutor’s intervention, and in some instances, the original meaning was changed as well. Now, in contrast, the peer tutor commented as follows on the back of the second (and last) page of Felicity’s essay:

- a. Why forgetting the past was sedative for you?
- b. This is a short nice essay but I think it would be better if you explain the more details. How did the Charles river look like? How did your braid look like? How was the concert?
- c. As I explained above, I suggest that you provide more information on landscape, concert, especially your braid.

The comments written by Felicity’s peer leave open the possibility for detailed expansion of the assumed-to-be main topics she raises in her work, and illustrate that the peer reader read for content and meaning: his questions indicate he wishes to learn more about her experience. He also focuses on the initial portion of the paper making the assumption that the first topics to appear are

central to the paper, and as such deserve elaboration. His second comment validates her work, yet implicitly suggests that she needs to seriously consider expanding her essay: the assignment did call for a three page final paper, and Felicity has just barely produced a page and a half. The peer reader's final comment reiterates his suggestion that Felicity "provide more information" to enhance the reader's understanding of what Felicity's fellow student has assumed were her principle topics in the memoir.

MY COMMENTS – POETRY WHERE LEAST EXPECTED

After I read Felicity's paper I wrote in the open space following her final sentence on the second, and last page of her paper: "Felicity', This is a wonderful, poetic piece of writing. I would not change it. What you might do instead of revising is think of something else you remember from this special evening – the look of the river, the people, the concert, whatever." I, then, with Felicity's permission, typed the piece, did a bit of minor editing, and submitted it to the university's undergraduate literary journal run by English majors. I hand delivered the work to the journal office, having formatted the piece according to submission guidelines. Felicity was pleased despite the fact that the poem was not published.

REFORMATTING FELICITY'S MEMOIR

I turn now to a discussion of the bases upon which I restructured Felicity's work so that her assumed-to-be prosaic writing re-appeared as a narrative poem ready for submission to a student journal. I initially emphasize how I relied first on Felicity's internal markings in the text to guide my decisions regarding separation of the text into lines and stanzas (Gee, 1985, 1988, 1996, Scollon & Scollon, 1981).

My goal was to be true to the writer's original intentions – whether they were conscious or not. My goal as well was to seek a restructuring that would allow this piece to be seen anew – not as a failed attempt at writing a memoir as per instructions – or as a text replete with surface-level error in need of correction as it was read by the tutor. Nor did I wish to appropriate the text in the quite

gentle manner in which the student reader's comments would have done had they been attended to. First I looked to punctuation to guide me as to where breaks in the text were seemingly meant to occur. In addition, I chose spacing to guide my division of the text into the line and stanza structure common to poetry; a larger than normal – for Felicity's work – space signaled to me that a new line was intended. In all I made but five surface level edits: 1. I placed the word "the" before "newness"; 2. I added "ed" to "open"; 3. I changed "other" to "another"; 4. I changed "grave" to "grieved" (and I still question if this change was appropriate); and 5. I capitalized the beginning word of each line of the restructured text. To emerge is the poem:

A New Life

Being outside
In a beautiful landscape
Was the reward
For my boring job.

I was by the Charles River
Almost ready for a concert in the Hatch Shell
In summer time,
The best season of the year.

One of my coworkers,
A shining black young woman
For the first time in my life
Made in my hair a comforting braid.

This little braid divided my life in two parts.

At that time
Forgetting the past
Was a sedative
For my broken soul.

The braid made me feel different.
Another person was born.
The newness of my life opened my eyes,
Making a new beginning.

At that time
I grieved the sadness
Of a betrayed heart.

The struggle was not easy.
But finally it worked.
Nobody recognized me.
It was so wonderful.

DE-HABITUATION

The restructuring of the work into poetic form elicits from the reader – and this has been born out time and time again – a newfound appreciation for the piece (Meier & Cazden, 1982; Gee, 1989a, 1991). No longer do readers see the work from a superficial perspective, viewing it as a misguided effort at essay writing on the part of a non-native speaker of English who is a novice writer as well. If she had a stronger background never would Felicity have handed in the work in pencil on notebook paper. In much the same way, Felicity’s misspelled words, inconsistent punctuation, odd word order, and lack of follow-through in leading the discussion to greater detail regarding the “landscape” or her “boring job” both of which are introduced as topics in her first sentence, any follow-up regarding the “Charles River” or the “concert” mentioned in her second sentence, or a detailed discussion of the “braid” which she introduces in her third sentence. This piece does not follow the linear order expected in an essay, or a narrative for that matter. The reader never learns anything more about the boring job, the landscape, the Charles River, or the concert. We do, however, learn much about the power of the braid.

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

The analysis to follow considers first the line and stanza structure of the narrative poem, and second the use of metaphor in the text, comparing metaphorical, poetic language to the literate language required in schools when writing essays. I then turn to an analysis of the use of spacialization and echoing, both of which play a profound role in the overall structuring and coherence of the

work. Further, I consider the work from a Labovian perspective emphasizing the overall textual structures Labov identified in his work with Black adolescent males in Harlem in the 1970's. And finally I turn to a discussion of the appearance of alliteration throughout the piece. In the end I argue that the ability to step back from Felicity's work in order to view it as a narrative poem, rather than a failed attempt at writing a memoir, leads to the recognition that the artist exists within us all, though for many the creative and complex linguistic patterning and sense-making displayed by this young woman is most often silenced, or if produced, left unacknowledged as we seek to temper the creative urge, while offering support for the conformity, the linearity, and explicitness required of academic discourse.

METAPHOR

Felicity writes metaphorically as is often the case in poetry; she does not structure this text in a manner that conforms to the tenets of essayist literacy (Scollon & Scollon, 1981). Essayist literacy contains the following hallmarks: 1. the topic is introduced at the outset; 2. supporting details follow in linear order providing elaboration of the initial, single topic; and 3. the text – whether oral or written – ends with a brief summary statement of the introductory topic, thus framing the overall text. These features correspond to what Sarah Michaels (1981) has characterized as a topic-centered discourse style, a style she identified as being produced by first graders during Sharing Time (show and tell) who were then, based on shared discourse style between teacher and student, able to receive from the teacher feedback – scaffolding – that served to further insinuate the students into the discursive style required in school. Those students, in contrast, who produced topic-associating discourse were disadvantaged due to the fact that the teacher, who did not share this linguistic style was, thus, unable to scaffold appropriately (Cazden, 1983). In fact the teacher's interjections into topic-associating children's turns-at-talk served often to deflect the children from their original intent, or to silence the child whose turn it was to share.

Much like Michaels' topic-associating little ones, Felicity's discourse style fails to identify her as one who has the foundation

for insinuation into the discursive style anticipated in the academic context. In fact, her style of writing corresponds in many ways to the characteristics of topic associating: 1. the discourse consists of a series of associated segments that may seem anecdotal in character, linked implicitly to a particular topical event or theme, but with no explicit statement of an overall theme or point; 2. while these stories start with time, person, and place, temporal orientation, and location, focus often shifts across segments; 3. relationships between parts of the narrative have to be inferred; and 4. the stories may give the impression to those who have no control over the style of having no beginning, no middle, no end – thus no point (Michaels, 1981; Gee, 1989, p. 78). What I have not included here are the features of topic-associating style that would emerge in the oral rendering of a story – prosodic features such as rising and falling intonation and pausing, for example – for the obvious reason that Felicity’s text is written.

I now turn to an analysis of the text that reveals its underlying meaning and provides a rationale for the structure I have “imposed” on, or more judiciously, uncovered from Felicity’s original text. In order to better reference the textual features I discuss I rewrite the poem numbering the lines as I go and numerically marking the two sections – Part I and Part II – and numbering and labeling the stanzas by theme as well:

A New Life

Part I

Stanza I - Reward

Being outside

1. In a beautiful landscape
2. Was the reward
3. For my boring job.

Stanza II - Orientation

5. I was by the Charles River
6. Almost ready for a concert in the Hatch Shell
7. In summer time,
8. The best season of the year.

Stanza III - Main Character

9. One of my coworkers
10. A shining black young woman

11. For the first time in my life
12. Made in my hair a comforting braid.

Stanza IV - Two Parts

13. This little braid divided my life in two parts.

Part II

Stanza V - Sedative

14. At that time
15. Forgetting the past
16. Was a sedative
17. For my broken soul.

Stanza VI - Rebirth

18. The braid made me feel different.
19. Another person was born.
20. The newness of my life opened my eyes
21. Making a new beginning.

Stanza VII - Grief

22. At that time
23. I grieved the sadness
24. Of a betrayed heart.

Stanza VIII - A New Life

25. The struggle was not easy.
26. But finally it worked.
27. Nobody recognized me.
28. It was so wonderful.

THE LITERARINESS OF THE TEXT

In what follows I argue that Felicity has produced a text that contains many of the hallmarks of literature, and as a literary work it is both highly complex and meaningful at multiple levels. With that said, I must note that it is rare that a text produced in a comp I course would be read in the manner I intend. Deep textual analysis is reserved for work that is deemed literary to begin, and as such has been produced by writers recognized as worthy of a place in literature anthologies, or on syllabi produced by members of English departments who devote their careers to text

interpretation – canonical texts, that is, or those on the fringe – Black writers, Latino writers, women writers, many of whom do not appreciate the moniker, but would appreciate inclusion in the slowly expanding, more inclusive canon. Felicity’s work is not part of the canon, this is without question, nor should it be. Nonetheless it contains many of the features noted and valued in literature. Her poem demonstrates features found also in orally-produced language such as those in the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, and the Bible, for that matter, each of which was hardly influenced by print culture – except for more recent revised, very un-poetic, versions of the Bible – as the works are well known to have been first produced orally and passed down through generations until scribes captured them for eternity in script (Heer, 2003, Ong, 1982).

Pattern upon pattern emerges in Felicity’s work evoking the realization that this piece is not a simple reflection of reality, but a metaphorical rendering of the complex changes this young woman has had to endure as a newcomer, whose life has been radically transformed due to her move to a new world. Felicity captures the essence of William Carlos Williams’ three line stanza cited at the beginning of the memoir assignment: she has allowed memory to invite her to see anew; in effect this poem is about Felicity’s rebirth. But lest we venture to far a field let me begin at the beginning just as Felicity did.

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF “A NEW LIFE”

Much linguistic work of the late 20th century has dealt with the analysis of everyday language in an effort, not only to validate the language – oral and written – of ordinary people, but to seek an understanding of the relationship between orality and literacy, recognizing that print culture has had a profound influence on the type of language valued in institutional contexts. (Chafe, 1980; Labov, 1976; Michaels, 1981; Gee, 1989, 1996, 1999). As noted above, Sarah Michaels’s work highlights the profound interrelationship between the oral language produced by White, middle-class first graders, and the structures desired in essayist literacy, while in sharp contrast, the narratives produced by the Black children in the same class conformed to an associative style more typically seen in cultures less influenced by print, and by the

need to get quickly and directly to the point. In addition, the work of James Paul Gee has contributed immensely to our understanding of the intricacies of orally-based language, in particular emphasizing the line and stanza structure that underlies texts of this sort, and the fact that these texts contain many of the features of language that are highly regarded in literature: alliteration, parallelism, spacialization, echoing, and metaphor.

To begin to understand Felicity's text it is constructive to compare Stanza I, lines 1 – 4 of Part I, with Stanza V the opening stanza of Part II, lines 14 – 17.

Stanza I

Reward

1. Being outside
2. In a beautiful landscape
3. Was the reward
4. For my boring job.

Stanza V

Sedative

14. At that time
15. Forgetting the past
16. Was a sedative
17. For my broken soul.

A number of commonalities exist between these two opening stanzas. First, each contains but one stative verb per stanza – “was” – in the corresponding third line of each stanza. Lines 3 and 16 are parallel structures, one offering a “reward” and the other, a “sedative”, connoting gifts of comfort for the writer. The first gift is concrete and external – “being outside, in a beautiful landscape”, received for having performed a concrete act: doing her “boring job”. The second is internal: the gift is a mental sedative obtained through “forgetting the past”, a far more abstract concept. In Stanza I the writer is rewarded “for (enduring) her boring job”, and in line 17, the sedative is “for (healing) my broken soul.”, again parallel structures that are linked linguistically and metaphorically. The linkage emerges further through the alliterative bonding apparent in the use of “boring” and “broken”. In both instances the writer is the recipient of the gifts – reward and sedative. Again, in the first case the reward is pleasurablely concrete: she is outside enjoying the “beautiful landscape.” In the second case the gift is internal and abstract in that her memory is sedated resulting in the healing of her “broken soul”.

What this young writer has done is connect these stanzas through a literary technique, spacialization, a discursive strategy seen often in modernist texts. (Frank, 1963 as cited in Gee, 1989a)

Specialization allows for thematic and structural connections to be made within texts through repetitive linguistic patterning and themes that at the same time create a dynamic of difference through the avoidance of linearity. There is no explicit linkage made linguistically through the use of transitional phrases or through an explicit accounting of the connection intended, as would be the case in more academically structured discourse. If Felicity had written the following: “ Just as being outside in a beautiful environment made me forget for a time how boring my job was, so too did my efforts at forgetting my past serve to sedate me in such a way that I, for the time being, was able to forget the pain of my past.” To have written the sentence above would have made explicit the connection between the two themes. In addition, a more literate style of writing would have juxtaposed the two themes, and not presented them apart from one another, with intervening themes occurring between the portions of the text connected solely by the literary technique of spacialization. Instead Felicity makes the thematic linkage through patterning across the text, thus serving to link stanzas implicitly even though they are not directly juxtaposed.

In many ways Felicity’s work is painterly in that it has patches, if you will, of language that reappear in other portions of the text allowing the viewer/reader to make visual connections across space through patterns and form. A Mondrian work of art, for example, employs the same technique. Stanza V of Part II with Stanza VII are linked in this “painterly” manner as well.

Stanza V

Sedative

- 14. At that time
- 15. Forgetting the past
- 16. Was a sedative
- 17. For my broken soul.

Stanza VII

Grief

- 22. At that time
- 23. I grieved the sadness
- 24. Of a betrayed heart.

Line 14, “At that time” is repeated verbatim in the opening line of Stanza VII, again “At that time”, echoing one another, a repetitive strategy often employed in oral cultures as it serves as a mnemonic device. (Havelock, 1981) The last lines of the same two stanzas – V and VII – again are parallel. Line 17, “For my broken soul.” and line 24, “Of a betrayed heart.” serve again to tie the stanzas together

despite their distance from one another. Spacialization occurs at the structural level as both are prepositional phrases, and metaphorically in that each stanza relates to the writer's internalized pain again as reflected in the use of "broken soul" and "betrayed heart". These two stanzas evoke powerful emotional pain emerging from reflection – through the use of a gerund and verb – on the body; i.e., "forgetting", the gerund, and "grieved", the past tense of the verb "to grieve" which are both internalized mental/emotional constructs connoting active mental processes dealing with the sorting through of past experiences. This writer's past is pain-filled, and breaking from the pain of the past anchors the text creating the foundation upon which a "new beginning", line 21, will occur. But what creates the potential and context for this new beginning? In order to understand how "a new life" is born, the analysis must backtrack to Part I of the poem since things do proceed in order in this text though, again, never is this stated explicitly.

ANALYSIS OF PART I OF "A NEW LIFE"

Stanza I of Part I serves as a preamble of sorts, similar to what William Labov (1972) characterizes as an abstract, the initial component of a narrative that provides a summary statement of what is to follow. Ultimately Felicity's reward is a new life which is finally fully realized in the second to last line of her poem – line 27 – "nobody recognized me.", the narrative poem's denouement. The two previous lines serve also as the resolution (Labov, 1972) of the ongoing struggle she portrays throughout her work between her past life and the struggle for the new. Stanza II, lines 5–8, "I was by the Charles River, Almost ready for a concert in the Hatch Shell, In summer time, The best time of the year", provide for the reader the orientation. We learn who – "I", what – "concert", where – "the Hatch Shell", and when – "in summer time". In Stanza III the reader is introduced to the other main character in lines 9 and 10: "One of my coworkers, A shining black young woman." Labov noted over and over with his work with Black male adolescents who were speakers of Black English Vernacular that in narratives the greatest detail and the heaviest embedding would occur when the main character was introduced and described. This is the case as well

with Felicity's work: nothing else in the text is so explicitly and complexly described as is the coworker. The complexity of the linguistic structure in and of itself identifies the coworker as an extremely important player in this unfolding drama of rebirth. We soon learn of the coworker's importance in the following two lines - 11 and 12 - of Stanza III: "For the first time in my life, Made in my hair a comforting braid." Line 11 marks the beginning of the complicating action as it introduces the following line - 12 - which contains the first action verb - "made" - yet to appear. The making of the braid provides the first comfort, and really the second reward, for this young writer who must endure a "boring job".

How important is this braid? It is so important that it warrants a stanza by itself: stanza IV, "This little braid divided my life in two parts.", which we infer are the past and the present - the old life vs. the new life. Now not only does the braid divide Felicity's life into two parts; it divides the text as well into two equal parts or sections. Part I and Part II each contain four stanzas. Further, line 13 - "This little braid divided my life in two parts." divides the poem into two parts, each of which contains 60 words. Line 13 serves as a linguistic, structural pivot from the old life to the new initiated by the braid itself which does the dividing.

ANALYSIS OF PART II OF "A NEW LIFE"

Whereas Part I of "A New Life" deals in the concrete: place, time, character, and then the beginning of the complicating action as "a shining black young woman" made the braid for Felicity; Part II is much more abstract and relies far more heavily on the use of metaphorical language. Braids for example do not act, yet this one does in a very powerful manner. Not only does the braid divide Felicity's life into two parts, it also in Stanza VI, line 18, made her feel different, initiating the new person in line 19: "Another person was born." And this truly is a birthing experience as noted in line 20: "The newness of my life opened my eyes" much like the eyes of the newborn open to its life outside the womb. With the opening of Felicity's eyes a new beginning is made. Yet there is still tension, and the past has not yet been fully surpassed as we switch again in Stanza VII, lines 22 to 24, to the present coexisting time frame in which: "I grieved the sadness, of a betrayed heart." But then in the

final stanza, VIII, we learn: "The struggle was not easy, but it finally worked." These two lines provide the result (Labov, 1972) of Felicity's struggle to overcome her past. Truly a new person was born as "Nobody recognized me." And how did this feel? The evaluation (Labov, 1972) clearly states Felicity's feelings after experiencing the profound effects of the braid: "It was so wonderful."

The struggle between her old life and Felicity's new life plays out at the structural level throughout Part II. Stanza V, lines 14 to 17 deal with the pain of her past life, but then the following stanza, VI, lines 18 to 21 deal directly with the new life. This stanza is filled with action as well. Whereas the previous stanza contains but one stative verb, "was", Stanza VI has two action verbs: Line 18 again, "The braid made me feel different, and line 20, "The newness of my life opened my eyes." This is the first stanza in the poem to be composed of more than one sentence; here there are three full sentences, again highlighting the active nature of the message it conveys.

The verb patterning across lines 18, 19, 20, and 21 is action verb - "made", stative verb - "was", action verb - "opened", and in line 21 there is just a clause "making a new beginning.", which echoes back to line 12 of Part I: "Made in my hair a comforting braid." This echoing effect serves to implicitly link and highlight the theme of the power of the braid to affect change. If this last line were to parallel the last line of the poem and the verb pattern of the last stanza, it would read "It was a new beginning." Stanza VII returns to the struggle emphasized in the opening stanza, and as already noted parallels the structure of Stanza V: "At that time, I grieved the sadness, of a betrayed heart." But then in the final stanza each line consists of a full sentence and establishes a verb pattern of: stative verb - "was", action verb - "worked", action verb - "recognized", stative verb - "was".

THEMATIC ANALYSIS

The thematic patterning across stanzas proceeds as follows:

Stanzas V and VII Stanzas VI and VIII

Reflection Action

Body	World	
Internal	External	
Old life	New life	
Heart / Soul		Whole person
Past		Future
Sadness		Wonder
Past life		Rebirth
Concrete		Abstract
Literal		Metaphorical

These binary oppositions represent not only the thematic struggles that Felicity contends with throughout her poem, in particular in the second section of the text, but also the framework upon which her poem is structured. Claud Levi Strauss argues that across cultures people make sense of experience by casting it oppositionally as in – good vs. bad, old vs. new, black vs. white – much as Felicity does in order to make sense out of her experience. Though the world is far more complex than binary oppositions would imply, casting reality in such a way allows for the sorting through of the murky complexities that haunt us all (Johnstone, 2001; Mitchell, 2003). In essence Felicity's poem allows her to cast her experience in such a way that she, in the end, makes sense of it all. And we as readers are led through this sense-making process in a tightly woven piece of writing that evokes powerful emotion; if we take the time to read it deeply as we are asked to read texts deemed of great value, and not just those that are produced in response to a mere comp I assignment – and not done to specs no less.

ALLITERATION

In poetry alliteration plays a dominant role: sound play captures the listener or reader's attention in a subtle manner. Prior to print culture, orally rendered texts were more easily remembered when sound play cued the story teller as to what might come next (Heer, 2003). In Felicity's poem the bilabial, voiced stop /b/ is repeated, particularly word initially, serving to tie the text together in: [b]eing, [b]eautiful, [b]oring, [b]y, [b]est, [b]lack, [b]raid (used 3 times), [b]roken, [b]orn, [b]eginning, [b]etrayed, [b]ut, jo[b] and no –[b]ody. In Part I there is a bit of sound play with voiceless velar /k/ in Stanzas II and III: [k]oncert, [k]oworkers, [k]omforting,

ma[k]ing, bro[k]en, and re[k]ognized. The phoneme /s/ occurs frequently both word initially and internally, once again tying the poem together through sound: wa[s] used 6 times, [s]ummer, [s]eason [s]edative, [s]oul, [s]adness, [s]truggle, and [s]o; and internally or word final in: out[s]ide, land[s]cape, almo[s]t, con[s]ert, be[s]t, coworker[s], fir[s]t, part[s], pa[s]t, per[s]on, newne[s], sadne[s], ea[s]y, and recogni[s]ed. Here I have include voiced and voiceless variants of the fricative /s/ as the subtle change in production of the sound does not deflect from the alliterative quality of the repetitive sound. And finally the voiced, central approximant /r/ ties the text together as well: [r]ewa[r]d, fo[r] used four times, bo[r]ing, Cha[r]les, [r]ive[r], [r]eady, conce[r]t, summe[r], yea[r], cowo[r]ke[r]s, fi[r]st, comfo[r]ting b[r]aid, pa[r]ts, fo[r]getting, b[r]oken, differ[r]ent, another[r], pe[r]son, bo[r]n, g[r]rieved, bet[r]ayed, hea[r]t, st[r]uggle, wo[r]ked, [r]ecognized, and wonde[r]ful.

Finally the poem is united structurally through the patterning related to the braid and its central role in enacting the change in Felicity's life. First, in Part I, Stanza III is the pattern: "woman" - "made" - "braid". Then in Stanza IV, line 13: "braid" - "divided" - "my life". This is followed in Part II, VI, line 18: "braid" - "made" - "me feel different"; and finally, in Stanza VI, line 21, [braid] - "making" - "new beginning." Here we have a four-part, powerfully structured, thematically bound text that meets none of the requirements of essayist-text literacy.

WRITING THE ESSAY

Felicity did write a memoir for me. She worked and worked at it, and finally produced, as was required, a five-page paper chronicling a past experience. It was written in the manner not uncommon to the novice, but her persistence and the improvement achieved from draft to draft to final product earned her a respectable grade, and entrance into the early stages of command of academic prose. Greater improvement occurred as the course progressed as assignments focused more on the essay, and on writing through and about scholarly works. Though Felicity demonstrated progress, I always felt badly that I had not been in a position to encourage her poetic urge. This was the case even though I knew that Felicity had

to learn to write in the linear, detailed manner required of academe, yet I felt that even though I had tried to get her small poem published, for which she was very appreciative, that I had somehow let her down by forcing her to turn away from this ability she had to make meaning so fluidly and alliteratively, to write metaphorically in such a way that invited immersion, if one chose to accept the invitation, into a world far richer than that which the essay portended. Teaching writing in the academy imposes choices that are really not choices: we must engage students in the prose that will allow them access to greater educational opportunities. But we do so at great cost. Could it be that the poets before us are silenced? I believe so. For in the end, Felicity's "A New Life" truly had "achieved a vital integration" and banished, for the moment, "chaos and confusion", if only readers had the eyes to see the "perfect fitting together" of this young woman's writing (Overstreet, 1936, p. 525).

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Título: *Quebrando as convenções do ensaio na aula de expressão escrita: poesia narrativa – uma análise textual de resposta, significado e forma*

Resumo: *Este artigo analisa, em primeiro lugar, as diferentes respostas de três pessoas ao lerem a versão inicial de um mesmo trabalho apresentado em uma aula de produção escrita para alunos universitários de Inglês como Segunda Língua. A análise enfatiza as diferentes maneiras em que um texto pode ser lido e como essas “leituras” são motivadas ideologicamente. O primeiro leitor lê o texto da perspectiva de um prescritivista, o segundo lê buscando o significado, embora seja desviado por presunções errôneas em termos de estrutura do texto, e o terceiro lê o texto pelo que é: um poema. A autora apresenta a seguir uma detalhada análise temática e lingüística do mesmo texto e, nesse processo, quebra noções pré-concebidas sobre como o significado é transmitido, a coesão é mantida, e o sentido se dá pela experiência, nesse caso, quando o aluno é solicitado a escrever algo autobiográfico. A análise detalhada ilumina a complexidade inerente a um texto que, em determinado contexto, poderia receber pouca ou nenhuma atenção que não fosse para solicitar uma re-escrita. Ao final, o artigo levanta questões sobre os limites impostos pelo letramento em escrita acadêmica a alguns dos alunos mais potencialmente criativos.*

Palavras-chave: *ensino de produção escrita em língua estrangeira; análise narrativa; respostas à escrita acadêmica; escrita criativa vs. escrita acadêmica.*