

Literary Reading Is a Team Game: Exercises with Carroll and Carle

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Let's start by being honest. This statement is the first rule when adults seat at the game table and start to play. We call it fair play even if bluffing is allowed. So, let's start by being honest and let me tell you that what I really wanted to talk about was Lewis Carroll, Alice and caterpillars, and then to talk about how adults instrumentalize literary texts so that they can have some (precious) help on educating their children. Even if they say books are for pleasure and fun, what adults do with "books & children" is often a win-win situation: children enjoy the moments of reading or listening to a story and looking to the illustrations while mom or dad puts them to bed, gets them to sleep or makes them eat the soup. Or teachers teach them about colours, numbers or feelings. All that in a book!

What literary reading should train future reading mediators to do – they can be a mom or a dad or a teacher – is to find in the text itself the reason why we are reading a book and not only taking the book as an instrument for teaching something useful or distract the child or enchant him/her to fall asleep. So, this is why this paper will focus on the issue of training future literary-reading mediators or promoters and it will propose a practical exercise on playing with intertextuality with the aid of two children's literature classics and masterpieces—*The Adventures of Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll (1865) and *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle (1969). This will be an example of exercises that I often propose to my students, future kinder garden and primary school teachers, in the Children's Literature classes, so that they forget for some moments that they are using books for any other purpose than to understand what literature is and how reading literature can be a team game for all ages.

This is an exercise given after students are already aware that children's literature is what we call to those artistic books that are also and differently enjoyable from childhood to an old age. And my students are also already aware that lonely reading requires effort, attention, concentration and peaceful environment. And they also know that when children look into a book they see different details than adults do, in particular illustrations. We are still talking about readers, we are still talking about the effects of these books on readers, but mainly we are doing all that on the basis that literature requires some rules to be, on one hand, really fun and, on the other hand, that it can somehow change you, more or less in the way you will be more capable to understand the world and other people and, why not?, yourself. It's all about the child and the book.

In my opinion this is what a literature teacher in general does for a living: to teach how to be a better reader of literature... but of life as well. At this moment you might think that this is practically the same as reading a book to a child so the child eats the soup or goes to bed. Yes it is. Thinking is as important as eating and sleeping to grow up as a citizen. That is what we say, we that have food and a bed everyday.

But teaching literature nowadays is more than ever also to be aware that the literary meaning of a text does not reside only in the text and in its solitary relationship with the quiet and comfortably installed reader. The meaning is produced by the reader in relation both to the text in question and to the complex network of texts invoked in the reading process and plural connections provided by the world of a new media environment. And these are somehow rivals of the activity of literary reading (and even of meals time!). This is why, in my opinion, one should also use these connections children easily get from other toys – and I am thinking about TV and movies – to plunge young readers into the literary text. I have chosen *Alice* and *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* also because students, who are grownup people, can feel how you don't have to give up of being an adult to enjoy a child's book or a book written to children that are already autonomous readers.

For two academic semesters already I read the whole *Alice* in class. (Maybe next semester I will read *Pinocchio* or *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* or *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* but I will always come back to *Alice's* chapter number 5, «Advice from a Caterpillar».) I usually read two or three chapters per class. It takes me an hour out of a three hours class. But each chapter of this masterpiece is an opportunity to talk about an item of the programme of the Children's Literature class. Each chapter can be followed or preceded by other books or texts: poems, tales, albums, songs, riddles, proverbs, etc., etc. In fact, I am doing with my students what parents do with their children: tell them a book so that they eat and grow up.



I will then tell you about a game played with my students and then to be played by my students - as future literary reading mediators - and children aged from ~~3 to 10~~ ^{about 10 years} years old, but in this case in an easier and better known version of the game.

As I read *Alice* from the first to the last word it's when I get to the 5th chapter that I will talk about Eric Carle and its *Caterpillar*. But I could also start by introducing the item of picture books and albums, to pick Carle's *Caterpillar* and then read the first part of «*Advice from a Caterpillar*», and I would have the same game. (In fact I did it sometimes before I decided that I would have to read a complete classical text in Children's Literature class.) The game-board remains the same. And Comparativism is still and definitely a keyword for this literary reading game.

The game I propose to my students we call it "Spot the Similarities" and it's inspired on the well-known individual game that we can find on newspapers and magazines "Spot the Differences", which will be the version they can play with their future students beyond from the really easy differences they will find alone by themselves. The role of the mediator will be to tell the children to find more differences than the easiest ones that are already listed.

I tell my students about the game after reading Carle's album with regard to the first part of *Alice* Chapter 5, not spending at this moment but later, on Alice's version of the traditional song "The Old Man's Comfort" included in the chapter, during the conversation between Alice and the Caterpillar. It's the dialogue between Alice and the smoker Caterpillar we are focused on. And I also propose to my students that they can introduce their children at school or kinder garden first to Alice's then to Carle's Caterpillar. My students will always have to adapt the reading of this chapter to children that cannot yet read. They may even have to be able to resume Alice's adventures or ask a child that already knows the story through any other version than the Portuguese translation to tell it to other children. And they may also need to forget a little "The Old Man's Comfort", even if it is interesting, with elder children as it is with my students, to compare the "true version" of this ballad with Alice version and notice the similar topics between each one of them and interpreting the differences according to the circumstances of the upside down Wonderland. (In the best Portuguese translation we have, the translator gives in endnotes the translation of the two first strophes of the original poem and they are quite interesting on what concerns healthy ways of life, evoking an intertextual relation with Carle's album of course.)

So, I start by asking my students to find two similarities, at least, between Eric Carle's caterpillar and Alice's caterpillar. My students will immediately start enumerating the differences and it will take some time to focus on similarities. In fact they will notice that one is an anthropomorphised personage (it can speak!) and that the other is much more natural, even if it eats on Saturday what children usually like to eat. After a while (and after remarking that there is only one similarity which is they are both caterpillars) my students will notice these two similarities: they both are aware that they change with time, so they both take their time; and they both know that eating is a way of growing up. Even if Alice's caterpillar uses its knowledge to teach Alice, and Carle's caterpillar does it all alone in the world, by instinct one should notice.

Of course that my most imaginative and bold students will remark that both caterpillars are somehow addicted creatures: eating candies as if there were no tomorrow and smoking. They will remark that both caterpillars are very individualistic creatures that live their own lives with no need to interact with other creatures. In fact, Alice's caterpillar is the first creature that contradicts so hardly the little girl. And they will also remark that there is good and bad in everything and that we, individuals, must take options in our lives even if life goes on despite our options: for example, which side of the very same mushroom should she eat?; it can eat good things every day of the week so it can have a day when Carle's caterpillar screws it up and suffers the consequences. So my students will focus on the basic themes that in fact can be the starting point of elaborating arguments and develop critical sense as well as improve self-knowledge of young readers. Both books and episodes will communicate, in an artistic and literary way, that besides eating and growing up, thinking and arguing, in Q&A sessions, will "preserve their temper" and prevent them from "losing their heads".

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Food and growing up... Here we have two of the best topics that matter parents and children. The first one will lead to the second one: you must eat to grow up. Most of children want to grow up; some of them don't like to eat healthy food that makes them grow up. Getting to these statements in Children's Literature course isn't always evident for university students by themselves – they think this is another course subject. (Is this Children's Literature teacher making us argue about caterpillars? And food? And growing up issues?) These students are generally focused on activities around the pyramid of food or other similar healthy and didactic issues they have to teach about these themes to their children. As well as they learn how texts and books teach children to start reading. Literary reading is just another completely different matter now. Well, they still can learn to practice and improve their own reading aloud capacities... which is not an obvious ability for all of them...

To conclude let us not forget (that's what I lead my students to do when putting the two texts and books in conversation) that the first thing Alice's caterpillar says is "Who are *you*?". In fact that is the question that solves the mystery of the voracity of that other caterpillar: I am someone who is changing, growing up and that must eat a lot and very well to accomplish this adventure of becoming an adult – or a beautiful butterfly.

The "Spot the Differences" game develops cognitive skills by identifying what is different between two apparently similar images. Collectively, players develop the descriptive of a theme and then progress to comparing one "image" with another. The ultimate goal would be to identify the similarities and differences between the two descriptions. This dialogue between two books and/or two teams – Carroll and Carle, adults and children - is important for the exchange of ideas on literature and understanding of the literality of the books. Both students and children will recognize that comparison is a scientific practice, that the classification of the result of the comparison as a similarity or difference is a subjective matter, defined by personal or collective ideologies or presuppositions. If playing the game will allow students and children to practice their own presuppositions, dialogue will help them understanding not only the books but also the world and can stretch the child's own cognition.

Putting them – my students now and their future children in different chronological moments – in front of two literary/artistic pieces like *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* and «*Advice from a Caterpillar*» is to set the game board ready to play the literary-reading game. And the funniest way is to play it as a team.

Thank you very much!