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Research Article

Gaining understanding of different perspectives in Virgil's *Aeneid* through creative writing: an action research project with a sixth form Classical Civilisation class in a mixed comprehensive

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Introduction

Creative writing is a teaching strategy employed increasingly less frequently as students progress through their secondary education. From my own school experience and observing other teachers, many such tasks are set in Year 7 but then later give way to the pressure of preparing students for exams. In the first Professional Placement of my postgraduate teacher training, I observed a Classical Civilisation teacher set her sixth form students to write a poem about Hector or Andromache from the *Iliad* Book 6. Although there was some initial reluctance, students largely engaged with the task and we were both impressed by the results. This prompted me to carry out my own research project to explore further the potential impact of creative writing, following the argument that one way into a text is to understand the characters within it.

I conducted this research during my second school placement in a mixed comprehensive with a small sixth form. The school has a relatively strong Classics provision for the area, with students given the choice to study Latin from Year 7 to GCSE. Classical Civilisation at A level was also offered for the first time this year (2019). Having observed and taught a few lessons with the Lower Sixth Classical Civilisation class, I was given the opportunity to start teaching Virgil's *Aeneid* in translation as part of the OCR examinations board *World of the Hero* module from February half-term. The class was composed of five students, four male and one female, known for the purposes of this project as Victor, Paul, Mark, Andrew and Rosie. They were of mixed prior attainment with A level target grades of Bs and Cs. Three of the male students had previously studied Latin at GCSE and so had some foundation knowledge of the ancient world, along with an already established positive relationship with the single Classics teacher at the school. The prior attainment range did not reflect itself in the group dynamic as Mark, one of the boys who had the least prior attainment, was usually the most dominant in discus-

sion. Rosie rarely offered anything unless prompted, seemingly due to a lack of confidence in her ability, but perhaps also due to the uneven gender divide. When I asked why she had chosen Classical Civilisation, part of her reasoning was that she had swapped from English Language upon discovering that there were no opportunities for creative writing. This helped me feel more confident that she might respond well to my proposed tasks.

My main aims for this project were to assess how the use of creative writing affected the students' understanding of different characters' perspectives in the *Aeneid*. My students seemed to struggle connecting to the characters: they were largely able to select appropriate quotes from the text but then found it challenging to analyse them for information on the character's motivations and values. I wanted to challenge these students by trying something different, and studying the impact it had on their character understanding and engagement. I was also interested to discover how much the students themselves valued the tasks for this same purpose.

I chose to base my research on Book 2 of the *Aeneid* as this fitted best into my devised scheme of work for the term. The class had already studied Homer's *Iliad* earlier in the year. Due to the spread of Covid-19 and the subsequent school closures, part of my data had to be collected remotely. This brought added challenges and meant that there was some difficulty in collecting all the data. It was harder to chase up individual students when teaching online; as a consequence a small part of the collection is incomplete.

Literature review

I have evaluated a range of secondary literature that corresponds to my research project. Due to the limited research into the teaching of Classics, I encountered some difficulties in finding literature that directly focused on my specific interest on the use of creative writing within this subject. However, it must be acknowledged that using creative exercises from a character's perspective is not a new strategy for Classics, but rather was carried out in the ancient classroom. McGill writes that Virgil's work was used to inspire *ethopoeiae*, exercises in which students composed a speech for a literary or mythological character (McGill, 2005). The principal difference is that these students mostly performed their work orally,

whereas my students produced written results with the resources readily available in our modern world.

To broaden my understanding, I widened my reading to look at the similar context of teaching English Literature, and the issue of fostering a personal response when studying texts in the classroom. I have focused on the main areas of encouraging a personal response from students with its challenges and potential solutions, particularly in relation to Classics, and then reviewing creative approaches to teaching literature in the wider classroom. Within the wider approaches to teaching literary texts, I have discussed the advantages of the reader-response theory in encouraging student response. Most research focuses on case studies carried out by the various authors, largely teachers, in their respective schools.

Encouraging a personal response

The Challenges

When teaching literature to students, many teachers consider encouraging a personal response to be 'the ultimate aim' as highlighted by Cresswell (2012, p. 11). Teachers strive to engage their students in the various texts, yet Muir (1974) makes clear there is no guarantee that this will awaken an immediate response, and identifies barriers such as 'remoteness, sophistication [and] means of expression' that inhibit students personally connecting with a text (Muir, 1974, p. 515). These encapsulate the key challenges identified by myself and other more experienced teachers: the lack of cultural understanding and language difficulties.

The remoteness of ancient literature and the ensuing lack of cultural understanding often prevent students from feeling fully able to connect with a text and the characters within it. Classics is declining as a subject in schools: I have come across many, both staff and students, in my placement schools who view a knowledge of historical material from over 2,000 years ago both in and out of the classroom as irrelevant to modern society. Therefore, students are increasingly unaware of even the basic level of background needed to unlock a text, driven by their limited cultural capital. Jones reinforces this, emphasising students' lack of understanding of the context of the ancient world as noted by many Classics teachers. Furthermore, he argues that this 'needs to be supplied by the teacher' (Jones, 2016, p. 23). Implicit here is the argument that students benefit from being given some information beforehand to enhance their interpretation of the text. I will consider this view in more detail in response to the reader-response theory. Certainly, a limited cultural understanding seems to heighten the inaccessibility of a text.

The difficulty of language is two-fold: first, there is the original Latin which was written in a complex and highly literary register. This drives the second difficulty as translators produce sophisticated translations in an attempt to represent these complexities. The latter challenge is more applicable to my research in Classical Civilisation, a course which only covers literature in translation. Most of the literature that deals with Virgil's *Aeneid*, or indeed other classical texts, is authored by or concerns those teaching the GCSE and A level Latin courses with a strong focus on translation. When tackling literature for Latin GCSE, Cresswell argues for the 'extra barriers of language and culture' that impede students forming a personal response (Cresswell, 2012, p. 11). It is true that Classical Civilisation takes away the barrier of Latin language; but Hoskins raises the additional possibility that reading literature in translation 'may intensify problems of understanding' due to difficulties of transferring words from the Latin, specifically value-words (Hoskins, 1976, p. 250). Virgil, leaning on Homer, is full of such

words, such as *pietas* and *furor* and multi-faceted concepts that I have had to spend time in lesson carefully explaining, closely linked to their Roman context. These are essential in order to understand the *Aeneid*, particularly its hero Aeneas and his character development. Without some level of intervention, these can contribute to the student perception that the text is unrelatable to them.

When identifying barriers to students forming a personal response, Muir (1974) writes in regard to classical literature, but this could also be applied to other literature taught in English studies: Wood (2017) found that her students struggled with the archaic language of Shakespeare, a challenge increasingly faced by those in most secondary schools. The level of 'sophistication' is too high compared to that previously encountered by students. I have heard other teachers in my school complain that students are reading less outside of the classroom, and I can verify this from observations with my own students. This is linked back to students' levels of cultural capital and their access to, and engagement with, different types of material outside of school. The result is that their experience of such sophisticated texts is narrowed.

The challenges outlined above have been found by myself and other colleagues to result in students struggling to connect and empathise with characters. They also often seem unable to confidently analyse without relying heavily on the teacher. I have observed this in lessons, with my students waiting to hear my views before making notes. This often results in disengagement and the dreaded passivity that Tucker (2000) bemoans. I have reviewed examples of action-based research within Classical subjects that seek to address some of these issues and create or encourage a personal response from their students.

Classical Solutions

Cresswell (2012) perceived that the challenge of translation was preventing her GCSE class from engaging with Catullus' love poetry. In an attempt to remove this barrier, she designed a creative writing group task. Each group was given a 'secret identity' and asked to produce a short piece of writing from this perspective; they then presented to the rest of the class who had to guess their assigned identity. The adopted personae were imagined characters around Catullus such as his best friend or his mother. These forced the students to put themselves into the shoes of these characters and imagine their thoughts. Although this study is based on a lower age group than my own research with the purpose of removing the translation barrier, the use of creative writing is similar. Both have been adopted with the ultimate aim of challenging students to personally respond to their text by the means of connecting with a particular character. Due to the nature of Catullus' poems, Cresswell (2012) invented different personae for her students, whereas the story of the *Aeneid* offers a wealth of characters from which I can select. Her class responded positively to the task, aided by the teacher's knowledge of her class and the group dynamics. There also seems to have been an added novelty factor which corresponds with the diminishing opportunities for creative writing, as noted earlier. This serves to suggest that there is a valuable place for employing creative alternatives to encourage a personal response.

Music and drama were the strategies chosen by Rushton (2018), working with a GCSE Latin class. Her findings align with those of Cresswell (2012), when she claimed that engagement with a text is significantly improved when 'students were given an alternative method through which to interpret a text in a personable way' (Rushton, 2018, p. 107). This is what I discovered when observing creative writing used for teaching the *Iliad*: despite some

expressions of reluctance, most students put considerable time and effort into their poems. Rushton was focused on students comprehending Latin literature in translation: tackling the lack of cultural understanding by focusing on wider themes and concepts in ancient literature. She encouraged students to use music and drama to reinterpret the text, observing that these activities increased their ability to 'infer empathy' and develop their personal creativity' (Rushton, 2018, p. 113). I am interested in this idea of empathy and Heathcote's (1984) argument that allowing students to view the story from different perspectives aids their understanding. She argues this as a benefit of dramatic activities, and it is an approach used by Rushton; but I believe this also can apply to creative writing: students can take on different perspectives of (in the case of my research) the fall of Troy, in order to understand in greater depth what that experience was like and to empathise with their particular character(s). Rushton's (2018) main conclusion from her case study was that music and drama enabled students to express their thoughts and feelings through the words of others. I have asked my students to produce their own work, but writing a poem 'occupying the emotional space of specific characters' as Rushton describes (2018, p. 135). They are working to create a personal response by imagining an event through the eyes of others.

Unlike Cresswell (2012) and Rushton (2018), Forde (2019) worked with an A level Classical Civilisation class studying the *Odyssey*, one of the Homeric alternatives studied alongside the *Aeneid* as part of this examination course. He noted how students were relying on his own interpretation, and therefore struggling to develop their own personal response to the text. He describes their 'fundamentally passive way of engaging with literature' – a complaint noted by others above (Forde, 2019, p. 14). Forde's approach is slightly different: he made use of classical reception, asking students to respond to secondary texts. These were a selection of poems, using other people's responses. He noted that students' sympathetic understanding of Odysseus was enhanced by being given the freedom to respond imaginatively. The way that the exam board focuses on critical analysis seems largely responsible for teachers' limited use of creative activities: this is not how students are examined. Yet Smith argues that students engage with a literary text 'most effectively when they do so imaginatively rather than critically' (Smith, 1973, p. 297). The findings of Forde (2019) and the others cited above seem to demonstrate this. Although by no means conclusive, their studies stretch across a range of students.

It is this principle of imaginative rather than critical responses that I have brought to my own study. Unlike Forde's class, my students wrote their own poems as I wanted to view the effect of creative writing on their understanding of characters and personal engagement: this is another method of stimulating an imaginative response. Tombs' (1997) article dealing with the problems of essay writing encountered in Classical Civilisation A level applies the models of knowledge tellers and knowledge transformers to Classics. The former writers simply write down what they know, whereas the latter use the process of writing to transform and enhance their understanding of the subject matter. Creative writing falls into the second model: as my students planned, wrote and then reflected on their poems, I was trying to use this means to transform the text and their knowledge of the characters.

Use of creativity in the wider classroom

Teaching English literature

Due to the small amount of literature on using creative methods in Classics, with the specific aim of encouraging a personal response,

I have turned to English literature as researchers and theorists here have a few salient points that align with the experience of Classicists. English teachers seem to face similar challenges with engaging their students who largely seem to rely on their teacher to spoon feed their interpretation of a text. Overcoming the barrier of language is also an issue when teaching authors such as Shakespeare or even those with a higher level of sophisticated vocabulary than students are used to encountering today. Richards-Kamal (2008) draws attention to a further challenge: the pressures of the exam board and teaching to strict criteria. He argues that this prevents teachers from allocating the time needed to explore creative methods of teaching a text, hence the diminished opportunities for creative writing in Key Stages 4 and 5. However, from the case studies detailed above, it seems that such creative methods have a valuable, if not essential, role in engaging students personally in a text. Wood (2017) considered these opportunities for her English students and found that a large proportion stated they enjoyed creative writing along with other activities such as drama. This was also found by Rushton (2017). Yet such considerations as enjoyment do not meet exam criteria. Richards-Kamal (2008) highlights that students need to be able to explain the effects of a text upon themselves as readers in order to fulfil the requirements for higher grades at GCSE. There seems to be a disconnect here: critical analysis is given more weight by most teachers, perhaps because it is needed even for the lower grades.

However, in higher level education there is some evidence that creative approaches, specifically creative writing, are being employed. Thurgar-Dawson, a senior English lecturer in the UK, has noted a 'gradual institutionalisation' of the practice of creative writing (Thurgar-Dawson, 2017, p. 116). His teaching has combined both critical and creative writing into so-called 'crossover writing', clearly realising the value of perhaps less traditional practices. Lewis and Newlyn (2003) also show this link between the critical and creative that benefits their students in academic practice. Neither Thurgar-Dawson (2017) nor Lewis and Newlyn (2003) match my A level context, yet it is useful to observe the wider recognition which their articles discuss for creative writing. The 2018 reforms of the English National Curriculum and examination specifications saw the complete removal of creative writing from A level English, in favour of a more purely academic curriculum. It seems that it is now used less often as a medium through which students are able to learn. Richards-Kamal (2008) reasons that if even prestigious universities are encouraging the use of creative writing, why are such opportunities decreasing in secondary schools? This has helped to justify my view that creative writing can have a place amongst A level students in another subject with clear parallels.

Reader response theory

A theory that has greatly influenced researchers such as Richards-Kamal (2008) is the reader response theory, and it has some implications for my own study and the emphasis on the student forming their own response. This theory, brought to prominence by Rosenblatt (1938), places emphasis on the reader as the active participant in making sense of a text. As highlighted by Miall (2018), it can trace its origins even as far back as Aristotle and his theory of tragedy in which the audience response is critical. A common reflection by those such as Woodruff and Griffin (2017), who champion this theory in education, is that students are often 'bombarded' by the views of others, particularly of the teacher. Students are often not given the opportunity to personally connect with a text and develop their own meaningful response. This can

contribute to students passively accepting their teacher's interpretation of a text, noted earlier as a particular challenge when teaching literature, ancient or modern.

A particular method advocated for encouraging this active learning is for students to write a reader response journal in order to record their thoughts on a text (Woodruff & Griffin, 2017; Seranis, 2004; Tucker, 2000). Tucker (2000) views this as an opportunity for students to develop their own literary interpretation and validate their response. I felt this particularly paralleled with my research as a means of engaging students in the text and recording their response, and any changes, throughout the study. Since part of the task that my students were set was a creative one, a student's understanding of the text and its implications must play an integral part of the creative process, particularly in regards to how a student might perceive how a character engages with a particular situation or scenario. For such creative expressions to be engaging, a carefully considered individual response to the text must play a part.

Reader response theorists emphasise that an important aspect of developing a well-rounded appreciation of a text is comparing and contrasting one's interpretation with another. Tucker's (2000) second stage after first individually writing down a response is then to share this with others. I agree that discussion can enable a student reader to learn the value of other angles of interpretation and other meanings which their own reading may have overlooked. Even with all this considered, the reason why I chose to ask my students to have an individual response is not so that they would not benefit from discussion and forge new ideas, but to demonstrate the importance of independent critical thinking. Despite the benefits noted above, discussion was not my primary aim, because I wanted individuals to engage well with the primary source themselves and develop their own original perspective on the characters before moving on to evaluate it in the light of others or the teacher's contribution. A few students in my class are very quiet in discussion and I thought there could be a temptation to form their own views depending on others without first crystallising their own original thought. Regardless of this, Covid-19 and the subsequent move to remote teaching removed the possibility of encouraging the dialogue that Park suggests (2012).

A further point is the emphasis placed on students justifying their response and choices by reference to the text. Students are encouraged to develop their own personal response but they must be able to explain their evaluation. Seranis (2004) notes how this allows a teacher to track their developing responses. Tucker (2000) adds that this also teaches students to think critically about a text as they analyse their own response. Thus, such a method could be used to guide students for acquiring the skills needed for an exam. I introduced a questionnaire to my students at the end of my study with specific questions that challenged them to explain how their response had been shaped.

In order to encourage more varied responses and give 'more latitude' to students, Tucker (2000) goes further than some and allows an element of choice: for one area of his course, students are able to individually choose the text they would like to study. His argument is that this combats the challenge of relevance by studying texts that are meaningful to them. Although Tucker (2000) is working in the wider scope provided by a college context, I have tried to introduce this choice to my own study: I specified the means of response in creative writing but students were able to choose between a poem or prose piece of work. Furthermore, I allowed students to choose from a range of scenes and, for their second piece of writing, which character they would like to respond to. My hope was that this would not only make the character more relevant to the students as

Tucker (2000) argues, but also, by allowing a more active participation, increase their level of understanding.

Research questions

In light of the issues discussed above, I have identified the following research questions:

1. How has creative writing affected students' understanding of characters' perspectives?
2. To what extent do students value the use of creative writing to deepen their understanding of characters' perspectives?

Teaching sequence

I started teaching the *Aeneid* with my Year 12 class after February half term, teaching three out of their six Classical Civilisation lessons a fortnight. I had already taught a few lessons with this class for the OCR Imperial Image module and then a few lessons introducing the *Aeneid* and Book 1 prior to my study. This, alongside multiple observations, meant that I was very familiar with the class. I composed my own scheme of work for this teaching and based my research on Book 2.

I set students to write a reflective journal on Aeneas in Book 2, followed by their first piece of creative writing as homework tasks. Once these had been handed in, I asked students to complete a second reflective journal on Aeneas, particularly noting any changes of understanding. This took place within a lesson to avoid overburdening the students with homework. I then repeated this process for a second character, allowing them to choose from a list of those who appear in significant scenes in the book. When setting each type of work for the first time, I spent lesson time explaining how to undertake it, as I acknowledged some were either new activities or ones of which students had little recent experience. Schools were closed due to the outbreak of Covid-19 before I was able to carry out all my data collection in lessons, therefore later activities such as the reflective journal had to take place as homework tasks. There were some difficulties in collecting working from all students online and no further opportunities to discuss the work in class and gain any findings from students' comments in lesson. The data collection in total took just over four weeks in order to allow students enough time to meaningfully complete the different tasks.

Methodology

This research project largely follows the principles of action research rather than a case study. The latter has been termed by Adelman *et al.* as 'an umbrella term for a family of research methods having in common the decision to focus on enquiry around an instance' (Adelman, Jenkins & Kemmis, 1980, p. 48). My study involved introducing a change in my practice – taking action – rather than studying a particular 'instance'. Therefore, my project is one of action research, defined by Elliot as a study of a situation 'with a view to improving the quality of action within it' (Elliot, 1991, p. 69). This aim of improving practice is the core of action research: McNiff and Whitehead (2002) outline how practitioners first review their current practice and identify an aspect for improvement, plan and implement a possible way forward and then, to use their phrase, 'take stock' (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002, p. 71). Through my initial observations and teaching of the *Aeneid*, I had identified that my students had difficulty in engaging with the characters, and that it did not come naturally to them to view the events from their perspective. I decided to introduce creative writing as a possible method of countering this, having been made

aware of its benefits from my reading outlined above and own observations in school. I wanted to study its impact on my A level students and evaluate if there were any signs of improvement.

I incorporated this action research into my teaching of the *Aeneid* in order to make it as naturalistic as possible, with a combination of homework and in-class tasks. Following the example of reader response theorists who have put this into practice in their own teaching, I gave my students a number of choices: poetry or prose, scenes and characters. I wanted to encourage in them an active participation and give them a greater ownership of the project. These choices allowed them to work according to their own interests.

However, action research is ultimately a 'cyclical process…that requires interventions to be implemented, evaluated, modified, and then implemented in their new form … and so on' (Taber, 2013, p. 212). Due to my limited time with this class, I was unable to take this specific research project further and continue to improve based on my evaluations. The small sample size also provides some limitations for evaluating and drawing conclusions. Applying any conclusions that I do reach to other classes can only be done with further, wider research.

Research methods

In order to address the outlined research questions, I employed a range of different, but complementary, research methods to collect the required data. I followed the Faculty of Education's ethics and guidelines on educational research, which are based on those of the British Educational Research Association.

For my first research question, the most obvious data is the students' pieces of creative writing. This is the core piece of data that I am analysing, using other methods to complement and enhance my evaluations. Taber highlights that it is possible to select a number of techniques providing they are 'consistent with the overall strategy' (Taber, 2013, p. 257). As detailed above, I gave students a degree of freedom in their creative writing focus, in order to encourage a meaningful personal response. Alongside students' creative writing, I wanted a means of identifying any potential changes in their understanding of a character's perspective. With this in mind, and considering the reader response practice of journals, I asked my students to write a number of reflective journals. I encouraged students to record their views of Aeneas and their chosen second character both before and after they had completed their creative writing in order to evaluate any change in their understanding. All these tasks were set as individual work, unlike Cresswell (2012) and those advocating for dialogue between students. With only five students in my class, there were limited opportunities for group work and I wanted to track individual changes. I decided not to give grades or mark work but rather send individual comments online as I was not conducting quantitative research.

For my second research question which focuses on the views of the students themselves, I planned to use my observations from classroom discussion to possibly gain less inhibited thoughts, for example their initial reactions to the task. These are more limited as a result of the move to remote teaching. I also first intended to carry out individual interviews during lesson time, a method of reflecting on other collected data and drawing on the student voice. However with remote teaching making this challenging, I decided to use an online questionnaire as an alternative means of asking students to justify their responses, the importance of which is outlined by Tucker (2000) above. Before the move to a questionnaire, I had already chosen not to use a group interview due to the small size of the group. I also knew that a few more confident characters would dominate the discussion, a potential issue of using the student voice (Flutter, 2007). On reflection, the questionnaire produced insightful data, with students spending longer analysing their responses than I think they might have done in an interview. It seemed to produce a more relaxed environment for them as a task they could do on their own terms.

A possible concern with an interview or questionnaire is that students will write what they think is the right answer. In my instructions I explicitly asked my students to be honest and made clear that only I would read their individual comments before the responses were anonymised. I have a good relationship with the group and they have usually been open before, particularly noted in the lessons before school closures. The main difference between an interview and questionnaire is that one requires a verbal response whereas the other is written. I had previously noted that students seemed to find it a greater challenge to express themselves in writing. I particularly anticipated an effect on Mark's response as he is much more articulate in discussion. However, he was the only student not to complete this work so I have been unable to judge the impact of the altered research method.

Data and Findings

In the following data, all participants have been given pseudonyms to ensure anonymity. Where I have quoted from a student's work, I have left in any grammatical errors or spelling mistakes. As noted earlier, the aim of this project was not to collect quantitative data: all data collected serves to complement each other and I will therefore integrate the various methods in order to discuss my findings in regard to my two research questions. It is important to acknowledge that due to the move to remote learning, it has not always been possible to collect every piece of work from every student. All poems have been included in my Appendices, labelled A1-E2.

Effects of creative writing on student understanding of characters' perspectives

In order to make any judgements as to how creative writing has affected my students' understanding of characters' perspectives in the *Aeneid*, I need to gauge their initial understanding levels. I have analysed their first reflective journal on their impressions of Aeneas in Book 2, along with their insight as to why each student chose their particular scene to work with. Paul showed a good understanding of Aeneas, trying to identify the key parts of Aeneas' character and experience in his journal. He repeated twice that Aeneas had 'been through a lot of suffering' – the destruction of his city, loss of his wife, and at the hands of the goddess Juno. Paul acknowledged that his choice of the Creusa scene where she appears to Aeneas was because he believed it was 'a key scene' in Book 2; however, there is no evaluation as to *why* he held this view, in relation to Aeneas or the plot as a whole. Mark also placed the emphasis of his journal on Aeneas' suffering, commenting that he is 'hard done by'. Mark began to give a judgement on Aeneas that he seems 'a little boyish', ignoring multiple instructions to leave Troy, rather preferring to stay and die in battle. As with Paul, the overall level of Mark's analysis was basic: he did not attempt to understand, or perhaps think it important to consider, *why* Aeneas doesn't want to leave Troy. Rosie only made brief bullet point notes, focused almost entirely on Aeneas' family: observing his care for them and suffering as a result of losing his wife. Her focus here seemed to have influenced her choice of the Creusa scene for her creative writing.

Finally, Victor and Andrew both did not hand in a first journal but I have their explanations for their choice of scene which show

differing levels of analysis. Victor noted Aeneas' leadership and piety, as he had previously seen Aeneas as 'overly protective of his troops' and 'respective' towards Venus. He compared these views with Aeneas' impulsive, vengeful actions in the Helen scene: 'I felt like it showed him in a completely different light'. Victor was usually the most analytical student in this class and he began to show this here, although there is no hint of whether or not he understood Aeneas' perspective. This was also the case for Andrew who ignored reflections on Aeneas altogether, rather stating that he chose the initial Greek invasion scene as it was the 'first scene of all out war and rage' and 'enjoyable to read'. This is a positive sign of engagement in the text, seemingly encouraged by having the freedom to choose a scene according to his interests. Overall, the students seemed to demonstrate varying degrees of analysis of Aeneas as a character, but few sought to understand his perspective and none showed any real empathy prior to their creative writing.

I observed a greater level of empathy and understanding from most students in their poems, reflected in their second reflective journal. All except Mark wrote their poem in the first person which encouraged students to put themselves into the shoes of Aeneas. Victor particularly tried to convey the thoughts in Aeneas' mind, imagining the questions he might have asked when viewing Helen: 'Am I to end the suffering caused by the golden apple?' (Appendix A1). Paul stated in his journal that his 'views haven't changed', yet in his poem there was clear understanding of the depth of Aeneas' feelings towards his wife. Paul used emotive language such as 'fate rips my love from me' and placed greater emphasis in his journal on Aeneas' family and the duty he feels towards them, not just the gods (Appendix B1). This added a depth to Aeneas' suffering, building on Paul's thoughts in his first journal. Mark also emphasised Aeneas' family and his feelings towards them: Aeneas thinks of his family as he watches Troy's destruction and 'thought this might be his last goodbye' (Appendix C1). Mark did not write in the first person but in his poetic description he did try to imagine Aeneas' view of other characters, for example the sight of Helen prompts thoughts of 'the scrawny little boy called Paris'. Andrew's poem showed some insight into Aeneas' emotions, emphasising the extreme brutality of the Greek invasion. His poem implied that Aeneas views the 'slaughter' and bodies' which results in an impassioned outburst: 'Who could you speak of such slaughter' (Appendix D1)? Out of all the students, Rosie seemed to show the least improvement in understanding. She took my instructions very literally; I had encouraged students to keep close to the text, intending their interpretations to be justified from the text. Rosie framed her poem around lines lifted directly from the text, making it clear with quotation marks and her bracketed explanation. This appeared to impair her ability to look beyond the text and imagine Aeneas' feelings beyond what the reader is told. Almost all of my students seem to make an attempt to place themselves into Aeneas' shoes and were able to demonstrate his emotions in their poems. Interestingly most students placed an increasing emphasis on Aeneas' feelings towards his family, perhaps because they found it easier to relate to someone caring for their family and facing loss rather than a hero fighting for his burning city. I was encouraged most by Victor's reflection in his second journal, concluding that he now thought of Aeneas 'as a more relatable hero'. Victor evaluated Aeneas's actions and explained his seeming lapse with Helen as someone 'in shock' and simply reacting to what is happening around him. Victor considered Aeneas' experience and made promising steps to understand the hero's perspective in the text through his creative writing.

Some of the students tried to make their poems rhyme. I had made clear this was not expected, in order to make their task seem less daunting, however it was clear that for some, this was their idea of a poem. Mark particularly embraced this challenge, researching to find a metre used in the time of Virgil and, by his own admission, making the task much more complicated for himself. In his case, although clearly interested in the process of creative writing itself, it seemed to take some of his focus away from the content, trying to fit the words to a rhyme scheme.

I have largely focused on students' work on Aeneas as it is easier to draw parallels from the same character. I also set the same tasks on a second character in Book 2. However Rosie again misunderstood the instructions and so did not submit any work. The challenges of remote teaching meant that I was unable to effectively check up on students and address such misunderstandings before they submitted their work online. Nevertheless, from the data I have collected, there is evidence of similar patterns to the first set of tasks on Aeneas. I gave students the choice of Priam, Creusa, Venus, Helen – a range of characters who we devoted less time to in lessons compared to that dedicated to Aeneas in Book 2. Although given greater freedom in their choices, my class showed little difference, positive or negative, in their engagement in the text. Victor wrote journals on both Priam and Creusa but for each he analysed their role and purpose in the plot, rather than reflecting on their feelings. It prompted some thoughtful views, such as considering Priam's death to symbolise the 'final blow to Troy'. Victor chose Priam for his poem and placed the focus entirely on this character and his feelings: his killer, Pyrrhus, is only referred to as 'my target' (Appendix A2). Priam's powerlessness and the injustice of his fate were particularly highlighted: 'What have I done to deserve this?' As with his Aeneas poem, Victor used rhetorical questions to imagine Priam's perspective.

Andrew also chose Priam for his first journal, taking the initiative in comparing the character in the *Aeneid* to his appearance in the *Iliad*; he criticised the character here for taking the 'decision to let the horse into Troy'. Although Andrew simply stated his impressions of Priam – 'still brave, heroic' – rather than analysing his perspective in any detail, there was a sign of engagement with the text as observed earlier with Aeneas. For his poem, Andrew made the rogue decision to write on Dido: he started his poem with 'I' but it was not clear who this referred to. It was only in his questionnaire that he explained that he wrote from Dido's perspective. However, the focus was still on Aeneas and his suffering so there was little evidence that his writing here deepened his understanding of the character's perspective. Mark also showed little emphasis on his chosen character Venus' feelings in his poem. His journals gave only brief thoughts and some analysis of Venus' main motives but there was less thought here than demonstrated for Aeneas.

In comparison, Paul's poem on Creusa showed a deeper analysis of her perspective. His initial journal noted all of Creusa's actions in Book 2 and assigned the basic emotions of 'relief' and 'fear'. By choosing the same scene he selected for Aeneas, Paul was able to explore this from the other perspective. The text, and my subsequent teaching on the scene in lesson time, placed the focus on Aeneas. Paul imagined Creusa's thoughts towards her family and gave greater freedom to her character: in his interpretation he implied that her appearance is her choice, with no mention of the gods. It is Creusa who sends Aeneas on his journey and her heartbroken feelings are described: 'It pained me' (Appendix B2). Overall, it appears that my students were able to understand Aeneas' perspective through creative writing, rather than their second character. A possible explanation for this is that students already had a level of familiarity with this character, having previously studied Book 1, which they were able to build on and start to understand his

emotions from a personal level. Or perhaps the external stress, coupled with the transition to remote learning, meant that they found this harder.

Students' view of creative writing

My second research question was concerned with considering the value my students themselves placed on using creative writing to deepen their understanding of characters' perspectives. In terms of their overall experience of creative writing, my initial observations from the lesson were that my instructions were greeted with some apprehension. They shared that they had been asked to write poetry before at school but not for a long time – evidence of the decline in these opportunities as noted earlier. When I asked about their experience after their first poem, they acknowledged it had been hard. Mark and Andrew admitted they had made it even harder by trying to rhyme their poems. This also came across in their questionnaire answers: Victor said he found it 'quite challenging to start' and Rosie noted that she 'struggled to word it'. This is largely unsurprising due to their lack of experience of this kind of writing. I made it clear at the beginning that if students struggled with poetry, they could choose prose but they all persevered. A few comments in students' answers demonstrated that for some, their choice of scene was influenced by their thoughts on writing a poem. Paul thought that, 'a scene with tragedy is easier to turn into a piece of creative writing' and Rosie shared that she felt it was 'easier to write about a tragic emotional moment'. Both students made the same judgment about tragedy and interestingly, both chose the Creusa scene as, in their minds, the most clear and relatable moment of tragedy for Aeneas in Book 2.

However, their challenges did not seem to impede their enjoyment of the activities. Since Mark did not fill out a questionnaire, I cannot judge his response other than from the initial lesson observations. Andrew simply acknowledged that it was 'hard at first (but still fun)'. Andrew's engagement in the writing task was clear: after some persuasion by his classmates, he revealed that he had initially become carried away and created a 'mock' poem with modern references to Trump! Victor's answer showed a deeper analysis: he 'quite enjoyed looking into the perspective of another character and being able to put yourself in their situation'. Out of all my students, Victor seemed to have most clearly embraced the purpose of the activity. However, I was most interested by Paul's response: he commented that it was a 'refreshing' change to all the essays they now have to write. It had also changed his view on writing and analysing poetry: he had 'hated' those studied in GCSE because of the repetitive themes of war and death. Evidently in the *Aeneid*, and through these writing tasks, he had found more variety that inspired him. This is another sign of increased engagement in the text.

I used a Likert scale for students to record how well they felt they understood Aeneas' perspective before their creative writing compared to afterwards: 1 meaning 'Not at all' and 5 'Very well'. For Aeneas, three out of the four students who completed the questionnaire started at 3 and moved to 4. Paul went further and placed his understanding at 5. For their second character, the pattern appears that most students started at a lower understanding of 2 and then improved – for Paul and Andrew as far as 4. Victor was the only student that recorded no change in his understanding, perhaps because he only wrote his journal on Priam after his poem. The difficulty of an online questionnaire is that I was unable to ask follow-up questions and probe further into their own evaluation. These findings reflect my analysis above in relation to Aeneas: that students improved in their understanding of his perspective and

already had a level of familiarity with Aeneas through study. Since students had not studied characters such as Priam or Creusa in any detail for this text, it is not surprising that this activity raised their understanding from its low starting point. However, evidence from their journals suggests their analysis was still deeper for Aeneas.

When specifically questioned on the value they placed on creative writing, all my students responded positively. Victor thought that he wouldn't think about a character's perspective, or at least not in the same depth, if he 'didn't have to write about them'. Paul also valued the use of creative writing in making a scene 'more memorable'. By creating your own interpretation, the reader does more than 'just reading it and moving on'. He seemed to have grasped the importance of active learning. Rosie and Andrew both shared the same view that the tasks helped their understanding 'more than… before', with the latter student acknowledging he valued the creative writing itself 'a lot more than I did before we started it'. It seems my initial observations here were correct!

All students agreed that they were able to empathise with the characters. I observed a difference in analysis across this question. Rosie answered with a simple 'Yes', whereas the others went into more detail. I tried to avoid many questions that had a simple 'yes/no' answer but rather ones that encouraged them to explain their thinking. Andrew made the link between this feeling of empathy and his creative writing very clear: 'only able… because at the time I was writing the poems'. Victor noted this was 'the main feeling… when writing' – he was able to realise and understand these characters' perspectives by imagining their experience for himself. It seems that this process of imagining and writing creatively enabled students to realise different elements of the characters' experience and thus made them seem more relatable. This came across from Paul who responded that it, 'brought the characters struggles to the forefront which made it easier to empathise with them.' These findings align with my own analysis that the act of creative writing itself forced students to consider the characters' emotions in a deeper way than before.

Conclusion

Overall, I was impressed by the willingness, effort and honesty from my students who rose to the challenge of the tasks set, despite some initial apprehensions. I believe creative writing tasks have a value for students studying literature beyond the KS3 level when these are most commonly used. My findings seem to suggest that creative writing enabled my students to deepen their understanding of characters in the *Aeneid*, particularly towards Aeneas. Focusing on his suffering and care for his family, students were able to imagine their chosen scenes from his point of view and consider his emotions. The activity also appeared to make Aeneas more relatable as they were able to empathise and connect with his perspective with minimal teacher input. I was encouraged to gather from their questionnaire responses that my students themselves appreciated the value of creative writing for this purpose. Even when there was only a small amount of detail on their character's experience and feelings, I observed a deeper level of analysis on the characters and also clear signs of increased engagement with the text itself. These findings suggest the potential benefits of such activities for removing some of the barriers noted earlier that prevent students closely examining a text and making a personal response to it and characters within it. None of my students noted that they found it 'remote', rather one explicitly stated that they found Aeneas more relatable. The act of recreating the text in this way forces them into an active role. They are required to ask questions and to start to

deepen their analysis, for example evaluating why a character is experiencing a particular emotion. It also makes clear that their view is valued which is an important feature of the reader response theory also discussed earlier.

There was a difference in the length and quality of students' reflective journals, perhaps due to my limited instructions. If I were to carry out a similar project, I would make clearer what I expected in order to encourage a comprehensive insight into their thoughts and therefore more easily analyse any changes. The pattern that seemed to emerge was that their journal enabled students to analyse, at various levels, the role and motivations of a character, whereas the creative writing allowed them to really experience their character's perspective with an emphasis on their feelings and the experience around them.

This study was conducted with a small class and in part hindered by incomplete data, therefore all my conclusions are very tentative. I would be interested to conduct a similar study with a greater range of students and being able to carry out all lessons in an actual classroom. Although most of my students continued to work well despite the move to remote teaching as a result of Covid-19, some faced difficulties handing in work which has had an effect on my current study. This did not seem to significantly hinder their enjoyment which, despite the increased focus on exams, must surely remain important for engaging students in their education.

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Appendices

A1: Victor's Aeneas Poem

As I stand alone surrounded by the flames
until wicked Helen, who ironically is by Vesta,
caught my sight, I was filled with a hatred of
Achilles and portrayed his sacking as I ran towards her.
As I strode towards the unhospitable waste
I picked up my sword, which glimmered a gold sphere
into the sky – was this what was destined?
Am I to end the suffering caused by the golden apple?
This beam however did not display my wish,
as Venus appeared before me and questioned me thus:
'O my son, what bitterness!
This isn't what the gods wish.'
From this became an image to see
the gods in all their might,
our sacred Neptune, god of the sea
was destroying our foundations with ash off a tree.
The gods have saved me and now I know
to grab my family and depart to go.

A2: Victor's Priam poem

I awake to the shrieks of my people.
The sweet smell of flames teases me as I get up.
I feel trapped in a furnace of Greek flame.
O, Jupiter, what have I done to deserve this?
My youthful armour lay next to my bed.
The flames glisten in the reflection, surrounding my face.
My armour still fits.
I will die for Troy.
I know what Hecuba is saying and it is irrelevant.
Troy has to be defended by those who live there.
Regardless of low or high we have to survive.
My target is in sight; throwing my spear,
The air compressed my power and it seemed to stop.
He rushed toward me with the power of a god.
I know this is my fate.

B1: Paul's Aeneas poem

Body fuelled by fear,
The burden of loyalty heavy on my back,
Prior terrors were naught.
The cacophonous sound of soldiers marching nearer.

Flames in the distance spurring me on.
Fate rips my love from me.
I raced back down into chaos,
My blood chilled by the icy silence.
Greeks flooding the streets,
Burning down Troy from the ground up.
Despite the dangers that lay in wait,
Into the shadows I call out:
'Creusa! Creusa!'
Relentlessly, I searched,
Until I looked upon her visage.
I stood there paralyzed.
My voice stuck in my throat.
She warned me of my journey ahead.
Then she faded back into the shadows,
Leaving me longing once more,

B2: Paul's Creusa poem

Shattered glass and broken screams drag me from sleep.
My home is burning,
Ripped apart by savages.
My son staying close to me,
I fear for my husband out there in the chaos.
He bursts in like a whirlwind, planning on taking us to safety.
His father refuses to leave without the gods' permission.
I cling to my love as he turns to leave to his certain death.
The gods reply, giving permission to leave,
My love takes his father and our son. I trail along behind,
Running through burning streets,
The home I once knew turned to ash and rubble.
I lose sight of my love.
Wrapped up in the chaos, I feel death take me.
The world goes black.
One last time, I get to see him -
My husband, my love.
It pained me to see him grief-stricken over me.
It pained me, even more, to send him on his journey.
One last time I got to see him before it all faded black.

C1: Mark's Aeneas poem

There he [Aeneas] was stood in the city called Troy.
Visions of family flashes before his eyes.
His father, his wife, his men and his boy.
He thought this might be his last goodbye.
Alone he saw a girl called Helen,
The wife of the Spartan king,
Cuckolded by the prince of Troy,
The scrawny little boy called Paris.
Anger filled his pure heart with thoughts of vengeance,
For the city he once called his homeland,
As he ran towards the girl with sword in hand -
Venus, his mum, stopped him dead and spoke in a sweet tone:
'O my son, why this anger? Your father, your son,
You wife? Go find them. The gods are the cruel ones.'

C2: Mark's Venus poem

Aeneas saw red with the vision of Helen.
His mother came before him.
'Son, I come from heaven.

Go and check on the king.
This new anger, where is it from?
It blinds you from love,
Your wife, father and son.
See what they have become of.
Do not blame [them] and [that] man;
Helen, Paris or the Greeks.
This is not in their hands.
The gods are the ones to critique.
Escape, my son, far away from this place.
Try to forget about the woes.
Move with great haste.
And found the city of Rome.

D1: Andrew's Aeneas poem

You must save yourself from the flames.
Troy is falling from its highest pinnacle,
Nought that can be saved but here remains,
So found a city far across the sea.
I shook the sleep from me and climbed.
The Greeks are masters of the burning city.
The hours of my sleep were mistimed.
Ulysses and the Greeks showed no pity.
Who could you speak of such slaughter?
The bodies lay dead in the streets,
As I put on my armour and lion fur
And I prepared myself for battle, perhaps to die.

D2: Andrew's Dido poem

I sing of arms and of the man,
The man who Juno hates relentlessly,
A man sent on an exile but not a ban,
And until Carthage he would be travelling endlessly.
Leaving me there in tears and longing reply,
At the death of wife. Aeneas did cry.
To add salt to his wounds was the fall of Troy.
So he fled with his father and his little boy.
Prosperity, a kingdom and a royal bride,
All of this was waiting in Hesperia.
Neptune and the walls of Troy did collide,
The Greeks were in hysteria.

E1: Rosie's Aeneas poem

My head I covered with golden dappled lion's pelt.
Iulus' hand with mine was entwined.
The time for us to flee hidden was here I felt.
'Now every breath of wind frightened me,'
I hear my father's cries,
'At this moment some hostile power confused me.'
Fate tore me away from Creusa to my surprise.
'I blamed every god and man.'
With that I found my flashing armour and turned.
I retraced my steps throughout the darkness.
I searched and searched even though is burneds [*sic*]
I was refusing to give up.
Then did she appear, her eyes full of sorrow.
Her very ghost was as large as could be.
I was paralysed in place. I could barely swallow,
She then left me a message to comfort my despair