

Of Researchers and Resources: Improving access to nineteenth-century non-fiction Catherine Charlwood

Rushed through from conception to inception, the 9-1 GCSE English Language syllabus hit hard, students and teachers alike.¹ Unseen nineteenth-century non-fiction was suddenly a key component for the widely-used AQA syllabus, as well as in the OCR specification. In both cases, students – and the overwhelming majority sitting these exams are 16-year-olds, daily exposed to more hashtags than polysyllables – are faced with the daunting task of not only answering questions specifically about the nineteenth-century non-fiction text, but of comparing it to a companion extract from the twentieth or twenty-first century. However, the resources available to teach this new requirement when the 9-1 came in in 2015 were next to non-existent. Nineteenth-century fiction extracts and resources abound, and have for a while given that nineteenth-century literature has long been a staple of the GCSE English Literature syllabus. How, though, to cope with teaching this new, demanding nineteenth-century non-fiction requirement? The answer lies, I believe in collaborating with researchers, those scholars of the nineteenth century for whom such texts are second nature.

The Challenge

Firstly, it is important to remember the context: the exam scenario which teachers are preparing students to face. AQA GCSE English Language candidates have one hour and forty-five minutes to read two extracts (one of which, at least, is written in an unfamiliar style), answer four questions on them (ranging from four to sixteen marks in weighting), before the forty-mark non-fiction writing question. Students need to navigate time with precision as much as language. This exam is worth 50% of a student's overall grade, so Paper 2, Section A – containing the nineteenth-century non-fiction – holds 25% of their grade. One

major stumbling block, then, is decreased reading speed for Source B, as candidates navigate more archaic language and syntax.

This is from AQA's Paper 2 'Writers' Viewpoints and Perspectives', so students are not only attempting to read and understand the text, but to analyse how language is used to indicate the author's viewpoint on a given topic, in order to compare it with the paired twentieth or twenty-first century text on the same topic (Source A). On the OCR specification, the same style of paired sources and questions appears on Paper 1, 'Communicating Information and Ideas'. Both exam paper titles are somewhat grandiose given the unignorable fact that linguistic shift means that nineteenth-century texts – and perhaps especially non-fiction texts, without a narrative structure to fall back on – do not readily communicate information, ideas, viewpoints or perspectives to today's exam candidates. And don't think I am blaming them for this: you cannot get used to something to which you're not exposed, and the lack of resources for this exam element often means that there simply are not enough texts available for students to become accustomed to negotiating unfamiliar nineteenth-century non-fiction. Certainly, I struggled to find extracts to teach from in 2016-17 and 2017-18 when I'd taken two cohorts through the AQA GCSE English Language course. Being directed to the British Library's 'Texts in Context' collections online was little help to the time-poor teacher, since it provides detailed overview but wrestling out the raw material which could then be converted into a form usable in the classroom would require the kind of spare time teachers do not have.²

Our Response

The European Research Council funded Diseases of Modern Life project at the University of Oxford (2014-2019) focused on medical, literary and cultural responses in the Victorian age to the perceived problems of stress and overwork, anticipating many of the preoccupations of

our own era. As part of the project, researchers compiled a free database of sources covering the project's major themes (Finance and Speculation; Diseases of Professions and Occupations; Addiction; Climate and Health; Education and Over-pressure; Nervous Diseases; Technology and New Inventions) – it is available for all to use at <https://diseasesofmodernlife.web.ox.ac.uk/database>. Suddenly, here was a wealth of material which would be redeployed and repurposed for a secondary audience: secondary school English teachers. Having found that many of these sources were freely available online, I decided to convert some extracts into Source B-style practice texts for teachers and students of AQA GCSE English Language.

The resulting corpus of possible Source B texts are hosted on the University of Oxford's Faculty of English webpages, at <https://www.english.ox.ac.uk/diseases-modern-life-resources>. There are nineteen freely downloadable PDFs, formatted to appear – as far as possible – as they would on an AQA exam paper: in 11pt Arial font, with an initial explanation of the extract and followed by a glossary of terms candidates are not expected to know. This way, teachers can easily print out classroom-ready resources and students can familiarise themselves with the style of extract they will face in the exam. The two main aims of the resources are

- to increase students' reading speed when reading 19th century non-fiction: the quicker students can read and understand 19th century non-fiction, the more time they can spend formulating strong answers
- to allow students to practice the skills tested by Assessment Objective 2, which can fall by the wayside when students are busy just trying to understand the gist of the text

AO2, 'Explain, comment on and analyse how writers use language and structure to achieve effects and influence readers, using relevant subject terminology to support their views', is

the highest weighted assessment objective for the reading sections of the GCSE (at 17.5%).³ While the specification specifies it is testing ‘reading’, the higher-weighted questions are more akin to literary analysis, a skill which is understandably harder to perform on texts with which candidates are less confident.

The Diseases of Modern Life GCSE Resources purposely cover a range of topics, from the plight of youthful shop assistants (in ‘Death and Disease Behind the Counter’), to female drinking (‘Stimulants for Fine Ladies’), to burgeoning environmental concerns (‘London Air and London Streets’). With many of the resources highlighting concerns which resonate with the lives of young people today (such as ‘Anxiety’, or the stress described in ‘American Nervousness’), there is also scope for using these resources as part of PSHE.

Moreover, there is lots of fun to be had in discussing how obnoxious the Victorians found new technological developments, ‘the confusion, noise, and bustle of the railway station; the shriek of the engine; the start from and stoppage at various stations’, with which Benjamin Ward Richardson characterised train travel; how art critic John Ruskin determined that a steam ship was ‘the most disagreeable floating contrivance imaginable’.⁴ Students can and do enjoy analysing the language of nineteenth-century non-fiction, but they need a range of extracts, with teacher time able to be given to lesson planning rather than resource creation.

The main reason that researchers might be best placed to fashion nineteenth-century resources is that they have what I term second-nature knowledge of where to find nineteenth-century primary texts online. As a class teacher, I was limited to what was already in my sphere and had little time to venture beyond it; by contrast, as a researcher of the nineteenth century, I was daily using the kinds of primary texts online for which I was desperate in my teaching days. Thanks to the expiration of copyright – and commitment from academic libraries worldwide to digitising their collections – there is lots of nineteenth-century non-

fiction freely available on non-paywalled websites. Two excellent starting points are the HathiTrust Digital Library (hathitrust.org), and the Internet Archive (archive.org).

The Diseases of Modern Life resources formed the basis of a collaboration with scholars from the Thomas Hardy Society to run two free workshops in Dorchester, one for teachers of GCSE English Language, the other for Year 10 students of the course. For these workshops, the themes of Diseases of Modern Life and the nineteenth-century non-fiction requirement were contextualised through the familiar literary personality of the local area: Thomas Hardy.⁵ Students who were also taking the ‘Medicine Through Time’ paper in GCSE History found lots of ways to link English to their historical studies. Survey data showed that we had expanded students’ horizons, with 87% of students more interested in the Victorians; 87% more interested in English; 69% more interested in books and literature; 94% more interested in the history of medicine; and 69% more interested in the relationship between literature and science. In my favourite feedback comment from the day, one student wrote ‘I should be more open to a future in English’, which just goes to show that outreach works!

The next round of resources in production came out of feedback from teachers at our May workshop in Dorchester. Extracts are all very well, they pointed out, but they’re no use to students who are grappling with individual words not covered by the glossary, or unfamiliar sentence structures which render the meaning opaque. Along with colleagues in The Thomas Hardy Society, I am compiling a resource on ‘Victorian Vocab: Get the Gift of the Gab’, glossing some words common to nineteenth-century texts though uncommon today (such as ‘countenance’), as well as a group of ‘false friends’, whose meaning has shifted since the nineteenth century, in common parlance at least (such as ‘check, v.’, to stop, prevent, or slow the progress of something). With this and the Victorian syntax resources we are developing, we will seek to give examples from both fiction and non-fiction, so that they can be cross-curricular resources for both language and literature skill development. All

resources will be produced in conjunction with our teacher partners and adapted accordingly, before they are eventually hosted on the Hardy Society website.

The Promise of Interdisciplinarity

There are many ways of making nineteenth-century non-fiction exciting and fascinating (as it is!), rather than the trial it is felt by many students to be. There is also a knock-on effect: students who have a bad experience of nineteenth-century writing at GCSE are unlikely to opt for more of the same at A Level, thus reducing the numbers of sixth formers who could choose to study English at university. You likely have scholars in your local university who are dedicated members of the British Association of Victorian Studies (BAVS) or the Research Society for Victorian Periodicals (RSVP), who would be willing and able to help if you reached out. Collaboration is a task for both sides, and while I am dedicated to raising awareness among Victorianists that their day-job could have a direct impact on teachers and students in secondary schools, I also know that reaching out to schools can be a disheartening process. The number of replies you get to emails offering free workshops will always be depressingly low (six from seventy-two in a case this Spring), and those emails will go to whichever email address the researcher can get hold of from the school website – not necessarily yours. Thus, if you are a classroom teacher wanting to involve a researcher, reach out! Not to cast this in too instrumental a light, but university researchers are now subject to the Research Excellence Framework (REF) exercise, and are measured on the impact their research has beyond the academy, for instance by working with schools.

Diseases of Modern Life specifically looked at medical and scientific culture, and thus provided a way of opening students' eyes to the concept of interdisciplinarity. With school timetables necessarily dividing subjects up into discrete disciplines, many students do not realise that the study of English embraces medical and scientific texts (alongside the

poetry, prose and plays they are aware of). This knowledge opens up new possibilities and new avenues of exploration for students who are served quite a prescriptive diet of literary texts.

Our strict notions of academic disciplines were, importantly, not shared by the Victorians.⁶ In both of our outreach workshops, we were keen to point out how non-fiction aligned with fiction, not just in using the same linguistic techniques, but from a basic standpoint of publishing. We showed participants the frontispieces of periodicals like *The Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art* to make the point that these subjects were mixed together for nineteenth-century readers. This is often surprising for today's GCSE students, and provides many amusing juxtapositions. As Dr Will Tattersdill of the University of Birmingham points out about general magazines in the 1890s, 'virtually anything could be over the next page, be it a report from a war artist, some photographs of cats, or the latest adventure from Arthur Conan Doyle'.⁷

Interdisciplinarity also allows students to see texts as on a continuum, rather than insisting upon the mutual exclusiveness of fiction and non-fiction (which often leads only to a resolute dislike of non-fiction). Victorian scientists often quoted poetry as part and parcel of explication of scientific theory, and Victorian novelists wrote with an awareness – and vocabulary – informed by contemporary scientific developments. The 'traffic' between literature and science, as Dame Gillian Beer's marvellous wording has it, was 'two-way'.⁸ Nineteenth-century periodicals, where whole volumes have been digitised, are a great way to allow students an initial foray into the heterogenous world of nineteenth-century texts. Professor Angelique Richardson and Dr Helen Angear have already made online resources which link Thomas Hardy to the periodicals in which he published, and they foreground the 'new scope for schools to work with universities and cultural heritage organisations, many of which are bursting at the seams with fascinating and underused historical archives'.⁹

Nineteenth-century periodicals could be key to unlocking students from their strict disciplinary thinking, since as Professor Gowan Dawson notes,

The miscellaneous nature of most nineteenth-century periodicals, whether politically influential journals of the Romantic period such as *Blackwood's Edinburgh magazine* or Victorian family-oriented shilling monthlies such as the *Cornhill Magazine*, provided a textual space in which scientific articles appeared alongside poetry, short stories and instalments of serial fiction. [...in the 1860s] the *Cornhill* carried a regular feature entitled "Our Survey of Literature, Science, and Art", which combined reviews of recent works of fiction with news of the latest scientific developments.¹⁰

The *Cornhill*, of course, serialized Thomas Hardy's *Far From the Madding Crowd* in 1874, a good way of showing to students that a text which we now receive as canonical literature, and as self-sufficient, could originally be read alongside 'Maids-of-all-work and Blue Books' on the education system; 'Comets' Tails', a scientific essay on this astrophysical phenomenon; and a meditation 'On Unaccomplished Purposes'.¹¹ Teaching nineteenth-century non-fiction as the set of eclectic, intertwined with literary fiction texts that it is, offers a more engaging educational experience for all involved and allows the GCSE curriculum to communicate with the study of English in its broadest sense.

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References

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² <http://www.bl.uk/learning/langlit/texts/context.html>

³ AQA (May 2018), 'GCSE English Language (8700): Specification', pp. 16-17.

⁴ These examples are from the 'Train Travel' and 'Ruskin Letters' resources respectively.

⁵ To read more about these workshops, see C. Charlwood and A Hewitt (2019), 'Reaching out to Teachers and Students with Research-Based Resources' in *The Hardy Society Journal*, Vol. 15 No. 2, pp. 56-63.

⁶ For students interested in further exploring the interdisciplinarity offered by literature and science studies, this February Dr Laura Ludtke and I set up *LitSciPod: The Literature and Science Podcast*, which is free to download and listen to from all major podcasting websites.

⁷ Tattersdill, W. (2016), *Science, Fiction, and the Fin-de-Siècle Periodical Press* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 1.

⁸ Beer, G. (1983) *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 5.

⁹ Richardson A. and H. Angear (June 2018), GCSE English: 'New, exciting' approaches, *TES Magazine*, <https://www.tes.com/news/gcse-english-new-exciting-approaches>.

¹⁰ Dawson G, (2017) 'Science in the Periodical Press', in *The Routledge Research Companion to Nineteenth-Century British Literature and Science*, ed. J. Holmes and S. Rushton (London: Routledge), pp. 173-4.

¹¹ These particular examples come from *The Cornhill Magazine*, Vol. 30, No. 177 (Sept 1874). This is freely available online for classroom use via the Hathi Trust Digital Library at <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.32044036998359?urlappend=%3Bseq=302>.