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Reading Up-Close and Personal: Connection-Making and the Classic American Short Story

"Mr. Farrington," she said, with the smile that everyone in the Lotus loved, "I want to tell you something. I'm going to leave early tomorrow morning because I must go back to work. I work selling women's clothes at Casey's shop. That dollar is all the money I have. I won't have more until I get paid at the end of the week. You're a real gentleman and you've been good to me. I wanted to tell you before I went."

—O. Henry, "Transients in Arcadia"

In 1908, William Sydney Porter, otherwise known by his pen name, O. Henry, published a collection of short stories, *The Voice of the City: Further Stories of the Four Million*, in which "Transients in Arcadia" appeared. It is available for teachers and readers on the American English website (see Henry 2023).

The brief five-page narrative opens in the lobby of a luxurious New York City hotel, the Hotel Lotus. It is July in the early 1900s. The Hotel Lotus is a summer oasis for the rich to temporarily escape the intense heat and noise of the bustling city. A guest, the mysterious Madame Héloise D'Arcy Beaumont, is rumored to be a great lady. In an elaborate dress decorated with roses, she descends the grand staircase into the hotel's restaurant, where a team of waiters meticulously serves her the evening meal. In the dining room, she meets Harold Farrington, rumored to be a great man. Over the next week, the two guests become fast friends—and, from the point of view of the other hotel guests, a good match. The night before Madame Beaumont's rumored departure for Europe, she reveals—as quoted above—that she is not Héloise D'Arcy Beaumont. Her identity is fiction. Her real name is Mamie Siviter, and she works in a department store selling women's clothes. It took her more than a year to save the money she needed to experience the Lotus for a short week as a wealthy woman; she has not finished paying for the dress she is wearing. The gentleman smiles and reveals that his real name is James McManus—or "Jimmy." He isn't a great gentleman either, he says. Instead, he is employed at O'Dowd and Levinsky—by coincidence, the store where Mamie bought her elegant dress. His week at the Hotel Lotus was something he had saved for, too—wanting to experience, even if temporarily, the lifestyle of the rich and famous. The story ends with Mamie and Jimmy agreeing to meet again (as themselves) at Coney Island, a working-class beach park in Brooklyn.

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"Transients in Arcadia" is a celebrated ironic commentary about the desire of everyday men and women to experience wealth—however temporarily. It is a lot to think about; and stories like "Transients in Arcadia," whether they be five pages or 500 pages long, challenge us to reconsider our values. But for a variety of reasons, reading O. Henry stories can be a challenge for anyone studying English as a foreign language (EFL). The story's title, for example, might require a dictionary if not an encyclopedia to decipher. "Transients"?—an antiquated expression for persons staying or working in a place for only a brief period. "Arcadia"?—a once unspoiled and idyllic region in the Greek Peloponnesus and playground of the dryads and nymphs of ancient mythologies.

In previous collaborations, we have leveraged classic American short stories to explore how teachers working within a prescribed literature curriculum might take up new language and forms in participatory formats (Salas, Mraz, et al. 2019), visualize a storyline (Salas, Williams, et al. 2021), and develop deep comprehension through layered question-making (Salas, Mraz, Green, et al. 2024). In this article, we extend these discussions and underscore the value of the deliberate juxtaposition of readers' lived experiences with the text as we explore words and worlds—especially ones that might initially seem antique, difficult, or even irrelevant to our contemporary lifestyles. Here, we argue that reading short stories—and more broadly, literature—is about making connections between the text and our own lives, other texts, and the world we live in.

We begin with an overview of a body of "reader-response" literature, emphasizing the creative transactions that happen when we take up a story. With "Transients in Arcadia" as an anchor, we continue with a series of connection-making moves. Although we write with adolescent readers in mind, using examples from the O. Henry narrative, we hope that teachers across grade levels and content areas will access the connection-making moves we describe here as a generative template for acknowledging our students' layered lived experiences and for modeling the connection-making moves that can make classic stories contemporary.

CONNECTING TEXT-TO-SELF, TO-TEXT, AND TO-WORLD

Our combined experiences suggest that teachers and students taking up works of literature in an EFL context are often fixated on decoding the text at the level of vocabulary. Much of what teachers do is simply to confirm that students know, for example, what a word such as *transient* or *Arcadia* means. If they don't, the teacher intervenes and tells them. Word by word, sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph, the teacher and students painfully make their way through the story. Perhaps the teacher models the pronunciation of an unfamiliar word or phrase; the students then repeat it chorally and individually. To mix it up a bit, the teacher might have a single student struggle through a voiced reading and may intervene to correct or repair a mispronounced word. Paragraph by paragraph, students take turns reading aloud and the teacher takes turns repairing their pronunciation. Or as another variation, the teacher might read the story aloud in its entirety and then explain what it means to their students. For all these reasons, reading

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a classic can be a slow and arduous task that is not particularly communicative or meaningful. But it doesn't have to be that way.

For decades, literacy research has shown connection-making as central to reading. Rosenblatt (1994), for example, famously theorized those generative interactions as a dialogue between the text and the reader. That is, readers alternate between processing the information or the message the text is trying to convey (an efferent stance) while simultaneously experiencing the text emotionally (an aesthetic stance). The result is a "poem"—the individual's connection-making with the text at hand. In a reader-response framework, reading is more than the consumption of an author's message or a definitive interpretation. It is a creative process that elevates readers as co-authors.

Smith (2012), however, named a third "deferent stance" that basic readers/writers in developmental literacy coursework frequently default to when they encounter a challenging text such as O. Henry's:

> Some basic writers who are deferent readers often give up on demanding texts because they believe the texts are too hard for them; they assume that when they have difficulty understanding challenging texts, their struggle to understand must be attributable to a deficiency in their reading ability, not in the fact that some texts are just difficult and require patience, sustained focus, and persistence to understand. (64)

So, the question is, how do we engage adolescent world-language readers in an O. Henry story in ways that don't trigger the sort of deferent stance that Smith (2012) describes? How do we engage them in challenging texts without undermining their sense of worthiness as language learners and as readers?

To answer these questions, we can first consider reading as sense-making moves beyond the idea of extracting an approved understanding of a text. Sense-making, as a pedagogical stance, recognizes and encourages the multiple meanings that individual readers make of the same text, and those connections depend in large part on who the reader is. Thus, the broad question we invite readers to ask as they approach an unfamiliar text is less, "What does the text mean?" and more, "What does the text mean to me?" In the sections that follow, we illustrate three types of connections to engage readers with new texts: text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world, with examples of how these might be operationalized in classroom settings.

We note that it is unclear where the terminology "text-to-self, text-to-text, text-to-world" came from exactly, as it has been part of the literacy practitioner repertoire for decades. Furthermore, our selection of "Transients in Arcadia" as anchor text is intentional in that, as previously mentioned, the complete text is available (along with several other great O. Henry stories) on the American English website. As a bonus, the site provides a series of lesson-plan templates that teachers will find tremendously useful as they work through the story in a classroom context (see https://americanenglish.state.gov/files/ae/resource_files/transients_in_arcadia_1.pdf). Finally, the story itself is only five pages long and is therefore manageable for various classroom contexts.

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Text-to-Self Connections

We suggest that teachers begin with "text-to-self" connection-making. Readers are asked to process the reading on a personal level and to think about how the text or an aspect of the text relates to their life, school, or community. Simply put, the questions here are, "How does this text connect to your life?" or "On a personal level, what does this story remind you of? How do the characters' experiences mirror (even in small ways) your own?"

Contextualizing this move in "Transients in Acadia," the story centers on two mysterious guests at the luxurious Hotel Lotus, Madame Héloise D'Arcy Beaumont and Harold Farrington. By the end of the story, we understand that both are working-class New Yorkers who saved their meager earnings to experience if only for one week the lifestyle of the rich and famous in the "oasis" of the opulent hotel.

We encourage teachers to model the three moves—as a way of legitimizing these exploratory ways of reading. In terms of when to start making connections, this can happen before, during, or after reading. For example, in advance of reading "Transients in Arcadia," the teacher might simply talk aloud in a way that previews the story and their connections with it. A pre-reading text-to-self connection might sound something like this:

> Today we're going to begin a short story by an American author named O. Henry. It's called "Transients in Arcadia." We'll learn more about what *transients* and *Arcadia* mean, but one of the big messages of the story is that sometimes we daydream about what it would be like to be another person or to have a life other than our own. Before we start reading, I'll share a little about daydreaming and me. When we were little, my neighborhood friends and I had sword fights with sticks we found in the woods where we lived. But it was all pretend—and that's what made it fun. So even from a young age, it's something that we do—we imagine what it's like to live in a faraway time as someone else. That's something that even before reading the story I can connect with and that I'd like us to think about together. What sort of games did you play as a child that involved taking on an imagined role or identity? What role were you in? How did it feel?

After sharing and posing the questions, the teacher can ask readers to pair up or arrange them in small groups to discuss. Volunteers then summarize their individual experiences or summarize the sharing that took place in pairs or groups. Then begin reading the O. Henry story.

Text-to-self connection-making can also take place while reading. In the final paragraphs of the story, Madame Beaumont reveals that, in fact, she is not Héloise D'Arcy Beaumont:

> For a year I've been planning to come here. Each week I put aside a little of my pay so that I would have enough money. I wanted to live one week like a rich lady. I wanted to get up in the morning when I wished. I wanted to be served by waiters. I wanted to have the best of everything. Now I've done it, and I've been happier than I ever was before. And now I'm going back to work. (Henry 2023, 65)

Students might relate the opening description of Madame Beaumont to Ariana Grande's 2019 hit song "7 Rings."

This is a moment in the reading when teachers might stop and ask readers to do some text-to-self connection-making. This could take the form of a diary entry in which the student writes about fantasizing or wishing something were different, and possibly even pretending to be someone they are not or to have something they do not have. The prompt might be, "Write about something you wish were different in your life or, if you could, would like to pretend was otherwise. What would be different in your life, and how do you imagine that change would make you feel? Explain why." Or, as a way of connecting to the story once the reading is complete, teachers might put students again in pairs or small groups and ask them to interview each other with a similar question: "What is something wonderful you would like to experience one day, and why?"

Text-to-Text Connections

To reiterate, text-to-self connections are key moves readers can make before, during, and after reading to bring themselves and their lived experiences into dialogue with a text. In contrast, "text-to-text" connection-making, as its name implies, involves readers' juxtaposition of a current reading with something or things they have read before. Or as Waller and Barrentine (2015, 2) explain, "A *text-to-text* connection occurs when a reader uses content or interpretations from previous reading experiences and makes connections between texts." The connection between what we're reading and what we've read might be at the level of the storyline, a specific character or characters, a theme or themes, a stylistic convention, and so forth.

For classroom contexts and especially when reading with adolescents who might not readily identify as avid readers, we encourage teachers and students to think broadly of the category of "text." That is to say, the text we connect "Transients in Arcadia" to might be another American short story or some other work of fiction or nonfiction. It might also be a film, music video or song, poem, photograph, or some other sort of "reading" in a multimodal sense of the word. That way, it is not a prerequisite that readers be intensely familiar with the canon of American literature to make a text-to-text connection with "Transients in Arcadia." Rather, the text to which they connect the story might be one from outside that reading list—even a text generated from popular adolescent culture.

For example, within the first paragraphs of the O. Henry story, we meet Madame Beaumont:

> Madame was alone in the Hotel Lotus. She was alone as a queen is alone, because of her high position. She rose from bed late in the morning. She was then a sweet, soft person who seemed to shine quietly. (Henry 2023, 63)

Popular culture globally is permeated by messages and images of affluence and lavish lifestyles. The Cardi B, Bad Bunny, and J Balvin collaboration "I Like It," for example, resonates with the same sort of materialism that O. Henry exposed a century ago:

> Now I like dollars, I like diamonds, I like stunting, I like shining
>
> I like million-dollar deals …
>
> I like those Balenciagas (those), the ones that look like socks
>
> I like going to the jeweler, I put rocks all in my watch (cha-ching).
>
> (Cardi B et al. 2018)

Or our students might relate the opening description of Madame Beaumont to Ariana Grande's 2019 hit song "7 Rings." The lyrics and music video celebrate extravagance and indulgence—diamonds and houses—and suggest that money buys happiness and independence:

> I want it, I got it, I want it, I got it
>
> You like my hair? Gee, thanks, just bought it
>
> I see it, I like it, I want it, I got it (yep).
>
> (Grande et al. 2019)

In some ways, "I Like It" and "7 Rings" both read like contemporary musical accompaniment to the lifestyle to which Madame Beaumont aspired. She wanted to feel what it was like, even for only a week, to be wealthy and, therefore, admired by the world around her. Or we can look back even earlier to Madonna's 1985 single "Material Girl"; again, the lyrics of the song underscore the consumerism that defines modern society:

> You know that we are living in a material world
>
> And I am a material girl.
>
> (Brown and Rans 1985)

That said (and this is the power of text-to-text connection-making), other songs might come to mind as we continue with the reading. One possibility is Whitney Houston's rendition of "Greatest Love of All," a song that sends the message that happiness or love first requires self-acceptance:

> Learning to love yourself
>
> Is the greatest love of all.
>
> (Masser and Creed 1985)

This song especially resonates with the resolution of the O. Henry story, when the two characters confess who they really are—and accept each other as their undisguised working-class selves, Mamie and Jimmy. Thus, one potential shared message between the O. Henry story and "Greatest Love of All" is the idea that it is no use pretending to be someone we're not. Happiness is accepting and loving who we are in the present.

There are probably many more songs that our students could relate to "Transients in Arcadia." Because the text-to-text connection move asks readers to relate one text to another, it's probably best to wait until the class has completed the story at hand before trying to relate it to another text. One post-reading activity for generating text-to-text connections can be structured around students trying to assign a popular song to the narrative. It works like this:

Divide the class into smaller groups. Each group is producing the soundtrack to go with a film version of the O. Henry story. Pick a moment in the text and pose the question, "What song would you match with the passage to create additional meaning?" Next, have the groups of students brainstorm and then decide on a song that they see as somehow connected to the storyline or a character. Then have them transcribe the specific lyrics that they connect to "Transients in Arcadia" and prepare to explain to their peers what that connection is. Once students are ready, have them present to the class and ask for feedback about their "short-story soundtrack."

Remember to ask students to articulate what they see as the relationship between "Transients in Arcadia" and the song they have selected—and to be specific: "Where or how does the story align with the lyrics of the song you have selected? Be specific." Again, we encourage teachers to model the activity with a think-aloud as a way of legitimizing the connection-making we have described here and to explain the relationship—however tenuous—they see between "Transients in Arcadia" and another text. The connections individual readers might make between two texts (or a text and a song, or a text

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and a film, or a text and an image) are not necessarily obvious to others.

Readers might make musical connections to the story, but as we suggested earlier, movies are texts as well. For example, the O. Henry character of Mr. Farrington makes us think of Jack in James Cameron's *Titanic*. Jack (played by Leonardo DiCaprio) is a third-class passenger and normally would not be allowed on the main deck of the ship or to mingle with the first-class passengers. However, after saving Rose's life, he is invited to dine in the ship's ballroom. Dressed in a borrowed tuxedo, Jack is indistinguishable from his wealthy dinner-mates. Similarly, in "Transients in Arcadia," Jimmy puts on the clothes of a gentleman and the persona of Mr. Farrington. The stories are very different, of course, but there is a connection to make between them. What is it? Invite the class members to share their thoughts and build off the connection a classmate has identified. Does the connection resonate with someone else's point of view? Why (or why not)? What other "readings" of the same text are possible? What other texts besides print, songs, and film can we connect to the O. Henry story?

Text-to-World Connections

"Text-to-world" connections ask readers to move beyond themselves or another text they have read and to think about the text and its meaning in relation to what is happening in the larger community or even in the world. This type of connection-making pushes the storyline, theme, characters, and messaging of the text into the present day by asking readers to juxtapose the text with contemporary society. As with the other two connection-making moves, we encourage teachers to again model what a text-to-world connection might sound like or to introduce a theme from the storyline and connect it somehow with modern life. For example, in contemporary U.S. society, it seems we have never let go of the idea that having more money somehow adds to people's merit and makes them better, or at least more-deserving people.

"Corridors of Reader Response" is another strategy that we have found to be helpful when making text-to-world connections (see Murray, Salas, and Ni Thoghdha 2015). This drama game comes from the discipline of applied theatre, and in terms of "Transients in Arcadia," it might go something like this: After the readers have completed the story and have worked on its various elements—generating multiple connections along the way—explain to the class that they will create a "collective social-conscience hallway," with students facing each other about a meter apart in parallel rows. Each participant thinks of one cautionary social message or takeaway from the narrative that they want to articulate to either or both of the story's protagonists (Madame Héloise D'Arcy Beaumont and Harold Farrington). Give students ample time to compose their messages—and, again, these should center on the larger societal issues that the text generates.

Once readers have created their messages, assign the respective "Transients in Arcadia" roles to two students and ask them to walk slowly through the imaginary social-conscience hallway as the other students repeatedly voice the text-to-world message or cautionary advice they have devised, e.g., "Wealth is an illusion; Money cannot buy happiness; Accept yourself and other people for who they are; Don't try to be someone or something that you're not."

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Importantly, the readers might not all agree about what the final lesson of the O. Henry story is. Some, for example, might argue that the story's two main characters were happy at the Hotel Lotus pretending to be other people—and that their role play led them to meet each other. Likewise, readers might admire the two characters for saving up their small salaries for a specific goal. Text-to-world connections might also sound something along the lines of "Dream big!" or "Save your money for something special!" Again, the connection-making process is shaped by the individual reader's point of view. These connections might vary widely, and that's okay, too.

If time allows, have each participant take a turn walking through the collective social-conscience hallway. Finally, have all the students come back together in a sharing-circle format to debrief. Talk about the messages they composed and, again, how their messages relate both to the story and to the contemporary world. A written version of this could be a "Gallery Walk" in which students write their text-to-world connections and advice on a whiteboard or large sheets of paper posted around the room, and then walk through, reading the "gallery" of messages and optionally responding in writing to selected messages that resonate with them.

Another creative way of getting at text-to-world connection-making is "writing in role"—also a technique from applied theatre. Here, the teacher asks students to take on the persona of one of the two main characters. For example, the teacher might ask students to imagine they are Mamie Siviter toward the end of her adult life. She is composing a letter to her children and grandchildren to impart final words of wisdom about what she learned about herself and life during her stay at the Hotel Lotus and the friendship that developed with Jimmy McManus. What would that letter sound like? Or the letter could be coming from Jimmy McManus as he reflects on the lessons he learned during his life and what he would like future generations to learn. Have students individually compose these personal messages or divide them into groups to co-create the letters for future generations. What would the letter include? What wisdom would either or both of the characters want to pass down to future generations? Once the letters are ready to share, assemble the students again into a circle and have them present their "writing in role." After each letter, discuss the takeaways for the present generation.

CONCLUSION: "WHAT DOES THE TEXT MEAN TO ME?"

Despite the ongoing evolution of pedagogical approaches and classroom practices for Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) (Vinogradova and Shin 2020), the gold standard of teaching and learning literacy (in English or any other language) at the advanced level remains access to great literature. Maybe that's because being able to read and appreciate short stories, novels, and poetry was one of the reasons we learned a foreign language in the first place. However, reading O. Henry stories with English language learners can be a tall order, especially for readers still developing their communicative proficiency in English. Moreover, TESOL professionals frame themselves as reading teachers; the nature of our professional and educational preparation is such that when we teach a story like "Transients in Arcadia," we may struggle to move beyond a read-and-explain pedagogy.

On the one hand, reading a 100-year-old story depends on our ability to generate meanings around words and their message

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across sentences, make use of relevant background knowledge, generate inferences, name textual and rhetorical structures, consider the author's goals and motives, and more. The interplay of all these overlapping reading moves is cognitively demanding. But it is worse when the language is archaic or the setting is of a time long past, or when the characters of the story share little with the reader's lived experience.

On the other hand, language and literacy education that emphasizes making connections between the text and ourselves, other texts, and the world can bring the story into our present-day lives by recasting the more traditional question "What does the text mean?" into "What does the text mean to me?" Taking up "Transients in Arcadia" as an anchor, we have provided a series of concrete examples of activities that teachers might devise for exploring and growing the connection-making that renders a story relevant to our current day. As a disclaimer, we underscore that the applications we suggest are only starting points. We encourage our colleagues to experiment with the activities described here before, during, and after reading and to craft their own for distinct teaching and learning contexts.

We encourage *English Teaching Forum* readers to explore the collections of American short stories that are available on the American English website. In addition to the O. Henry collection, readers have open access to Jack London's powerful short narratives about the 19th-century gold rush in the Klondike region of the Canadian Yukon (see https://americanenglish.state.gov/resources/build-fire-and-other-stories). Readers will also find Stephen Crane's classic U.S. Civil War novella about a young soldier's emotional turmoil on the battlefield (https://americanenglish.state.gov/resources/red-badge-courage-and-other-stories). We hope *Forum* readers will explore these and other valuable American English resources and apply the text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections that we have outlined here.

Truth be told, when we began conceptualizing this article, our choice of "Transients in Arcadia" as an anchor was one of convenience. It is one of the many resources that the American English website provides and that we hope teachers will explore. But we were unfamiliar with the story and unfamiliar with who O. Henry was and the context of his artistry. However, after connecting to the narrative again and again, we can now say that it has become one of our favorites. Along the way, we learned that William Sydney Porter (1862–1910) was born in North Carolina. He moved to Texas, where he started a family and a career with the First National Bank of Austin and in 1895 was charged with the federal crime of embezzlement. Porter fled to Honduras, leaving behind his wife and daughter. Six months later, he received word that his wife had contracted tuberculosis. He returned; she died; and Porter went to prison for three years. There, he began writing the stories for which he is famous under the pseudonym of O. Henry. It is the disguise that we still know him by even today (see McLean 1968; Stuart 1990).

We imagine that the characters that O. Henry invented and the storylines he composed were his way of making sense of and rewriting his own life and of making peace with the ghosts

| Key Questions

Text-to-Self:

"How can I connect this text to my life?"

Text-to-Text:

"How can I connect this text to another text I know?"

Text-to-World:

"How can I connect this text to something happening in the world?"

and regrets that must have haunted him until he died. Maybe that is why "Transients in Arcadia" is still able to transport us deep within and far outside our own experiences and into spaces that allow us to move beyond the singularity of "What does the text mean?" to a more inclusive "What does the text mean to me?" There—in an intimate dialogue between us, the text, and the world—"Transients in Arcadia" or any other reading becomes ours and of our own time—up-close and personal.

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