Orality and the Reader: Cultural and Transcultural Elements in Achebe’s *Girls at War*

Timothy Weiss
For those of us who teach English to second-language or foreign-language learners, one of the most important decisions we make in planning courses in literary studies is the choice of texts. We are often constrained by the course description or text availability, but even if we are not there are other practical constraints that affect our choices and one of the most basic is whether or not a text is readable. What this term means varies from one learner environment to another and from one group of students to another even within the same learner environment; differences granted though, orality would seem to be a feature of readable texts: whether or not a text has a conversational, speech-like quality would seem to be one element that determines how second-language learners—or the second-language learners whom I teach—will respond to it. A text that has a conversational, speech-like quality would seem to be easier for these students to read than other more writerly texts: that, at least, was the assumption with which I began this study of textual orality.

The topic of orality is obviously one on which empirical research can be and should be done. I agree with comparative literature scholars Douwe Fokkema and Elrud Ibsch, who in *Knowledge and Commitment: A Problem-Oriented Approach to Literary Studies* argue that literary studies involve both interpretation and empirical research; the two go hand in hand. As a step in this direction, I surveyed Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) students about their experiences of reading short stories by Chinua Achebe, and I will refer to the results of two surveys later in the essay. I would also like to indicate in this introduction what I mean by orality and what my theoretical orientations are. The most basic definition of “orality” denotes that quality which has to do with speech and conversation, and this is the definition that I will stick to in this essay. Nevertheless, due to the influence of scholars from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries onward who have studied folktales and folk traditions, orality has a more specialized meaning that
links it with storytelling in primitive cultures (i.e., cultures without writing) and with popular folk traditions (Lévi-Strauss 15). A West African writer like Achebe, who incorporates folktales, legends, proverbs, and popular wisdom, simulates this latter kind of orality in his fiction. Still, it is this initial definition of orality as approximated speech or conversation that I will principally consider in this essay. “The basic orality of language is permanent,” Walter Ong contends (7). Perhaps an overused term of Mikhail Bakhtin gets even closer to the meaning of orality that I have in mind. Language has a “dialogic” quality; it engages dialogue and emerges from dialogue. Paul Ricoeur’s definition of text also develops this notion of writing simulating dialogue or conversation: a text, he argues, involves somebody saying something about something to someone (Ricoeur, “What Is a Text?”).

In Jean-Paul Sartre's well-known essay, “Qu’est-ce que la littérature,” the literary object is called a “peculiar top that exists only in movement” (“une étrange toupie, qui n’existe qu’en mouvement”) (“What Is Literature?” 1337); reading is necessary to give it a spin. For Sartre, reading is “directed creation” (“création dirigée”) (1339). Paul Ricoeur’s essays on the nature of texts build on this and other ideas that underscore the contribution of readers in the making of meaning (“Le structure, le mot, l’événement”). Ricoeur calls writing “interrupted speech.” Whereas speech as discourse is anchored in a circumstantial reality, this is not the case with written discourse, such as a literary text, which “suspends” the circumstantial referentiality of speech. Because texts “suspend” or “defer” circumstantial reference, their relation to the world differs from that of speech. In the act of speech or discourse, words tend to subordinate themselves to the things to which they refer in a circumstantial situation, while in literary texts words “cease to efface themselves in front of things; written words become words for themselves” (“What Is a Text?” 47). The text’s “eclipse” of the circumstantial situation invites the reader “to fulfill the text in speech, restoring it to living communication”; this entails acts of comprehension and interpretation. Emphasizing the relationship with speech inherent in the act of reading, Ricoeur contends that the aim of reading is to “complete the text in present speech”; to read is “to conjoin a new discourse to the discourse of the text” (“What Is a Text?” 56-57).

Reader-oriented theorists such as Wolfgang Iser and Stanley Fish further develop the notion of the reader’s contribution to a text, with the latter theorist viewing that contribution as almost total. Reader-oriented theory intersects with translation theory, which emphasizes that any reading and interpretation of a text involves a translation of the strange into the familiar; linguistic and cultural conventions are some commonly translated elements (Steiner, Iser). From a translational perspective, reading involves a deverbalization of the text; interpretation involves the further step of re-verbalization or expression (Weiss “Interpretation as Translation”). In the process of reading, the reader builds and projects images and themes; in order to do this he/she must bring a context to the text. Meaning thus emerges in a continually shifting movement of foregrounded and backgrounded segments that draw on the reader’s repertoire, or stockpiles of historical, literary, and sociocultural information. Umberto Eco, among others, refers to this repertoire as the reader’s “encyclopedic knowledge.” All in all, the aesthetic object that emerges in the act of reading and interpretation inevitably taps into belief systems, history, culture and society, and this is the larger background against which the textual figure stands out and takes its meaning. Re-verbalization or interpreted re-expression of
the text draws consciously on the reader's overall cognitive knowledge, stored primarily in long-term memory.

My research on orality began with the hypothesis that prose with oral features facilitates students’ contextualization of a text and therefore allows them to read it with less difficulty and more confidence. What became clear to me, though, when I looked more carefully at passages from Achebe’s stories and at students’ responses to survey questions about them, was that many elements figure into comprehension and only some of them can be linked to orality. Furthermore, orality in itself does not equate with comprehension. Hong Kong students find Mark Twain’s fiction (with its American dialects) difficult to understand; the lyrics of rap music are often based on popular language and speech, yet for someone on the outside of the language group, the lyrics may have little meaning. Linguistic conventions as well as sociocultural knowledge are two areas of overall cognitive knowledge that would seem to impact on readability and comprehension.

Hong Kong Student Responses to Achebe’s Fiction

Chinua Achebe’s collection of short stories, Girls at War (1972) may be less well known than his novels Things Fall Apart, No Longer at Ease, or Arrow of God, yet the collection shows the same gift for storytelling and original use of language. I have taught stories from this collection several times in introductory courses for first-year students, such as Writing about Language and Literature and World Literatures in English, and although I have often made reference to proverbs, West African sayings, and the folktale tradition in Achebe, I have never gone beyond that to attempt to pin down the specifics of the oral quality of this fiction. In the first survey I took a very basic approach, asking my students some simple questions about their responses to two stories, “Uncle Ben’s Choice” and “The Sacrificial Egg.” These stories are neither the easiest nor the most difficult to read in the collection; they fall somewhere in between, and both are quite short, only six pages each. “Uncle Ben’s Choice” uses a first-person narrative in which a character, Ben, reminisces about his life in an anecdotal way; the incidents that the story recounts occur in 1919 in colonial Nigeria when Ben, still a bachelor, worked as a young clerk in the Niger Company. Unlike the collection’s title story, “Girls at War,” an anti-war story, “Uncle Ben’s Choice” is seemingly not about anything at all; rather, it is about a certain West African style of talking and living, and is full of humor, irony, and West African sayings and turns of expression. Here is a typical example of Ben’s style of storytelling and his West African mannerisms:

My father told me that a true son of our land must know how to sleep and keep one eye open. I never forget it. So I played and laughed with everyone and they shouted “Jolly Ben! Jolly Ben!” but I knew what I was doing. The women of Umuru are very sharp; before you count A they count B. So I had to be very careful. I never showed any of them the road to my house and never ate the food they cooked for fear of love medicines. I had seen many young men kill themselves with women in those days, so I remembered my father’s word: Never let a handshake pass the elbow.

(76-77)

Although the story does contain a principal incident, which occurs in the final pages, Ben’s personality and manner of storytelling are its real focus.
The second story, “The Sacrificial Egg,” is recounted by an omniscient third-person narrator; its subject matter is cultural collisions and their psychological effects on the central character, Julius Obi. The story includes references to and descriptions of West African legend, religion and rituals. Here is a representative paragraph of the content and texture of this story:

Julius went to the window that overlooked the great market on the bank of the River Niger. This market, though still called Nkwo, had long spilled over into Eke, Oye, and Afo with the coming of civilization and the growth of the town into the big palm-oil port. In spite of this encroachment, however, it was still busiest on its original Nkwo day, because the deity who had presided over it from antiquity still cast her spell only on her own day—let men in their greed spill over themselves. It was said that she appeared in the form of an old woman in the centre of the market just before cock-crow and waved her magic fan in the four directions of the earth—in front of her, behind her, to the right and to the left—to draw the market men and women from distant places. And they came bringing the produce of their lands—palm-oil and kernels, cola nuts, cassava, mats, baskets and earthenware pots; and took home many-coloured cloths, smoked fish, iron pots and plates. (43-44)

In the story’s culminating incident, Julius mistakenly steps on an egg, left in the middle of a footpath as an offering to African spirits; his psychological torment becomes the focus of the final paragraphs, which show him torn between traditional and Western ways of thinking and acting.

In the first survey I asked two groups of students (74 total), all of whom speak Cantonese or Mandarin as a first language, six questions about these stories and their experience of reading them:

1. “Uncle Ben’s Choice” is easier to read than “The Sacrificial Egg.” Yes or no.
2. It is easier to imagine the character Uncle Ben than the character Julius Obi. Yes or no.
3. “Uncle Ben’s Choice” is more dramatic than “The Sacrificial Egg.” Yes or no.
4. Uncle Ben is a better talker than Julius Obi. Yes or no.
5. Briefly list five things that Uncle Ben says or does.
6. Briefly list five things that Julius Obi says or does.

My goal was to determine whether CUHK students, whose mother tongue is not English, perceive orality in these African short stories, and if they do, whether this orality facilitates reading and reading comprehension. I also wondered whether the details of stories with a significant orality would be easier for students to remember. Here is a summary of the results:

First Survey

Questions 1-4

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Typical elements that students remembered about “Uncle Ben’s Choice”:

- Uncle Ben found a naked woman in his bed.
- Uncle Ben met Mami Wota and refused her.
- Uncle Ben likes drinking but he never mixes his drinks or drinks with women.
- Uncle Ben respected his father’s advice a lot.
- Uncle Ben never got drunk.
- Uncle Ben quit smoking.
- Uncle Ben chose family over wealth.
- He joined the African club.
- He met a girl called Margaret.
- He did not regret his choice (i.e., not to stay with the naked woman)

Typical elements that students remembered about “The Sacrificial Egg”:

- Julius stepped on an egg and broke it.
- Julius is a clerk.
- Julius studied in a missionary school when he was a child.
- The market, at the end of the story, is very quiet.
- Julius blamed himself for causing the illness of his mother and girlfriend.
- His mother and girlfriend were “decorated” with small pox.
- Julius worked in a Western company and received a Western education.
- Julius used to look out to the market by the river through his office windows.

**Analysis and Interpretation**

Sixty-two percent of the students did in fact find “Uncle Ben’s Choice” an easier story to read; sixty-four percent also found the character of Uncle Ben easier to imagine than Julius Obi. These percentages are less, though, than I had expected, for in my view, “Uncle Ben’s Choice” is clearly more conversationally oral than “The Sacrificial Egg.” In response to question Number 3, fifty-four percent of the students found “Uncle Ben’s Choice” slightly more dramatic than “The Sacrificial Egg”; the final pages of both stories are in fact quite dramatic. In response to Question 4, students did show that they perceive the difference between a first-person narrator like Uncle Ben and the third-person narrator of “The Sacrificial Egg.” For eighty-four percent of the students Ben is the better talker.

In response to Questions 5 and 6, students seemed to remember details from both stories about equally.

Results of the first survey suggest that students do perceive textual orality; however, its effects on the reading process are difficult to generalize for at least some of the following reasons. First, it is important to remember that any textual orality implies a translation from one medium to another; as Ode Ogede observes in an article entitled “Oral Echoes in Armah’s Short Stories,” Armah attempts to create the “illusion of an oral performance” (76). With translation theory in mind, we could say that Ogede tries to determine how Armah translates or creates the semblance of orality in his short stories, and I believe
that this is a fruitful approach to take with Achebe as well. Secondly, orality is a block term; there are certainly different kinds of orality, and not all of them, when translated into writing, will necessarily facilitate reading. Orality in fiction is often broadly linked with the folktale tradition; this tradition, however, may have little to do with the conversational qualities of a language in the twenty-first century, nor may there be an easy way to translate into fictional form an oral event as it is imagined by today’s readers. Thirdly, cultural differences likely affect orality. “The basic orality of language is permanent,” Walter Ong has argued (7), yet it would seem likely that orality also differs in some respects from one language and one culture to the next. Perhaps the problem with orality as a term is its implied universality, which masks the differences that occur across languages and cultures. There seem to be both cultural and transcultural elements of orality; there also seem to be some universal elements.

To make sense of a story, readers depend on various kinds of knowledge of subject matter, culture and society, and conventions of conversation and storytelling. A closer look at “Uncle Ben’s Choice” reveals why Westernized Chinese students in Hong Kong have difficulty reading it; the following are some of the elements that make for problems:

- Narrative indirection: Ben’s manner of talking and telling the story is puzzling; to some Hong Kong students it is not clear what Ben is getting at or why he is telling the story.
- The story’s unusual subject matter and the narrator’s idiosyncratic selection of incidents and details reported on: the topics that Ben talks about (e.g., drinking bouts and being in bed with a naked woman) are not normal topics of conversation in Asian cultures, so Asian readers wonder why Ben selects these incidents for his autobiographical portrait.
- Localized references: Ben’s use of West African proverbs and metaphors must be translated into a context that makes them understandable for Hong Kong readers.
- Doubts about the narrator’s reliability: Ben’s mixture of the probable and the improbable, or to put this in another way, his mixture of the plausible, the intentionally exaggerated, and the implausible, can be confusing.

Ben begins his tale in the middle of things:

In the year nineteen hundred and nineteen I was a young clerk in the Niger Company at Umuru. To be a clerk in those days is like to be a minister today. My salary was two pounds then. You may laugh but two pounds ten in those days is like fifty pounds today. You could buy a big goat with four shillings. . . .

Like all progressive young men I joined the African Club. We played tennis and billiards. Every year we played a tournament with the European Club. But I was less concerned with that. What I liked was the Saturday night dances. Women were surplus. Not all the waw-waw women you see in townships today but beautiful things like this.

I had a Raleigh bicycle, brand new, and everybody called me Jolly Ben. I was selling like hotcakes. (75)

There are many questions that will pop up in students’ minds about this passage. For example, why does Ben begin telling his story at this particular point in his life? In what way was being a clerk in those days the same as being a minister today? When is “today”? Why does Ben talk about his salary in terms of goats? What was the difference between the African Club and the European Club? What are “waw-waw women”? Why does Ben talk about owning a bicycle? Why does he compare himself to “hotcakes”? Who are Ben’s listeners, and what is his relationship with them? What is the point of the story he is telling? To understand this passage, a student needs, among other things, a context, a certain base of cultural, social knowledge, and knowledge of styles of conversational
I’m not sure that a student can hear Ben’s voice, so to speak, without this kind of information.

I want to elaborate on one particular difficulty that readers face: assessing Ben’s reliability as narrator. Although readers assume this reliability at the beginning, what becomes clear at least to some readers two or three paragraphs into the narrative is that Ben may be exaggerating the details of his past; he may even be inventing the details. At the end of the story, which includes an incident that Ben either exaggerates or makes up, the narrator’s motive as a storyteller can be seen in a different light: perhaps he has told this story to explain, in a roundabout way, that there are more important things in life than making money, or perhaps his storytelling has been a strategy to raise his esteem in the eyes of his cronies and younger wives—telling them that he had opportunities to get on in the world, but he turned them down:

Today whenever my wives make me vex I tell them: “I don’t blame you. If I had been wise I would have taken Mami Wota.” They laugh and ask me why did I not take her. The youngest one says: “Don’t worry, Papa, she will come again; she will come tomorrow.” And they laugh again. (80)

In this passage, Mami Wota refers both to a character in a West African legend and to the culminating incident in Ben’s narrative: that is, after drinking late on New Year’s Eve he goes home to find a naked woman in his bed, and in the darkness, he never discovers with certainty the identity of this woman although he chooses to leave her. The end of the short story puzzles more than a few students, partly because Ben makes his point indirectly by mixing legend with rhetorical embellishment; his relationship to his listeners remains unclear. And here we see a fundamental difference between the oral and the written: in a conversation, the status of the speaker and his/her relationship to the listener is often crucial to the interpretation of the words exchanged. I would argue that this is even more the case in Asian cultures, where respect for authority is stronger than it is in the West. The effectiveness of Achebe’s story seems to depend to a certain degree on the reader’s knowledge of a West African style of conversation and storytelling; it also depends on the reader’s ability to fill in a context that will make the narration understandable. Achebe’s simulation of the oral event of Uncle Ben’s telling his life story seeks to create an aesthetic effect that is perhaps more literary than oral in nature. Or to say this in other words: textual orality is not necessarily simpler, less aesthetic, and more easily comprehensible than other, more writerly textuality.

A Second Survey and Final Remarks

In the title of this essay I have used the terms “cultural and transcultural elements,” yet I myself wonder whether one can be differentiated from the other. Achebe has said that good stories cross cultural barriers to become universal (Jayalakshmi). He must be right, and it is certainly the crossing of cultural barriers that is the tricky part. Achebe’s stories are unquestionably African in certain respects, yet their ideas and effects can often be translated (I am using the word in a broad sense) and explained in terms of other cultures, such as Hong Kong and Chinese cultures. I would put in this category of translatable elements some of the sayings and proverbs that pervade the short-story collection. These elements seem more about human attitudes and behavior than about something particular to one culture. Other elements that seem to me harder to translate are those that involve actions that would be interpreted differently in Hong Kong and
Chinese cultures; for example, the taking of Nwibe’s clothes in “The Madman,” the carrying of the sister into the bush to die in “Akueke,” the night masque in “The Sacrificial Egg,” and Uncle Ben’s behavior vis-à-vis the naked woman in the eponymous story. Translating such actions depends not only on students’ understanding of human behavior but also on their knowledge of cultures different from their own. Along these same lines, I believe orality does not escape this necessity of translation. As Walter Ong assumes and as Achebe himself suggests, orality embodies certain universal elements; it seems equally clear, though, that many oral elements depend on translation from one culture to another in order to be understood.

To consider this issue a bit further, in a second survey I asked CUHK students to rank, according to difficulty of understanding, twelve short passages culled from the twelve stories of Girls at War. Here is the list of passages and the average ranking for each item.

**Second Survey**

Directions: For each entry below, indicate whether the passage is readily understandable, moderately understandable, difficult to understand, or extremely difficult to understand. Use a scale of 1 to 10 to rank your response; for example: 1 = easily understandable; 5 = moderately understandable; 7 = quite difficult to understand; 10 = extremely difficult to understand.

[There were 40 respondents; the average score for each item appears after the item number.]

1. 6.7 “They want to kill your dog, but our people say the man who decides to chase after a chicken, for him is the fall . . . .”

2. 3.2 “We did not ask for money yesterday; we shall not ask him tomorrow. But today is our day; we have climbed the iroko tree today and would be foolish not to take down all the firewood we need.”

3. 2.6 “We are God’s chickens. Sometimes He chooses a young chicken to eat and sometimes He chooses an old one.”

4. 5.4 “Your son has joined the white man’s religion. And you too in your old age when you should know better. And do you wonder that he is stricken with insanity? Those who gather ant-infested faggots must be prepared for the visit of lizards.”

5. 4.3 Progress had turned [the town] into a busy, sprawling, crowded and dirty river port, a no-man’s land where strangers outnumbered by far the sons of the soil . . . . For indeed they had prayed—who will blame them—for their town to grow and prosper. And it had grown. But there is good growth and there is bad growth. The belly does not bulge out only with food and drink; it might be the abominable disease which would end by sending its sufferer out of the house even before he was fully dead.

6. 2.8 “And that thing that calls himself a man talks to me about the craze for education. All his children go to school, even the one that is only two years; but that is no craze. Rich people have no craze. It is only when the children of poor widows like me want to go with the rest that it becomes a craze.”

7. 4.9 “Let the hawk perch, and let the eagle perch.”

8. 2.6 “My father told me that a true son of our land must know how to sleep and keep one eye open. I never forget it.”
I had seen many young men kill themselves with women in those days, so I remembered my father’s words: ‘Never let a handshake pass the elbow.’

Awrighto. Now make we talk business. We no be bad tief. We no like for make trouble. Trouble done finish. War done finish and all the katakata wey de for inside. No Civil War again. This time na Civil Peace. Not be so?

May bullet crack sugar’s head!

That time done pass. Now everybody want survival. They call it number six. You put your number six; I put my number six. Everything all right.

I will attempt to differentiate transcultural versus cultural elements by contrasting the four most difficult passages, in the students’ eyes at least, with the three easiest. To my surprise, No. 1 was considered the most difficult; apparently, this difficulty has nothing to do with chickens since No. 3, which also mentions chickens, was deemed the easiest of the twelve passages to understand. No. 1 does have a slight, culturally specific component, but its difficulty seems to have more to do with the lack of apparent logical connection between preventing someone from killing a dog, chasing after a chicken, and falling down. No. 11 is difficult because it lacks a context to make it understandable; even within the story though, its comprehensibility depends on students’ making a connection between war and an individual’s struggle to break a “habit,” that is, adding sugar to one’s tea. No. 12 also depends on a context, but less so, I believe, than No. 11; No. 12 features some West African English as well as a not immediately apparent connection between the sounds of the word “survival” and “six.” No. 10 features West African English; some students have difficulty understanding the ideas chiefly for this reason, but there are also some conceptual difficulties (i.e., a contrast between civil peace and civil war) that students need to deal with in order to understand the passage. In contrast, students found Nos. 3, 8, and 6 the least difficult to understand. It could be argued that all three of these contain a strong transcultural element. For example, No. 3 seems to depend on the concept of God or a god as omnipotent and human beings as relatively powerless in comparison. No. 8, although it involves paradox, takes on meaning in reference to a universal phenomenon: sleep. Students do not seem to have difficulty understanding the metaphor of sleeping with one eye open: in other words, never to let down one’s guard completely. No. 6 features some elements of West African English, yet these do not seem to prevent most students from understanding the basic transcultural idea of inequality between the rich and the poor. So it does seem that passages that depend on transcultural elements, and on universal phenomena, are easier for students to comprehend.

The preliminary research that I have carried out suggests that orality, or the reader’s sense of a person speaking, is recognizable even to EFL and ESL readers, for all cultures have conventions of dialogue and conversation. The problem, though, is that these conventions differ from one culture to another, as do styles of storytelling; furthermore, because speech also involves “someone saying something about something to someone,” the problem of a reader’s insufficient knowledge of a subject matter and of a circumstantial milieu also must be taken into consideration. Lastly, it is clear that textual orality can be quite complex and richly aesthetic in its effects. Thus, the “literariness” of some kinds of textualized orality must be recognized; in addition, the silent or less tangible aspects of orality must be brought to perception and then translated by readers in order for the stories to cross the cultural barrier.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Notes


Abstracts

Cette communication examine l’oralité textuelle dans deux nouvelles de Chinua Achebe, “Uncle Ben’s Choice” et “The Sacrificial Egg,” tiré de son recueil, Girls at War (1972); en plus, elle analyse les résultats de deux sondages qui mesurent la compréhension de ces textes par des étudiants du département d’anglais à l’université chinoise de Hong Kong. Les résultats du premier sondage indiquent que les étudiants remarquent bien les éléments d’oralité dans ces nouvelles; néanmoins, il est difficile de faire des généralisations concernant l’impact de l’oralité sur le processus de lire. Les résultats du deuxième sondage suggèrent que les éléments culturels et transculturels jouent aussi un rôle dans la compréhension des textes qui contiennent des éléments d’oralité. L’analyse de ces nouvelles de Achebe et les résultats des sondages montrent que l’oralité textuelle peut prendre des formes compliquées et peut avoir des effets esthétiquement riches.

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Timothy Weiss is a Professor in the Department of English at The Chinese University of Hong Kong. His books include *Translating Orients: Between Ideology and Utopia* (University of Toronto Press, 2004), *English and Globalization: Perspectives from Hong Kong and Mainland China* (co-edited with Kwok-kan Tam; Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2004), and *On the Margins: The Art of Exile in V.S. Naipaul* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1992). In the USA he has taught at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and the University of Maine. He has been a Peace Corps Volunteer in Liberia, West Africa (1975–77), and a Senior Fulbright Scholar in Tunisia (1988–89) and Algeria and Morocco (1993–94).