

Thinking Object: How much is Cinderella's father to blame for her situation?



This thinking object follows on from the blog: The [Good, the Bad and the Ambiguous](#), and is the first in a series of three.

These have been developed out of research as part of the Life Long Literacy Project, and funded by the Cognition Institute.

Text: *Cinderella: An Art Deco Love Story* by Lynne Roberts and David Roberts (Pavilion: Great Britain 2003)

The following teachers' notes are a guide for teachers to facilitate a 'literary' conversation with their students in class. In this literary environment, the right of students to hold different opinions is encouraged, as is the serious discussion of these opinions. However, it is crucial that opinions about the story can be supported by evidence in the text (words or illustrations).

Discussions of interest that arise from the text – such as the qualities of the ideal father – should also be encouraged (although a free form exchange of ideas about the world prompted by a text should not be confused with text analysis itself and the requirement of evidence in the text to support opinions). Showing the relevance of texts to students' lives will lead to greater engagement. Trials have shown that children will draw surprisingly sophisticated inferences from the text if encouraged in discussion.

Teachers working within our research project *Lifelong Literacy* (funded by the Cognition Institute) have described these notes as crucial in providing the confidence necessary to open up an interpretive space in the classroom. Krista, a teacher at a Wellington primary school, said this about the teachers' notes:

"I felt that I could be confident with what I was doing, because it was like a really good guide... That kind of resource I find invaluable because I'm constantly anxious as a teacher that what I'm doing is the right thing."

"It's like the teachers worked really hard [using the notes to prepare for the discussion]. And then this huge engagement and [the students] are now learning from one another, I think, and from their own conclusions..."

Why did the teachers' notes work?

Krista had been working on the key competencies all year, building an understanding of them as a set of ideas which can be used to guide the teaching of English Learning Area so that it provides kids with the opportunity to create new knowledge. The aim is to open up kids' worlds. As part of this, Krista had set up an environment in her class where the kids saw themselves as interpreters of texts as opposed to decoders of prescribed meaning. They expected to have unique opinions about texts and be able to support these opinions with evidence from them. (They were also expected to change those opinions as a result of talking to other people). In essence, her classroom was a place where the kids believed in their capacity to form valid opinions as readers.

But it isn't enough to have set up the right kind of environment – conversations around texts can be pretty empty when you can't pinpoint exactly what it is in the text that makes you respond to it in a certain way. This is where notes like *How much is Cinderella's father to blame for her situation?* come in. When the work regarding content knowledge (how characters are constructed, etc.) has already been done for teachers, they can relax about content and concentrate on facilitating an open discussion in the classroom. We believe the combination of the right environment plus the content knowledge presented in the notes provided the opportunity for children to discover that literature can provide rich opportunities for debate and the discussion of ideas.

Leading a class discussion about Cinderella's father

The classroom discussion was prompted by a question: to what extent is the father responsible for Cinderella's predicament? Or to use Krista's phrase: how much is the father to blame for Cinderella's situation?

The notes include two interpretations of the father so that teachers will be prompted to consider the multiple readings their students will make of the text and to encourage debate. The students investigate the language and illustrations which represent the father (ideally, each student has their own copy of the text). There are many possible interpretations of the father through his appearance, dialogue, actions, thoughts and what the narrator tells us. We have provided two possible readings as a starting point. Please note* due to time constraints, Krista's teachers' notes consisted of the sympathetic reading only, however, the more critical interpretation was discussed with her before class to aid in facilitating the discussion.

One is a fairly **sympathetic** reading of the father. He loves his daughter but is absent minded and easily distracted, so not really responsible for her situation.

The other is a more **critical** reading of the father. He is too wrapped up in his own world to care for his daughter and is largely to blame for her suffering.

Teachers' Notes: How much is Cinderella's father to blame for her situation?

Appearance (in illustrations), dialogue, action, thought, and what the narrator tells us are interpreted in both readings step by step below:

| Appearance More Sympathetic Reading: | Appearance Less Sympathetic Reading: |
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| <p>In an illustration of the father in his study, he wears his spectacles on the end of his nose and his garish socks and trousers don't match. The room is full of intriguing objects, papers are piled on his desk and on shelves, and a mouse peeps out from an open drawer. These details make him appear eccentric, perhaps someone who is easily preoccupied. In the next illustration he is distracted by some happy thought and carelessly drops some of his valuable documents. This shows us that he is not careful with things even though they are valuable to him,</p> | <p>The illustration of the father in his study shows mementos from countries like Japan and Africa. These indicate that he is well-travelled and most probably leaves his daughter alone frequently. He is happy about a document he has found in his study, but shows no similar enthusiasm towards Greta/Cinderella in any of the pictures. In the next illustration, for example, he leaves her without any sign of remorse. In the breakfast table illustration, he looks more interested in the article about Cinderella in the paper than in his real daughter who has been demoted to a servant. And when Cinderella</p> |

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| <p>including his daughter.</p> | <p>tries on the glass slipper, he has removed his glasses to clean them, so can't see what's happening. His absence in his daughter's life is summarised by his absence in the wedding photo at the end.</p> |
| <p>Dialogue More Sympathetic Reading:</p> <p>When the father says, "Goodbye, Greta dear, I shall be back in two days", and takes two <i>weeks</i> to return, we understand him as someone who has good intentions but does not keep his word. When he asks, "Why not let Cinderella try?" as he walks into the room when his stepdaughters are trying on the glass slipper, he is not conscious of the significance of his question. What follows is pure chance, not his design; however he has probably spoken out of a desire to see his daughter included in the prince's visit.</p> | <p>Dialogue Less Sympathetic Reading:</p> <p>When the father says, "Goodbye, Greta dear, I shall be back in two days", and takes two <i>weeks</i> to return, he appears to be careless and irresponsible. He also begins using the cruel nickname of Cinderella that Elvira and Ermintrude use when Greta's dress becomes covered in cinders. Then, when he asks, "Why not let Cinderella try?" as he walks into the room when his stepdaughters are trying on the glass slipper, he seems to be asking that she be included in an activity rather than being trying to secure her happiness.</p> |
| <p>Action More Sympathetic Reading:</p> <p>The father is a comical figure. He is illustrated as absentmindedly dropping his documents. He impulsively marries, and is unaware his new wife has a heart that is "cold and hard" and who has one daughter who is "wicked" and another who is "dim". He loses his glasses and so believes his new wife to be beautiful – "he had met a woman whose beauty was such that it could only be recognised by a few (particularly those who had lost their glasses)." Here the author's use of satire constructs the father as the object of ridicule, someone who should not be taken too seriously. He is later illustrated as happily greeting his daughter, oblivious of the conniving expressions on the faces of his wife and one of his stepdaughters and the dull-witted expression on the face of the other. He is illustrated as engrossed in reading his newspaper, apparently completely unaware that his daughter is wearing a maid's uniform and serving tea. He is absent from the action for most of the story, suggesting that he went away again or is not aware of what is going on.</p> | <p>Action Less Sympathetic Reading:</p> <p>The father doesn't really have his daughter's interest at heart. He is more interested in his documents, his important meeting in the city and reading the paper. He re-marries without inviting his daughter to the wedding or seeking her opinion or approval. He doesn't care enough about her to notice that she becomes a servant and has to sleep by the fire in the kitchen. He is so self-involved that he neglects her basic needs.</p> |

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| <p>Thought More Sympathetic Reading:</p> <p>The stepsisters start to use the name “Cinderella” because the main character is always covered in dust and cinders, “...and soon even her father called her by that name. He <i>thought</i> it was just a friendly endearment.” This suggests the father lacks perception and is oblivious of what is going on around him.</p> | <p>Thought Less Sympathetic Reading:</p> <p>The stepsisters start to use the name “Cinderella” because the main character is always covered in dust and cinders, “...and soon even her father called her by that name. He <i>thought</i> it was just a friendly endearment.” This suggests that he has no real relationship with his daughter. He doesn’t notice her, talk to her or listen to her.</p> |
| <p>What we are told More Sympathetic Reading:</p> <p>The author <i>tells</i> us “Greta’s father was a kind man. He could be quite forgetful...” This means he is simply absent minded and loves his daughter deeply at some level.</p> | <p>What we are told Less Sympathetic Reading:</p> <p>The author <i>tells</i> us “Greta’s father was a kind man. He could be quite forgetful...” This statement appears to be a major understatement. His serious negligence causes Cinderella to suffer. A truly kind man wouldn’t allow her to be treated so badly.</p> |