FRICTION IN FICTION

A study of the importance of open problems for literary conversations

MARGRETHE SØNNELAND

University of Stavanger, Norway

Abstract

The present paper is part of a multiple case study of literary classroom work at Norwegian lower-secondary schools (students aged 13–16) where three classes are invited to discuss texts presented to them as open *problems*. The first case study carried out showed that the text and the task had the power to attract as well as the ability to generate student engagement. The second case study identified variation in student engagement based on a description of intensity and an analysis of students' discursive valuation mechanisms. Following those findings of engagement, there is a need to understand *what* it is about the three short stories involved—Raymond Carver's *Little Things* (Carver, 2004), Roy Jacobsen's *Run for Your Life* (Jacobsen, 2001) and Franz Kafka's *Before the Law* (Kafka, 2000b)—that may yield that engagement. The main finding made is that what attracts students' attention are different forms of *friction* that delays the unfolding of the motif or plot of the story. This friction can therefore also be seen as the basis for the engagement shown by students in conversations. The findings suggest that lower-secondary students take an approach characterized by substantial engagement to those aspects of the text that represent problems of high relevance even within the field of literary studies. At a general level, the findings of the study open up for a discussion about whether greater use should be made of the genuine problems of literary studies in order to create student engagement.

Keywords: teaching of literature, text choice, literary conversations, engagement, literature as subject-specific problems

1. INTRODUCTION

Substantive engagement in students is a desirable yet elusive goal in the classroom. One way to bring it about is through collaborative, small-group work and discussions (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1990, 1991). Collaborative work that is open and explorative enables students to bring their own experience to their classroom work. It is possible to set the scene for discussions and collaborations that will promote substantive engagement (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991). One essential prerequisite for substantive engagement is for students to be involved and to interact with subject matters (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1990).

Open and explorative literary conversations represent collaborations of the kind that offer room for subject-specific reflection and problem-solving, for experiences and for confrontations between different processes of understanding (Aase, 2005; Gill & Illesca, 2011; Gourvennec, 2017; Hennig, 2012; Michelsen, Gourvennec, Skaftun, & Sønneland, 2018; Skaftun & Michelsen, 2017; Sønneland & Skaftun, 2017). However, there are obstacles to the realization of the opportunities for literary reflection and engaged problem-solving offered by explorative conversations. Among other things, it has been claimed that some literary conversations may be overly staged, which can affect both their form and their character. This may reduce conversation to a simple technique and considerably reduce its usefulness (Aase, 2005, p. 109). Rather, literary conversations need to involve *real* discussions, 'where students have some input into and control over the discourse' (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991, p. 265 ff). One way to prevent this 'staging effect' and to stimulate real discussions is to expose students to *real problems*. However, at least in Scandinavian classrooms, it is difficult to find literary conversations where students understand texts as utterances calling for answers (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 199) and where they also perceive that giving such answers would be meaningful (e.g. Kjelen, 2013; Penne, 2012; Tengberg, 2011). One prerequisite for the emergence of conversations where students feel it is meaningful to search for the 'most reasonable answer' (Reznitskaya & Wilkinson, 2017) to the questions emanating from texts is that students should relate to the text as a meaningful object—or, in the words of Bakhtin, as a subject that has something to say to the reader (Bakhtin, 2013). This prerequisite is interesting in the light of research showing that texts which offer *resistance* have the power to attract and fascinate in selected student populations (Gourvennec, 2017; Johansen, 2015).

My study of friction in fiction is a follow-up study to two case studies carried out in ordinary lower-secondary classes (Sønneland, 2018; Sønneland & Skaftun, 2017). The first of those case studies (Sønneland & Skaftun, 2017) answered the question of *whether* the literary texts and the task had the power to attract and the ability to generate student engagement. The second case study (Sønneland, 2018) answered the question of *how strongly* in that it identified variation in student engagement based on a description of intensity combined with an analysis of students' discursive valuation mechanisms in their conversations (Sønneland, 2018).

The key aim of the present study is to understand what it is about the texts concerned that can explain the attraction found to arise between them and their readers in the two previous studies. The material for all three case studies consists of discussions in three classes of ninth-year students (14–15-year-olds) about three short stories: Raymond Carver's *Little Things* (Carver, 2004), Roy Jacobsen's *Run for Your Life* (Jacobsen, 2001) and Franz Kafka's *Before the Law* (Kafka, 2000a). The key focus in this third case study is to find out which textual aspects attract student attention and to explore the depth of this attention—the way this attention is made apparent when the students remain focused on the textual content. I will provide interpretative plot summaries as a basis for identifying formal and thematic complexities (textual topoi) in the literary texts and in the student conversations. Then I will analyse the overall engagement in the textual topoi identified as well as variations across 18 groups of students.

The research question is: 'What is it about *Little Things*, *Before the Law* and *Run for Your Life* that attracts the students in the present material?'

2.   THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

According to Mikhail Bakhtin, as human beings we always find ourselves in a position where we respond to calls from the past, and we relate to future answers—both metaphorically and in conversations. We relate to other people and, not least, we relate to texts, which 'in the last analysis' put us in touch with the human voice (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 252 f). This understanding of texts as subjects other than 'voiceless things' (Bakhtin, 2013, p. 107) is central to Bakhtin's thinking. Bakhtin's understanding of texts as living utterances that call for our creative understanding (Bakhtin, 2013, pp. 7, 143) will form the basis for my discussion of the students' responses.

To Bakhtin, an utterance is inherently *responsive* (Bakhtin, 2013, p. 68). In his essay on speech genres, he elaborates on his ideas that utterances are always 'responses' addressed to someone and something, to earlier utterances and possible future 'responses'. A work (such as a text), when seen as a response within a dialogue, is oriented towards giving responses to listeners or readers, and listeners or readers, in turn, take the same approach to the work: they may agree or disagree (in part or in whole) with it, they may 'pick up on it', add something and prepare for the next thing that will come. In this study, the texts are utterances that invite us to respond. The way we—the students and I—respond is our '*respon(d)sibility*'[1] (Bakhtin, 1990, pp. 1–3) . In this sense, the didactic orientation is directed towards active and

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[1] *'Art and life are not one, but they must become united in myself – in the unity of my answerability' (Bakhtin, 1990, p. 2). In the English translation, the term* answerability *is used for Bakhtin's original* ответственность*, which has a dual sense of 'responding' and 'being responsible'. However, to be able to use the words response and respond in this context (and in line with Scandinavian translations), I prefer to use the term* responsibility *– here with an added attempt to make the duality apparent.*

creative answers: to what Nystrand & Gamoran (1990) describe as *substantial engagement*. Substantially engaged students are characterized, according to Nystrand and Gamoran, by the fact that they show 'a sustained commitment to and involvement with academic work' (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1990, p. 5 f), where they consider academic work to be 'the problems and issues of academic study' (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991, p. 262). In my study, those 'problems and issues' are represented by literary texts conceived of as L1-specific problems.

According to the philosopher Karl Popper, we learn and develop based on problems that 'inspire amazement' in us—that touch, overwhelm or surprise us (Popper, 1999, p. 3). A problem arises when '[…] some kind of disturbance takes place—a disturbance either of innate expectations or of expectations that have been discovered or learnt through trial and error' (Popper, 2000, p. 4). When we encounter problems, for example at school, we can approach them in several ways and use various types of resources simultaneously to find meaningful answers or solutions. In this process, we can eliminate approaches that are not helpful and try to find new ways and approaches. For this learning process to take place, then, something must disturb or disrupt our initial expectations. The way in which this happens will depend on the circumstances.

In the present study, I define 'problem' as a disruption of expectations. If there is nothing that interferes with our expectations, we do not perceive the situation as a problem. This understanding of 'problem' resonates well with well-known literary interests, such as the emphasis placed on—and appreciation of—complexity offering disturbance. Disturbance of expectations and the value of difficulties and resistance are all central to literary studies. They both relate to *defamiliarization* and to *the poetic function*. The term *defamiliarization* (Shklovsky, 1990) denotes the task of literature: to make the ordinary and familiar look strange. Literature should offer resistance and provide difficulties in a way that our perceptions are affected so that we see the familiar as if we saw it for the very first time. The *poetic function* (Jakobson, 1960) shows itself when the message—as a linguistic expression—makes itself aware of itself. We talk about the message for its own sake.

Because of their potential to interfere with our expectations when they are presented as open problems, literary texts would seem to be well suited for recurring exploration using the trial-and-error method.

3.   METHODOLOGY

This paper is part of a multiple case study (Yin, 2018) focusing on the investigation of nuances and variations in situations both within and across the cases in question (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). The purpose of the present integrated multiple case study is to analyse what happens when lower-secondary students are given the opportunity to work on their own with literary texts presented to them as open problems. The individual case studies were carried out in the context of a collaboration project between four teachers of Norwegian at a lower-secondary school

in Western Norway and a higher-education institution. Those teachers are the contact teachers of four classes[2] (A, B, C and D), where they teach Norwegian. Observations were carried out in all four classes for a total of 17 hours of literary work during Norwegian lessons (in the 2015/2016 academic year and in the autumn semester of 2017). A total of ten different audio recordings of literary conversations in groups of students were performed, plus thirteen field conversations with students and eighteen with teachers. This constitutes the background material for the integrated multiple case study along with observations of meetings where teachers discussed approaches and text choices. The students were allowed to encounter subject-specific problems in an experimental setting during both year eight and year nine. The implementation of the case study in year eight has been discussed in a previous paper (cf. Sønneland & Skaftun, 2017).

The present study covers a didactic design carried out in year nine (classes A, B and D; class C was not included). This includes audio recordings of eighteen small student groups responding to a text. The primary material for this study consists of the audio recordings of the students' conversations as well as the three short stories: Carver (2004), Jacobsen (2001) and Kafka (2000a).

Didactic framing: Introducing the problem

The way I chose to present the problem to the students was motivated by the assumption that the *students' expectations* should be disturbed by the text itself—not by the teacher's or my interpretation of it. Consequently, the didactic framing is designed to provide as much room as possible for the interplay between the text and the readers as a basis for engaged interaction. Such an approach may resonate with 'exploratory didactics', which, according to Peter Kaspersen,[3] is rooted in reader-response theory (e.g. Rosenblatt, 1995) and dialogic teaching (Nystrand, Gamoran, & Prendergast, 1997). My framing differs from other studies of exploratory didactics (e.g. Tengberg, Olin-Scheller, & Lindholm, 2015) in that there are no instructions from the teacher besides the initial question. There is a risk that such an open framing will cause the session to be overly open and unconstrained, resulting in everyday talk dominated by the exchange of the most articulate students' own experiences (Penne, 2012).

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[2] *A 'class' at a Norwegian lower-secondary school is a group of 20–30 students who spend most of their classroom time together but are taught different subjects by different teachers. Each class has a contact teacher (roughly corresponding to a form or homeroom teacher) who has special responsibility for practical, administrative and social issues including contact with parents or other legal guardians.*

[3] *The research referred to is a preliminary investigation performed by Peter Kaspersen which serves as basis for research presented in* Hva vi ved om undersøgelsesorientert undervisning i dansk *['What we know about exploration oriented teaching in Danish [L1]'] (Elf & Hansen, 2017).*

However, the students were given an open instruction where the text was presented to them as 'difficult': 'I have brought a difficult text with me today. As researchers and teachers, we cannot agree what to make of it. Would you like to see what you can make of it?' An open question such as this invites the students to *respond to the text as a whole*, as an open problem. The introduction used was meant to prepare the ground for what Nystrand and Gamoran refer to as 'substantial engagement' (1990, p. 5 f), by placing the subject-specific problem—the literary text—at the centre of attention. Further, the instruction also implicitly anticipates students' involvement: one necessarily needs to engage with the text in order to 'make something of it'. If the students were to accept this framework, the road to engagement might be short (cf. Gourvennec, 2016, p. 19). In this way, students in the specific situation concerned were shown trust and confidence, and they were positioned as equal partners. The assumption in the study is that the students will focus on the text as an open problem and not on the educational framework (Gourvennec, 2016; Sønneland, 2018; Sønneland & Skaftun, 2017).

Further, the texts are presented as 'difficult' to the students. In this context, I understand 'difficult' as meaning that the *narrative form* is complicated. When the narrative form is complicated, work is required to make sense of the plot or motif. The motif or plot is what we first look for when encountering a narrative text, because we search for coherence and meaning. The literary critic Peter Brooks claims that this 'narrative desire' is about finding a meaningful, limited and totalizing order in the chaos of life. In *Reading for the Plot* (1984, p. 37 ff), he emphasizes that this desire is what leads us forward, onward, through the text. We expect that relationships between characters, the cause of a character's complex inner life, and the relationships between events will be revealed, and that causes of actions will become known. Our desire for order keeps us reading as the author leads us through detours and expansions, which is what we tend to associate with the concept of plot.

The narrative texts presented to the students as open problems all have a narrative form that is complicated. This means that they do not lend themselves to an early 'closing' and resist a univocal answer (cf. Heath, 1982). In addition, since the stories are quite short (1–2 pages), it is possible to both read them and talk about them within the period of one session. The texts used here in no way represent the totality of diversity in texts that may disrupt, offer resistance or disturb students' expectations in other ways, but they are examples of such texts. Hence we may say that these texts permit the exploratory processes of testing and elimination (Popper, 1999, p. 4).

The students were given five to six minutes to read the text individually. Then they were divided into small groups at random. Audio-recorders were set up in each group before the conversations, which lasted for ten to twenty minutes. This framing may be claimed to have experimental traits and deviate from everyday practices: The students are in control of what they do, I (rather than their teacher) have presented them with the initial question, and the texts they encounter have initially been assessed as *difficult* by researchers and teachers alike. Such experimental traits

must be considered in terms of generalizability. According to John Dewey (1930), experiments are not considered to disturb reality nor to be decisive for how we acquire knowledge about reality, because the 'world' will always appear as a function of our interventions. Hence, when assuming that knowledge is not about observing a static, observer-independent reality, I must consider that the knowledge I can gain through this approach is knowledge about *relationships* between my actions and their consequences (Biesta, 2010, p. 14 f), where the crucial point is to find out *if* things can be different (which is not to claim that the alternative is *a priori* better) (cf. Biesta, 2003).

Analytical approaches

Since the two previous studies (Sønneland, 2018; Sønneland & Skaftun, 2017) showed *that* the students *respond* (cf. Bakhtin, 2013) *with engagement* to the literary texts (answering the questions of *whether* and *how strongly*), it comes naturally to ask *what* it is about the texts that they are attracted to. Hence the connection between the *students' conversations as texts* and the *literary texts* takes centre stage in this study.

All eighteen student conversations were transcribed. Together, these transcriptions constitute a text corpus running to 118 pages. They represent the 'textualization' of the conversations to facilitate the first analytical step (Ochs, 1979) in which text is translated into a new form. To ensure that I did as much justice as I possibly could to the conversations, I repeatedly went back to the recordings for purposes of quality control: nuances of oral utterances, sounds and sighs which can be hard to capture in writing.

The transcribed conversations were then processed using the NVivo software. The first step was to comprehend the conversations as processes. The opening sequences begin when the speakers start to speak and end as the conversation shifts into middle sequences, which in turn shift into closing sequences when the students are told that it will soon be time to finish. A close reading of the conversations as processes was then juxtaposed with various thematic codes. Codes are called 'nodes' in NVivo[4], and they are abstractions of the material based on the researcher's interpretation of it which can be renamed and grouped according to similarity during the process of interpreting (this method was also used in Nygaard, 2017).

A key point of interest in this study is what aspect of the texts attract students' attention when they are engaged in the texts *as a problem*. What attracts their attention can be both thematic and formal aspects of the texts. The nodes are designed to capture this complexity, and it should be noted that they do not represent a coherent system of theoretical categories. The nodes represent 'topoi' of the conversation, or conversational themes. On some occasions, more than one topos is at play.

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[4] *http://help-nv11.qsrinternational.com/desktop/concepts/About_theme_nodes.htm*

In such cases, the same sequence is coded with more than one node. For each text, the five most prominent topoi (in terms of time devoted to them) where identified. Besides the various topoi, from time to time in the conversations there also arises *leakage* (see Sønneland & Skaftun, 2017)—meaning that the students are talking about other things: a dental appointment, a fun film they have seen, their next lesson, etc. Such conversation sequences are coded as leakage and not coded for a topos. The numbers presented in the tables do not include such leakage. Hence all rates of coverage indicated refer to percentages of the total conversation time covered by topos codes. However, even though less than 100% of the transcribed material is coded for topoi, the codes still provide an illustration of what it is that the students devote most of their time to and hence of *what attracts their attention*. 'N' in the tables stands for the number of conversational episodes relating to each topos.

My own understanding of the literary texts will necessarily bias my analysis of what the students are attracted to. Therefore, it is appropriate to account for my own reading of the three short stories before I juxtapose it with the students' focus. Consequently, I will provide interpretative plot summaries as a basis for identifying formal and thematic complexities in the literary texts and in the student conversations. Further, I will analyse the overall engagement in the textual topoi identified as well as variations across 18 groups of students. These findings are presented in tables followed by aggregated pictures of each group's responses. This is done in order to show *diversity* of attraction in every group in all three classes.

4.   ANALYSIS

4.1 Little Things

Little Things[5] was written by the American poet and writer Raymond Carver. The Norwegian translation by Øyvind Pharo which the students and I read is to be found in a collection entitled *Hvem har ligget i denne sengen?* ['Who Slept in This Bed?'[6]] published in 2004.

In *Little Things*, a matter-of-fact third-person narrator describes an event at the final stage of a relationship drama. On the day in question, the weather turns and white snow is melting into dirty water. This turn from pure to impure, from light to dark, is also taking place 'on the inside'. The scene changes from outdoors to a flat and a couple's bedroom, where the man is 'pushing clothes into a suitcase' when the woman comes to the door and shouts that she is glad he is leaving. The man goes on packing without looking at her, which she explicitly notes. 'You can't even look me

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[5] *First published in* What We Talk About When We Talk About Love *(Carver, 1981) under the title 'Popular Mechanics'.*

[6] *After the Norwegian title of one of the other short stories included, which is called* Whoever Was Using This Bed *in the original.*

in the eyes, can you?' she says, and then she notices the picture of the baby. She picks it up, and then he looks at her. She wipes her tears, stares at him and goes back to the living room. The man says, 'Bring that back.' She responds by saying, 'Just get your things and get out.' Then he falls silent again, finishes packing and turns off the light. And follows her into the living room. She is standing in the doorway of the kitchen, holding the baby. He says that he wants it, and she replies, 'Are you crazy?' The baby begins to cry. She tries to comfort it by removing the blanket from its head, and then the man moves towards her. She steps back into the kitchen and says, 'For God's sake!' She is holding on to the baby with both hands, he is trying to break her grip, and the baby is crying. Her fingers are forced open and the baby almost slips out of her hands. She grabs for the baby's arm, catches it around the wrist and leans back. He pulls back very hard. And '[i]n this manner, the issue was decided'.

The narrator of *Little Things* is not himself involved in the events but comes across as having complete insight into what is happening between the characters of the story. The event he is describing takes place during a short period of time. The narrator has access to the characters' inner lives but chooses not to tell us everything. Instead, he maintains a matter-of-fact descriptive style through events that it is reasonable to assume that most readers will experience as agonizing

The scene where 'he' and 'she' are pulling at the baby from either side evokes the Old Testament and King Solomon's judgment between two women fighting over one baby (also addressed by Sustana, 2018). King Solomon ruled that the dispute over the baby would be resolved by having the live baby cut in two, with each woman to receive half. Then one of the women begged the King to let the boy live and give him to the other woman. As the King saw it, this made it possible to identify the baby's true mother: the woman who would rather let the baby live than have him for herself.

In this story, it is unclear whether one of the protagonists would rather let the other one have the baby than let it be hurt. What happens to the baby in the story has attracted several readers, because the story creates uncertainty about what will happen to the baby and does not completely resolve that uncertainty (cf. Clark, 1996). The text and the title include an ironic twist at several levels. The title indicates that the story is about 'little things', but there are 'big things' at stake: a child, a life, a relationship. And in the parents' fight over the baby, where there are indications to the effect that the baby is absolutely central and crucial to obtain, there are also several circumstances suggesting that the baby is of limited importance. Both the narrator, the woman and the man refer to the baby as 'the baby' or 'he', which might reduce the baby's status as a person. Further, things may be important even though they are 'little': the baby is little, but it is absolutely central to the story, and the picture is little, but it is absolutely central as a cause for the escalation of the conflict.

Finally, the narrator offers the possibility that something happens to the child, but that event is left out. Like the baby brought before King Solomon, this one may be in fatal danger. Yet the narrator concludes matter-of-factly that '[i]n this manner,

the issue was decided'. This utterance can be interpreted as ironic: it may point either to a horrible ending or to an undramatic one. The baby may be hurt, or one of them may let go.

Little Things addresses the reader with an ironic twist where the dramatic end to a relationship is narrated in a sober, distant manner. We do not know for certain what has happened between the protagonists, and the part to do with what happens to the baby is left out. Hence the text invites the reader to suggest what may have happened between them, what happens to the baby, and why the baby is treated and referred to as it is.

Class 9A talks about Little Things

When class 9A talks about *Little Things*, all students take part in the conversations, which last for 12.5 minutes on average (range: 12:12–13:00). Table 1 gives an overview of what they talked about and shows the rates of coverage relative to the entire coded material. This shows the diversity in how the different groups directed their attention. Time was not evenly allocated among the five main topoi that emerged, but two of them stand out in terms of time spent: *the relationship* (from the familiar to the emotional) and *the baby*. Further, there is not an equal distribution between those two topoi; *the baby* is the topos which accounts for the largest percentage of the conversations as a whole.

Table 1. Most prominent topoi for Little Things

	Group 1		Group 2		Group 3		Group 4		Group 5		Group 6	
	N	cov. %	N	cov. %	N	cov. %	N	cov. %	N	cov. %	N	cov. %
Picture of baby	2	16	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	15	0	0
Darkness	1	13	0	0	1	3	1	14	0	0	1	5
Relationship	**4**	**35**	**6**	**18**	**6**	**29**	**2**	**41**	**5**	**24**	**6**	**36**
Time and space	1	8	0	0	1	3	2	18	0	0	1	5
Baby	**3**	**18**	**7**	**67**	**8**	**53**	**2**	**40**	**10**	**60**	**5**	**44**

According to Table 1, Group 1 directs its attention to five topoi in its analysis, whereas Group 2 is attracted mainly to the relationship and the baby. The other groups end up directing their attention to three or four topoi. Groups 1 and 3 immediately direct their attention to the baby's fate: whether it died, was torn to pieces, fell to the floor, or whether its father got it:

> G[irl]1: I think the baby died. For real, I don't think so=
> B[oy]1: =me too
> G2: You think the baby died?
> B1: I think that=
> B2: =yes, I thought so too

G1: He must have fallen or something
B1: I think the father got him because they say, they say that
G1: [Why is that?]
G2: I think the father stole the baby and then left
G1: I don't think so or it could be
G2: Yes, but how can the kid die?
(Group 3)

Group 5 on the other hand first discusses whether the fight is about a baby or about a picture of a baby. Group 6 starts off by characterizing the couple as 'little kids'. Group 2 begins by establishing the relationship, and Group 4 starts by discussing the time (year) of the story. When the groups are discussing the baby, they all focus on what happened to it: whether it was killed, hurt, torn apart, whether it fell and hit the ground or whether the father got it. Groups 1, 2, 3, 4 and 6 all try to identify possible outcomes of the struggle by discussing *how* little the baby is: if it is young enough, they conclude, it is possible to tear its limbs off or at least to hurt it. Further, all groups except Group 6 take the utterance 'In this manner, the issue was decided' to be an argument or a piece of evidence in their exploration of whether the baby died or not. They claim more or less implicitly that 'the issue was decided' means that the baby died:

G2: It says 'in this manner'. It could mean that he pulled the hardest and that she lost her grip and then the issue was decided or that he died
B: Let's place our bet on him dying
(Group 5)

While trying to find out what happened to the baby, all groups (again except Group 6) test different ideas about possible outcomes ('she's holding its arm and he pulls at it very hard'). Groups 1, 2, 3, 4 and 6 all consider whether the baby was torn apart or to pieces, but they all conclude that this is not physically possible—whereas it is possible to *hurt* the baby. None of the groups reaches an agreement about what happened to the baby. Further, when the groups are discussing 'the relationship', two of them (Groups 3 and 4) at first wonder whether the protagonists are brother and sister or a couple living together, married or not, but they soon conclude that this does not matter because they have a child together. All groups place the course of the conflict in the foreground by discussing what he or she may have done to cause the verbal and physical fight, and why it escalated. They all reach the conclusion that *he* must have done something wrong, most probably by being unfaithful to her, 'because he cannot look her in the eyes':

G3: I don't think the baby died after all
G1: [she says like this, 'you cannot even look me in the eyes']
B: Did he fall on the ground?
G1: she says, so I think he is feeling very guilty he is feeling guilty
G3: Yes
G1: that he cannot look her in the eyes and like
G3: mhm
(Group 5)

Group 6 also wonders whether he might have raped her as well, using the same argument and also adding that he seems violent 'because he moves towards her'. Group 5 is alone in discussing *her* role in the fight by wondering whether she takes the picture of the baby to annoy him and so is also to blame for the escalation of the fight. That picture is also used by Groups 1 and 3 as an example of 'little things' in the relationship that cause the couple to fight. Further, Groups 2, 4 and 5 end up in a discussion about who should have the baby, triggered by a discussion about who they think may be to blame for the fight and who is likely to have been 'mean to the baby'. They conclude that both protagonists are 'crazy', 'mentally ill' or 'extremely hurt', meaning that they do not find an answer.

One boy in Group 5 wonders why the baby does not have a name, but the other three group members do not deem that to be a relevant question. Group 6 stands out when it comes to the exploration of the relationships: its members are alone in not concluding that the protagonists are 'crazy', 'mentally ill' or 'extremely hurt'. Instead, the fight between the protagonists over the baby makes them think of another famous conflict:

> B3: I think about that story from the Bible about a king two women come in and they are discussing they have a baby and then give this baby is mine they both say that he decides by splitting the baby in two
> B2: No
> B3: Yes
> B2: No that is not it there were two women who said that they that this baby was mine and then they said well then I split it then we'll decide by splitting it in two and then he said then the **mother** said yes OK just take the child this proved that she owned the child get it?
> B3: No but I think=
> B2: =yes yes yes yes
> B3: well I think=
> B2: =they did not split it was decided that she got the child she who started weeping and all really hard
> B3: Yes but=
> B2: =got the child
> [...]
> B2: that you shouldn't just **have=**
> B3: =it's a crazy world
> B2: you want **it** so the other won't have it, like (.) get it? Or like you want it so that the other doesn't get it
> B3: Yes or you can think (.) ehm (.) no
> (Group 6)

The conflict makes the students think of the Biblical 'child-allocation issue' brokered by King Solomon, to which they refer as a dispute which was similar except that one of the parties 'let go' so that the baby would live. By contrast, they conclude, neither party in this story lets go, and they discuss how 'nobody really cares about the baby' and how the most important thing is that the other party should not have it.

Summary

In class 9A's conversations, we can see a response to the leaving-out of the final event: the students strive to find out what happened to the baby. The ways in which they visualize this ending—whether the baby breaks into pieces, dies or is torn apart—can be claimed to reflect that they are reading for plot and that their narrative desire has been awakened (Brooks, 1984). Finally, the question of exactly what happened to the baby remains an open one in all groups, which necessarily means that the students concluded, after much discussion, that the text does not offer an unequivocal answer.

The response to the final left-out event and the question of what has happened between the characters are central in my reading of the short story as well. What the students do not respond to, by contrast, is the way in which the story is told. The ironic twist and the matter-of-fact representation of what may be perceived as a disturbing event—leaving the baby reduced to an object—is not something they discuss. One could argue that this is because the left-out event of what happens to the baby attracts a great deal of attention and makes the students focus on a search for answers. The students' reading and discussing are underpinned by a desire for this event to be solved and become known, but the text resists and refuses to yield this to them.

4.2 Before the Law

Before the Law (Norwegian translation by T. Winje used here: Kafka, 2000) was written by the Czech writer Franz Kafka and was originally published (in German, as *Vor dem Gesetz*) in 1919 as part of a short-story collection entitled *Ein Landarzt* (English title: *A Country Doctor*). It is also included in the novel *The Trial* (*Der Prozess*) (Kafka, 2000b), first published in 1925, where the story is told to Josef K. by a priest.

The first sentence of *Before the Law* reads, 'Before the law sits a gatekeeper.'[7] A man from the countryside comes to this gatekeeper and asks to gain entry to the law, but the gatekeeper says that he cannot grant him entry at the moment. The man wonders whether he might be let in later, and the gatekeeper hints that he might, 'but not now'. The man tries to look in through the gate, and the gatekeeper says that he could try to go in despite the prohibition. The man does not do so. The gatekeeper goes on to say that he is powerful but not as powerful as other gatekeepers that the man will encounter 'from room to room'. The gatekeeper's appearance—his fur coat, his large pointed nose, and his 'black Tartar's beard'—makes the man choose to sit down on a stool right next to the gate, where he remains seated year in and year out. From time to time he tries to bribe the gatekeeper, who willingly accepts the bribes, but this does not change the man's situation. Several years

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[7] *The English quotations given here are all taken from the translation by Ian Johnston (Kafka, 2015).*

pass, the man grows old and sick, and we receive indications that he is dying. When the end is approaching, at which time the man has grown weak and stiff, and the 'difference' in size between him and the gatekeeper has 'changed considerably to the disadvantage of the man', he asks one final question: 'Everyone strives after the law, [...] so how is it that in these many years no one except me has requested entry?' In response, the gatekeeper says 'Here no one else can gain entry since this entrance was assigned only to you. I'm going now to close it.'

Before the Law is told by an omniscient narrator, meaning that we are encouraged to accept that he has complete knowledge of that which he is narrating.[8] What he tells is the story of a man from the countryside who wants to gain entry to the law, for which he needs to pass through a gate, and so he asks a gatekeeper for permission to do so—but is not granted it. The story is compressed and stylised in that the man spends his entire life sitting outside the gate, waiting for permission to enter. The simple structure of events includes the metaphor of 'the law'—an abstract concept with a guard. This concept is presented as having physical walls, gates and several rooms. Hence *Before the Law* balances between a concrete universe and an abstract, strange one, which are both present at the same time. Our interpretation of the text largely depends on how we interpret 'the law', in other words on how we understand this abstraction. According to Skaftun and Michelsen, 'the law' with a definite article can refer to all laws collectively. The use of the definite article, in their opinion, evokes the way in which 'law' is used in religious contexts: the law as God's commands for humans to follow, such as the Ten Commandments received by Moses. Among other things, Skaftun and Michelsen suggest that 'the law' may refer to the rules and guidelines by which various authorities regulate our lives.

In the present context, 'the law' may also evoke other large, abstract concepts such as *truth* or *meaning*. The gatekeeper may symbolize people (society) whom the man does not wish to offend and who therefore prevent him from finding the truth or the meaning of life. At the same time, the gatekeeper may illustrate the man's inner conflicts: He is not willing to take the risk of doing something that he does not feel entirely sure will be acceptable to others. Instead, he prefers to wait and see if he can gain the acceptance of those around him by repeatedly surrendering more and more of what he has (and what he is) in the hope of qualifying. As a result, he gets nowhere. When he is at death's door, we do not know whether he regrets not having chosen to defy the others, but we take it that he really had that choice. If so, 'this entrance was assigned only to you' can be interpreted as implying that truth and/or meaning is something that is created by and in accordance with each individual's choice. A third possible interpretation is that the text refers to the text itself and to the interpretation of it (cf. Johansen, 2015; Skaftun & Michelsen, 2017, p. 60).

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[8] *My account here of* Before the Law *is inspired to a great extent by the analysis carried out by Skaftun and Michelsen in* Litteraturdidaktikk *[Literature didactics] (2017, especially pp. 59–60) and largely constitutes a reflection of that analysis. Those two scholars are active in the field to which the present study belongs.*

Class 9B talks about Before the Law

When class 9B talks about *Before the Law*, all students take part in the conversations, which last for 10.5 minutes on average (range: 10:29–10:58). Table 2 gives an overview of the five main topoi that emerged and their respective rates of coverage relative to the entire coded material. Table 2 shows that the time spent is more evenly distributed across the five topoi than for the other two texts. The margins are small, but the topos of *the law* (in both the concrete and the abstract sense) is the most prominent one in five of the groups, while *the gatekeeper* is the topos with the highest rate of coverage in Group 5.

Table 2. Most prominent topoi for Before the Law

	Group 1		Group 2		Group 3		Group 4		Group 5		Group 6	
	N	cov. %	N	cov. %	N	cov. %	N	cov. %	N	cov. %	N	cov. %
Gatekeeper(s)	**2**	**32**	1	14	4	24	3	19	**4**	**59**	4	17
Prohibi-tion—gate	3	28	2	15	3	21	1	6	2	48	4	21
Law	**3**	**32**	**3**	**41**	**7**	**39**	**6**	**33**	3	46	**4**	**27**
Man	2	14	1	5	3	31	3	24	0	0	3	23
Time and space	0	0	2	8	2	8	0	0	1	23	2	6

The students begin their conversations in somewhat different ways: Group 1 first discusses whether the man eventually gained entry to the law or remained sitting outside. Group 3 first wonders who the man is, then what the law is and why gaining entry is so important to the man. Group 4 homes in on words that the students find difficult. The students in Groups 2 and 6 ask each other what the text 'is about'. Group 5 tries to determine the 'message' of the text—which they deem must be something to do with death and life:

> G2: Yes what do you think about the text?
> B1: yes I couldn't figure out the plot really (8s)
> G1: I don't know but I feel it has something to do with death since he dies in the end and since everybody has their own guard or like his keeper is only for him or like I feel like he's waiting for death or something and he shuts the door when he dies I think it has something to do with that but I don't know (12s) What do you think [name]? (.)
> B2: Eh I don't know I was about to say (?) but I don't know so he tries to be tries to improve yes his whole life (the better and better where you are?) he ends up a different place I don't know (?) it doesn't make any sense
> G2: I didn't get that
> B1: Yes but he tried to give him such=
> (Group 5)

When, at somewhat different points in time, the groups direct their attention towards the law, they talk about the man who wanted to *get into a place*: into the *law* or into the *barn*, which is a widespread misreading among the students—the pronunciation of the Norwegian words for 'the law' (*loven*) and 'the (threshing) barn'

(*låven*) differs only with respect to tonal accent (and, it might be added, in real life people may enter barns more often than they enter the law), even though the inde-terminate forms are a little easier to distinguish: *en lov* 'a law' versus *en låve* ('a barn'). Five of the six groups discuss at one point or another of their conversation whether the story is about a *barn* or a *law*:

> G1: but a barn ['låve']?
> G2: the law [said using correct pronunciation]
> G1: Is it a law? I thought it=
> G2:= it's called 'Before the Law' [said using correct pronunciation]
> G1: I thought it was 'Before the Barn' ['låven']
> B1: I thought it was 'Before the Barn' ['låven'] too=
> G1: =I thought it was a barn with horses and stuff
> B1: Yes
> G2: Isn't it a law like rules? (.)
> G1: it makes **so** much more sense in a way (.) but also **so** much less (.) why is there a gatekeeper before the law? Is it because he should not break the law?
> B1: That could very well be the case
> (Group 2)

In Groups 1 and 2, the issue is quickly settled: the person asking the question meets opposition from several other group members, who simply declare that the story is about *the law*, not *the barn*, and this is immediately accepted. In Group 3, the girls talk about *the law* and the boys talk about *a barn*, but as one of the girls reads out, 'Before the law sits a gatekeeper', they boys accept this, which they show by saying 'the law' themselves. In Group 4, two of the students are unsure whether it should be *law* or *barn*, but when a girl says that she thinks it is a courtroom, those two ac-cept that it is *the law*.

In Group 5, a girl asks whether the story is about *the law* or *the barn* and a boy says that he visualizes a man wanting to get in to touch the *Norwegian Book of Stat-utes*. She does not seem entirely convinced until another boy (mis)reads from the text (which actually says, 'Everyone strives *after* the law'), but then she seems to accept 'the law' as the correct interpretation:

> G1: but is it a **law** in front of **the law** or is it the **barn** ['låve'] like? As a barn? (.) not a law but like (?)
> B1: I for one picture a man wanting to get in to touch the Norwegian Book of Statutes (.)
> G2: but the gatekeepers (?)
> G1: but that is probably I am not sure (5s)
> G2: It could be (.) that 'a man from the countryside asks to be stop...to come into the law'
> B2: 'Everyone strives to follow the law' so I don't think (I don't know what it is all about?)
> G1: Then it could be that he in one way or another wants to know how he can do good or something and to get in he bribes the man but (.) I don't know maybe it is a special way you have to say or do something to do to let him come in [...]
> (Group 5)

By contrast, Group 6 does not discuss this matter at all. It might be that the mixing-up of the two words is entirely due to orthographical confusion, but it is also possible to interpret the necessary clarification of this matter as a response to the fact that the text balances between two universes. When both concrete and abstract levels of meaning are engaged at the same time, the students are pulled towards the abstract level and almost skip over the superficial meaning of the text. Handling them both at the same time—as the structure of the allegory invites readers to do—is a demanding task.

'The law' as a thematic complex is dealt with in different ways. Group 1 discusses several proposed interpretations: the man does not enter because the way is not for him; he is hindered; he should have entered, because you have to take risks to get on in life, otherwise nothing happens. Against this backdrop, they wonder whether *the law* might be a metaphor for *life*:

> G2: The law it is a book right it is not possible to enter a book anyway
> G1: Yeah right maybe yes if he doesn't break rules
> G3: Yes this piece of paper (?)
> G1: This is exactly what the text says you should do (.) break rules if you do not break the law nothing happens but it sounds like a wrong message in a way since (.) as nothing happens
> G2: Yes (2s)
> [...]
> G1: Why did he want to go into a place (.) where there were rules?
> G2: It's probably a metaphor
> B1: It **is** a metaphor for something (.) but I don't know what
> G3: [I think it is] a metaphor for eh like (?)
> G1: Metaphor for (.) eh a place (2s) Life (.) Maybe it's a metaphor for life?
> G3: Yes
> (Group 1)

Group 2 wonders whether the man wants to leave prison for freedom, whether he wants to go to paradise or whether he is trying to get into a kingdom in a fantasy universe. Group 3 looks for an answer to what *the law* is by trying to find out what could be so important to the man: whether he has done something wrong, something criminal, whether he wants to die or go to heaven, and what it might be that was assigned only to him—could it be an inner struggle, perhaps that he wants to start over? They try out *death* and *heaven* as answers to what *the law* is. The students in Group 4 put forward several suggestions for what *the law* might be, including a courtroom and an air-raid shelter, before they settle for it as a gateway to heaven or paradise, based on their conclusion that the man has done something wrong for which he wants to be forgiven. What Group 5 devotes time to when discussing *the law* is why the man does not gain entry to the law and what is hindering him. The students suggest that he will first have to become a better person or that he must perform certain tasks in a certain way before the gatekeeper will let him in. In order to understand why the man does not enter the law, those students make various suggestions as to whom the gatekeeper represents and how the prohibition

is worded. They conclude that the man could break the guards' law but that he does not do so because then he would break the very same law that he wants to enter:

> B1: ehm (.) But (.) did he say there were other people other gatekeepers further in? You know if he passed the first then he would meet other (.) gatekeepers?
> G1: Yes I felt he said that but he he could go in because he said like is it allowed or this law eh lure them so much that you can come you may break what I say and just enter but he doesn't (.) So he wants the man's permission to enter the law (.) it could be the reason he doesn't get (?)
> B1: [did he say anything about that?] Because then he breaks=
> G1: =you break the law about entering (.)
> B1: (I can't picture that?) that he wants to go in (.)
> G1: No I didn't quite get that (6s)
> B1: What about you [name]? What do you make of the fact that he has he can go in but he doesn't without permission?
> B2: Because then he breaks the law that is the point (?)=
> (Group 5)

In Group 6, the framework is different: the students decide right at the start that *the law* is a heaven to which the man wants to gain entry, and that interpretation stands throughout the conversation.

Summary

The conversations in class 9B show that the students respond to the complex, abstract concept of 'the law' to be found in the text. They try to find answers to the invitation to interpret which the text extends to them: what or where is 'the law', and the puzzle at the end: what is keeping the man from entering? Some of the groups' answers range from the concrete (barn, courtroom, air-raid shelter) to the abstract (paradise, death, life, heaven). In other words, they respond directly to the abstract concepts of the story and put forward various suggestions with regard to what those concepts might be metaphors for. Based on the students' response, it can be said that they read in line with requirements of the genre. It can also be said that they seem to subscribe to a completely different student's characterization, which is quoted in the title of Johansen (2015): 'As I understand it, it's not supposed to be understood'.

   The students do not respond by paraphrasing or problematizing the superficial meaning of the text, or by presenting the motif as significant. Perhaps we could say that what is easy in this story becomes very difficult because of the abstract concept of 'the law'. The students are drawn to this concept, this difficulty, but they do not dwell on its concrete representation—the fact that it is presented as having physical walls, gates and several rooms. Thus they do not advance very far when it comes to elaborating upon what 'the law' could be a metaphor for or arguing about that. However, a couple of students make an interesting remark in this context: they suggest that the man does not enter the law without permission, because by doing so he would violate the very law that he wants to enter. Given that, to my knowledge, this

is a new and maybe also promising suggestion, one could argue that the students are here proposing new perspectives on an 'old' problem.

4.3 Run for Your Life

Run for Your Life (Norwegian title: *Løp for livet*) was written by the Norwegian writer Roy Jacobsen (b. 1954). It was first published in 2001 in a short-story collection entitled *Fugler og soldater* ('Birds and Soldiers') (2001). This short-story collection has been characterized as a work where the poet renounces his initial naturalism to assume other perspectives and arrive at unexpected insights which are out of sync with traditional logical thinking. Jacobsen's ability to throw off the reader, together with intimations and a Hemingway-like subtext of the unsaid, constantly forces the reader to think again (cf. Sivertsen, 2001).

The first-person narrator of *Run For Your Life* is part of the story himself; he starts telling it as he and his friend Øistein are running. We find out that they have run 'too far'[9] when Øistein discovers that they have forgotten that which is the reason for their running: his father's airline tickets, passport and wallet. His father is standing at the bus stop, about to leave for Singapore. As the boys run, we learn that Øistein's father is a sailor and spends only a month each year at home and that there has been a lot of drinking and quarrelling between Øistein and his father during this last 'watch below'. All of a sudden the narrator thinks, 'It takes time to discover a trap'. And Øistein says aloud, 'Bloody jacket!' The narrator thinks that Øistein took the wrong jacket, that they forgot the things that they are running because of. He tells us that Øistein's father's things were in 'the other one' but that he took 'this one', the one that 'his father brought for him and that he hadn't worn until now'. When the boys have come to the bus stop and Øistein's father compliments them on their running—he calls them star athletes—Øistein says that they have forgotten 'the whole shit'. His father erupts in a 'What?' Then the bus heaves into sight; the boys 'stand there fidgeting'; the bus stops; 'the sailor, white as the ocean', stares at the boys and at the departing bus, shaking his head defeatedly. Suddenly, Øistein's father discovers which jacket his son is wearing. He curses and says that he was supposed to be in Singapore the next day. Øistein replies, 'I'm sorry', and then they start walking home again, all three of them. Øistein's father says that he was going to find something for himself on land anyway. 'It's funny what a jacket can do', the narrator thinks. Then Øistein's father starts complimenting the boys again, saying that they ran so fast that they should join the athletics team. At that, the narrator begins to weep. Øistein's father asks him why he is crying, and he replies that he does not have a father. The story then ends with Øistein's father saying, 'But you're Øistein's friend. You ran with him.'

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[9] *This short story does not seem to have been translated into English; all quotations in the following are my own translations.*

The language used in *Run for Your Life* is not particularly complicated and it is not very hard to visualize how the boys are running to get to Øistein's father, who is standing at the bus stop, or how he does not leave after all. However, the way in which the short story is constructed calls for closer reading. The utterance 'It takes time to discover a trap' comes after the narrator has said that the boys have forgotten Øistein's father's things and that now he will not be able to go anyway, and it comes before Øistein's exclamation 'Bloody jacket!' Hence the reader is invited to search the text for what 'trap' may refer to and also prompted to investigate whether the 'bloody jacket' may have something to do with the trap. As a result of that search, the reader may draw conclusions about the number of jackets involved and about the importance of the jacket(s) to the story.

One possible interpretation is that Øistein's father deliberately asked the boys to bring the wrong jacket so that he would be able to stay on land and try to repair his relationship with his son without having to show weakness—that he staged an unfortunate event instead. However, the narrator describes Øistein's father as 'white as the ocean'—which can be associated with being *white with rage*—when he finds out that the boys have forgotten his things. This may suggest that there is something that the narrator does not know at this point of the story because a more likely interpretation is that *Øistein* took the wrong jacket on purpose and that *that* is the trap. When Øistein's father sees that his son is wearing the jacket that he has given him, he may interpret that as an act of reconciliation. This is why he does not express the anger that the narrator thinks he sees in his face. The utterance 'It's funny what a jacket can do' can be interpreted as reflecting the narrator's discovery of the attempted reconciliation under way between Øistein and his father. This could explain why he starts crying: it might be that he has felt close to Øistein because both of them, in different senses, lacked a father and that the basis for that closeness is now beginning to crumble. If that is the case, then Øistein's father's response to the narrator's tears could be a way for him to express that the narrator will never be alone as long as he and Øistein are friends.

Run for Your Life offers its readers several empty spaces that they are invited to fill. The relationship drama of the short story—which is pulsating underneath the narrator's utterances about how they are running with the wrong (or right) jacket, about how Øistein's father comes home only once a year, about his tickets, wallet and passport, and about how he did not go to Singapore after all—is in many ways wordless, appearing only in the spaces between a few utterances and in the wake of the narrator's own emotional outburst. *Run for Your Life* addresses the complex relationships between a father and his son and between two friends; and in the changes affecting those relationships, an important role is played by the jacket(s).

Class 9D talks about Run for Your Life

When class 9D talks about *Run for Your Life*, all students take part in the conversations, which last for 9 minutes on average (range: 7:17–9:28). Table 3 gives an overview of the five main topoi that emerged in the students' conversations and their rates of coverage relative to the full coded material. Overall, the tendency is for the students to spend the most time on *the relationship(s)*. In addition, the *jacket* and *what was forgotten*—the passport, the tickets and the wallet—also receive a good deal of attention (in Groups 3, 5 and 6). Group 4 is preoccupied mainly with the father's *journey*, whereas only Groups 1 and 6 spend a noteworthy amount of time on discussing the two friends' *run*.

Table 3. Most prominent topoi for Run for Your Life

	Group 1		Group 2		Group 3		Group 4		Group 5		Group 6	
	N	cov. %	N	cov. %	N	cov. %	N	cov. %	N	cov. %	N	cov. %
Running	3	29	2	4	1	10	1	3	2	3	1	23
What was forgotten	1	9	3	10	2	10	1	7	2	18	2	54
Jacket	1	9	3	10	2	23	1	14	3	24	2	54
Journey	1	18	1	18	2	14	3	34	2	10	1	17
Relationship(s)	**6**	**80**	**5**	**11**	**7**	**79**	**5**	**38**	**6**	**48**	**3**	**67**

Four of the six groups (Groups 1, 3, 4 and 6) begin their conversation by directing their attention towards the puzzling event where the narrator cries and says that he does not have a father. Group 2 first focuses on the mystery of the jacket, whereas Group 5 begins by discussing the pronunciation of the word 'ticket' and of the name 'Øistein' before focusing on the event where the narrator is crying.

Group 1 approaches the relationship between Øistein and his father head-on, trying to find out how it develops at an emotional level. The way in which the students discuss this relationship shows that they understand the links among the characters—they know who is the father of whom and who is telling the story:

> G4: Did you understand this text at all
> G3: eh in terms of what I understood there is in a way three characters who are mentioned (.) it is the one named Øistein and the father and the first-person
> G4: [yes]
> G3: who we don't get to know much about except that he doesn't have a father apparently
> G1: [yes mhm]
> […]
> (Group 1)

From the relationship between Øistein and his father, the students move on to the jacket, the narrator's tears and Øistein's father's response in order to elaborate their picture of what that relationship is like, what it has been like and what it might be

developing into. While Group 1 thus takes the nature of the relationship as a starting point, Group 3 begins by exploring who is who and who is telling the story as well as discussing the mystery of the jacket. Only then do they begin to explore the emotional character of the relationship, finding that it is moving towards reconciliation. Where Group 4's discussions concern the relationship, the students mainly talk about who is the father of whom, who is running and whether it might be the case that Øistein's father 'is an alcoholic'. Similarly, Group 6 is also busy trying to establish the links between the story characters, in particular who is the father of whom. However, while Group 4 does not move beyond the issue of who is who, Group 6 also discusses how the relationships between Øistein's father and each of the boys should be understood, given that Øistein's father addresses both boys repeatedly. The students suggest that the narrator may be crying because bad memories of his relationship with his own father are brought back to him by the fact that Øistein's father was going to leave, and one boy suggests that the narrator's friendship with Øistein is vital to the narrator:

> B1: Maybe he **does** have a father! But he has no connection with him
> G2: [like]
> G2: It could be but like what do you think they mean when they say that when he says he doesn't have a father then he doesn't say like no, poor thing like he just says 'You've got Øistein. You ran with him.'
> B1: [(?)]
> G2: like what does that have to do with them running together? (.)
> G1: I didn't get that
> B2: It has something it could have something to do with the fact that he's got a friend because
> G2: Yes that he like maybe he meant that he didn't have anyone but that he had like
> B2: Yes it seems like he has no friends or something the father then but (he has?) Øistein
> (Group 6)

The conversations in Group 2 are characterized from time to time by tricks to create a distance and attempts (some quite successful) to send out signals of parody. Apart from that, this group devotes most of its time to the journey to Singapore, but the mystery of the jacket also receives some attention—mostly in connection to the issue of who forgot it. Group 5 also takes an interest in the identity of the sailor, but the way in which the students talk about this suggests that they do not really see this as a problem. This is because the conversations in Group 5 are characterized throughout by something that can be perceived as fooling around: the students mess around with the recorder, argue against their own better judgement about the correct pronunciation of words, tease others for their accent and sometimes talk only to themselves (non-conversation) or only in sub-groups (parallel conversations). However, they do from time to time express things that are to do with the important relationship among Øistein, the narrator and Øistein's father—the one that the latter emphasizes through his reaction to the narrator's tears. The students point to the fact that, in different ways, Øistein's father sends out signals of fatherhood to both

boys, meaning that they are 'brothers in life' despite not being 'brothers of the blood':

> G2: Yes Øistein's friend doesn't have a daddy but
> B1: [(?)]
> B2: [that's the most]
> G2: one dude says to =
> G1: = it could be that =
> G2: = that Øistein's father is kind of the friend's father too
> B2: [that's the most (?) I've heard]
> G1: So they are brothers?
> G2: No
> G1: It reads that=
> G2: =oh yes no! It's like a step-dad you know since he looks after them both
> (Group 5)

Summary

The conversations in class 9D show that the students largely respond to the absence of explicit links binding the first-person narrator's story together—to that which creates empty spaces (Iser, 1978) in the sequence of events. The students' response is dominated by different suggestions with regard to how the characters are related to each other and what characterizes those relationships. The event where the narrator himself takes centre stage by suddenly breaking into tears and saying that he does not have a father attracts the attention of the students in most groups. Here we might perhaps say that the narrator's surprising utterance creates a *disturbance* which makes the students go back in the text to reconsider the links among the characters—the students' *narrative desire* is awakened (Brooks, 1984)—and then to put forward suggestions for how the *empty spaces* (Iser, 1978) of the text should be filled. Then Øistein's father's response, in turn, invites the students to have a closer look at the nature of the relationship between the narrator and *his* father as well as the nature of that among the narrator, Øistein and Øistein's father.

What the students do not seem to consider significant, by contrast, is what role the jacket(s) have in terms of *being 'a trap'.* The students talk about the jacket, but they do not seem to see the explanatory potential of this element, which might help them find out more about the relationship between Øistein and his father and about the narrator's outburst.

5.   DISCUSSION

The starting point of the present study was to investigate what it is about *Little Things*, *Before the Law* and *Run for Your Life* that could explain the responsive exchange between those texts and their readers within the context of what may be defined as a type of exploratory didactic design. The analyses performed indicate that those literary texts offer the students *resistance*. The students are attracted to

what *disturbs* them when they try to make sense of the story as a whole, as they are prompted to do by the initial instructions they receive.

When reading *Little Things*, the students are drawn to the open ends of the story—about what happens to the baby and about what may have caused the conflict between the protagonists. Their responses differ from mine in the sense that the students do not pay attention to how the story is told. Hence they do not emphasize the baby's role as a 'thing' in the conflict between the adults, and nor do they point out that the ironic distance in the narrator's voice may contribute to a sense of unreleased tension in the text as a whole.

In the students' responses to *Before the Law*, the problem of the abstract concept of 'the law' is central. This is also the main issue in my own reading. We differ, however, when it comes to suggestions for the overall interpretation of the text. I make several suggestions which are based on different interpretations of 'the law', while the students seem to be stuck in the massive openness of that concept, which they seem—not surprisingly—to have trouble manoeuvring in. This resonates well with research showing that 'experts' may be able to alternate between and handle overall interpretations when reading, whereas students show a tendency to move their focus from one detail to the next on their way towards an overall interpretation (cf. Gourvennec, Nielsen, & Skaftun, 2014).

When responding to *Run for Your Life*, the students' attention is drawn to the relationships and connections between the characters. Those were easier for me to establish. Still, the nature of the relationships between the characters attracts both the students' attention and mine. However, whereas I am attracted to the significance of the jacket(s) and their potential as 'keys' to understanding the narrator's outburst and the nature of the relationships, the students almost entirely overlook this.

Further, it is also interesting to observe the diversity across the groups in where the students direct their attention. As we saw in Table 1, Group 1 in class 9A directed their attention to five topoi in their response, whereas there were mainly two topoi identified in Group 2. The other groups directed their attention to three or four thematic topoi. There is less diversity in the groups' responses to the texts reflected in Table 2 and Table 3, but diversity is still present—suggesting that some topoi could easily have been missed by a teacher who prepared a traditional follow-up plenary discussion without first learning what the student groups found interesting. This diversity implies that this way of working has a didactic potential, and it supports my hypothesis that if the person presenting a text to students does not bias them with directions or paths to follow, a fertile ground is created for making a rich diversity of interpretations, and this will add new perspectives to such subsequent follow-up discussions. Further, as pointed out above, Table 2 shows a strong diversity of topoi covered by all groups in class 9B. In addition, Table 2 also shows that the time spent discussing the various topoi is very similar and that there is an even spread across groups. This differs from the texts reflected in Tables 1 and 3. One possible interpretation is that the Kafka text offers the students greater resistance than the other two

texts. This is based on the observation that when the groups respond to the other texts, they sooner arrive at some sort of consensus about what the most important topoi are and so spend more time talking about those.

At an overall level, it is interesting to note that the findings show that the main problems of interest within literary studies (at least as reflected in my own responses to the texts, which I humbly hope bear at least some resemblance to what more qualified and experienced practitioners within this field would have arrived at) also attract the attention of lower-secondary students. The main finding of this study is a simple one, in fact perhaps so simple that, like the motif of *Before the Law*, its importance is easily overlooked: When the students encounter literary texts by themselves, the *hermeneutic desire* which is inherent in human beings pulls them into the core of the subject and makes them respond in a subject-specific, relevant and adequate manner. In other words, the main finding is that different forms of disturbance are what attracts attention, and hence that such disturbance can be interpreted as the main cause of the engagement manifested by the students in their conversations.

One key objective when teaching literature is to highlight positive sources of engagement (e.g. Malmgren, 1986; Molloy, 2003; Smidt, 1989). In practice, this may cause teachers to choose texts that they expect will be of personal benefit to young people (Kjelen, 2013, p. 198; Penne, 2012; Ulfgard, 2012). However, what the present study implies is that difficulty does not necessarily stand in opposition to attraction, which may be relevant when it comes to the range of texts that can conceivably be included in the teaching of literature.

At this point, it must be stressed that it is not a matter of course that something happens (or indeed should happen) between texts and readers in literary classrooms. However, the present study argues in favour of encouraging literary conversations where students feel that there is something relevant to talk about. Hence the present study argues in favour of recognizing literature that offers cases of disturbance as providing meaningful problems to discuss. This could be an argument in favour of the assumption that L1 classrooms might benefit from being oriented towards students' interaction with subject-specific problems—placing the students and the problems on centre stage. I would argue that literary texts which offer disturbance might function as engaging problems which encourage the students to collaborate in a manner that leads the way towards a subject-specific practice.

It is a received wisdom in the field of research into the teaching of literature that students' engagement in literary texts read at school is mainly a question of the contexts in which those texts are placed (e.g. Malmgren, 1986; Molloy, 2003; Rosenblatt, 1995, p. 65 f; Smidt, 1989). This standpoint may cause difficulties for teachers trying to match their choices of 'advanced' texts with the interests and reading level of their students (e.g. Kyriakides, Creemers, & Antoniou, 2009). Nevertheless, if we give students the opportunity to encounter literary texts as open problems, chances are good that they will engage with them and relate to them, because of their inherent

desire for meaning—their hermeneutic desire. And once students actually *experience* the problems, a fertile ground is created for further didactic approaches.

The key aim of this study was to understand *what* it is about the three texts in question that may explain the attraction between them and their readers as found in the two previous case studies. The analysis shows that students address textual aspects that represent highly relevant problems of literary studies, and that dealing with those problems is an engaging activity. This overall picture calls for reflection on the relationship between substantial content and didactic framing of explorative group conversations. However, there remains a need for further knowledge about *how* students make meaning from texts that offer resistance—how they make meaning on the basis of the experiences that they bring with them to their work and to their engagement with the language of the texts.

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