Interpretive Inferences

Different assumptions about the “locus” of meaning are reflected in differences among psychological theories of meaning as well as among movements within literary and rhetorical theory (Fish, 1980; Rabinowitz, 1987; Scholes, 1985). For example, if it is assumed that meaning is in the text, then it ought to be possible to identify features that differentiate literary texts that have a “duplicity” of meaning from nonliterary texts that do not. If meaning is in the author, then knowing whether the author intended a surface meaning and a subtext would be the key to defining whether a text is literary or not. If in the reader, then whether a text is literary or not depends on whether the reader derives a surface meaning and a subtext. And so on for the other assumptions about meaning. This seems an untenable way to distinguish between literary and nonliterary texts, and it should not be surprising that scholars have not agreed on a specific definition of what constitutes a literary text.

From our perspective, we think it is more productive to take a situated approach and distinguish among occasions or comprehension situations where readers are more likely to adopt a literal stance toward text and those where they are more likely to adopt an interpretive stance (cf. Langer, 2010). A literal stance orients readers to constructing what the text says based on the propositions and connections among them in the text, using prior knowledge to the extent necessary to create a coherent representation of the situation referenced by the text. An interpretive stance orients readers to what the text means beyond the situation of the specific text and depends on integrating what the text says with prior knowledge of a variety of sorts, including knowledge of motivated human action, text genres and their characteristics, plot structures, character types, moral and philosophical systems, and pragmatic aspects of the communicative event. A situated approach is consistent with assumptions that comprehension is a constructive process reflecting interactions among reader, text, and task occurring in a particular socio-cultural context. Particular constellations of values on these dimensions in a particular reading situation affect the likelihood that readers go beyond taking a literal stance toward text to embrace an interpretive stance (cf. Goldman, 1997; 2004). To return to the idea of duplicity of code, a literal stance orients the reader to Schraw’s (1997) surface meaning and an interpretive stance to the subtext(s). We assume that a literal stance leads to readers constructing some representation of what the text says as a “prerequisite” to adopting an interpretive stance. Furthermore, whether readers adopt an interpretive stance is probabilistic and depends on readers’ interpretations of their tasks and what they require. Readers’ task interpretations and their requirements, in turn, depend on readers’ prior knowledge of the world, the domain, text

Susan R. Goldman, Kathryn S. McCarthy, and Candice Burkett

Acknowledgments

We gratefully acknowledge the important contributions to our thinking about literary interpretation made by members of the Project READI Literature Team, in particular Carol Lee, Sarah Levine, and Joseph Magliano. Other members of the Literature Team include ourselves, Stephen Briner, Jessica Chambers, Rick Coppola, Julia Emig, Angela Fortune, MariAnne George, Allison Hall, Courtney Milligan, Teresa Sosa, and Mary Pat Sullivan. Project READI (Reading, Evidence, Argumentation in Disciplinary Instruction) is a multi-institution collaboration to improve complex comprehension of multiple forms of text in literature, history, and science. It is supported by the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, through Grant R305F100007 to University of Illinois at Chicago. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not represent views of the Institute or the U.S. Department of Education.

In this chapter we address the kinds of inferences that are made when people read literary texts. Literary texts may include a variety of genres, including narratives, science fiction, folk tales, fables, poetry, songs, and historical fiction. Distinctions between literary and “nonliterary” texts may seem obvious. Indeed, there is general consensus that literary texts afford a displacement of meaning (Scholes, 1977, cited in Levine, 2013) or “duplicity of code.” Schraw (1997) characterized literary texts as “narratives that are richly symbolic and include both an interpretable surface meaning and one or more coherent subtexts (i.e., implicit thematic interpretations that run parallel to the explicit surface-level meaning of the text)” (p. 436). In fact, clear distinctions are difficult to make, partly because such distinctions depend upon assumptions about whether meaning is “in the text,” “in the author,” “in the reader,” in the “transaction between reader and text” (Rosenblatt, 1978; 1994), or in the interaction of reader, text, and task, situated in a social and cognitive context (RAND Report, 2002).
genre, and communicative intent of authors and readers as well as their standards of coherence (e.g., Goldman, Varma, and Coté, 1996; Graesser, Olde, and Klettke, 2002; Graesser, Louwerse, McNamara, Olney, Cal, and Mitchell, 2007; Graesser, Singer, and Trabasso, 1994; Kintsch, 1988; 1998; Kintsch and van Dijk, 1978; van den Broek, Lorch, Linderholm, and Gustafsson, 2001; van Dijk and Kintsch, 1983).

Other chapters in this volume focus on inferential processes involved in constructing what the text says — with the anaphoric, predictive, causal, and elaborative inferences that build a coherent model of the situation depicted in the text. Our concern in this chapter is with the kinds of inferences and processes involved in taking an interpretive stance. Specifically, we focus on the inferential processes needed to construct coherent subtexts, the knowledge needed to engage in these processes, and the implications for the types of interpretations and representations that result from adopting an interpretive stance.

The interpretive stance highlights aspects of narrative text comprehension and representation that have not received a great deal of attention over the past twenty-five years in discourse psychology: theme, emotional response of readers, author intent, and how that intent is communicated through character choice, plot structure, and the specific words and sentence structures that comprise the actual text (Graesser et al., 2002; Hillocks and Ludlow, 1984; Rabinowiz, 1987). This is somewhat understandable in the context of experimental designs that require clear operational definitions of variables, the need for control over potentially confounding variables, and the desire to have multiple observations of the “same” phenomenon so that any effects are not attributable to a specific text. At the same time, it is ironic, given the historical context of work in discourse psychology on narrative. In 1975, Rumelhart proposed grammatical systems for describing the syntactic and semantic structure of stories that originated in the oral tradition, such as fairy tales and fables (Rumelhart, 1975). Interest was in understanding how the structure of stories and variations in story structure impacted memory (e.g., Mandler and Johnson, 1977; Rumelhart, 1975; Stein and Glenn, 1979). Specifically, departures from canonical structures led to poorer memory for what had been presented but the “distortions” tended toward the canonical form (Mandler and Goodman, 1982). These findings hearkened back to the seminal work of Bartlett (1932) on reconstructive memory. Bartlett found that when people recalled stories that followed culturally unfamiliar semantic and structural conventions, they reconstructed the story to reflect culturally familiar stories. He dubbed this “effort after meaning” and used it to argue for the active role of prior knowledge in shaping people’s memory for events. In the 1970s, during the “early days” of the cognitive revolution, Bartlett’s earlier work on reconstructive memory and the postulation of schema as organizing structures for knowledge took on substantial importance as evidence for claims about the active role of the learner in cognitive approaches to memory and learning.1

Although Bartlett’s (1932) and earlier work on story comprehension was less concerned with interpretive stances than with literal memory for stories, the legacy of comprehenders as actively seeking meaning and using prior knowledge to do so may be seen as fundamental to modern discourse psychology’s interests in inferential processes writ large. Ironically, in their desire to control for extraneous variables and produce multiple examples of stories that conformed to a particular semantic or syntactic structure, discourse researchers moved away from authentic literature and began creating “textoids” in which variables of interest could be manipulated and therefore put to experimental test. Much of the inference literature has relied on these types of “texts.” As a result there is a plethora of work on inferences during the construction of literal meaning and much less on inferences and reasoning involved in an interpretive stance.

The chapter is organized into three sections and concluding comments. In the first section, we discuss comprehension processes and the inferences involved in constructing mental representations of what a text says as well as what it means. In the second section, we review research that describes the ways in which literary experts make sense of texts and how their approaches contrast to those of novices. We highlight the types of knowledge that come into play in adopting an interpretive stance. The third section reports on two studies that we have conducted as exploratory investigations into the circumstances that promote an interpretive stance in literary novices. In the concluding section, we discuss ways in which existing models of comprehension and representations of texts need to be expanded to more appropriately and completely account for the processing implied in an interpretive stance toward text and the representations that result.

Inferential processes and the interpretive stance

The representations that result from adopting a literal stance correspond to textbase and situation model levels as described and characterized in contemporary theories of discourse comprehension and representation

---

1 This was against a backdrop of the learner as passive recipient of information based in behaviorist learning theories.
(Kintsch, 1994; 1988; 1998; van Dijk and Kintsch, 1983). Textbase representations reflect information that was explicit in the text or can be inferred with minimal use of prior knowledge. These inferences tend to be local and are sometimes triggered by a single word or clause and sentences that occur over relatively short stretches of text (Graesser et al., 1994; Graesser et al., 2007). The textbase typically captures the characters, events, objects, settings, and emotions to the degree that they are explicit in the text. The situation model goes beyond what is explicit in the text itself to elaborate the textbase so that a coherent representation of the situation referenced in the text can be constructed. Several types of explanatory inferences contribute to the formation of a situation model but they are all relatively local. These inferences establish what happened and why, who was involved, and basic motives for characters’ actions and emotions. They are important to both plot and character coherence in the context of the story world (Graesser et al., 1994).

An interpretive stance generally involves moving beyond the specific text or situation and relies on explanatory inferences that operate at more global levels. For example, thematic interpretive inferences encompass longer stretches of text—sometimes the entire narrative. They provide an organizing concept, schema, or framework that expresses the point or moral of the story (Graesser et al., 2007; Vipond and Hunt, 1984). Thematic interpretive inferences often take a general characteristic of motivated action and use it to explain the characters and events in the context of the specific narrative. They may be stated in terms of the specific events in the story or they may be stated as generalizations about the world writ large (Kurtz and Schober, 2001). For example, in Aesop’s fable in Box 17.1 “The Dog and His Shadow” the statement “The dog was greedy because he tried to get a bigger piece of meat and so he lost everything” is an explanatory thematic inference that ties a general concept, greed, to a statement about the specific character and events in the story. In contrast, the thematic interpretive inference “Greedy people

Box 17.1 The Dog and the Shadow

A dog, crossing a bridge over a stream with a piece of flesh in his mouth, saw his own shadow in the water and took it for that of another dog, with a piece of meat double his own in size. He immediately let go of his own, and fiercely attacked the other dog to get his larger piece from him. He thus lost both: that which he grasped at in the water, because it was a shadow, and his own, because the stream swept it away, www.aesopfables.com/cgs/aesop1.csp?1&TheDogandtheShadow Dec 1, 2013.

risk losing everything” is stated as a general truism about human behavior. Thematic inferences—whether specific or more abstracted—are akin to “morals of the story” as in this and other Aesop’s fables. They often rely on religious, philosophical, or experiential knowledge bases and may constitute a commonsense theory of human action (e.g., Heider, 1958). Thematic interpretive inferences may serve to connect to other stories with similar themes. Such a mechanism would allow readers to form categories of stories that deal with similar themes. This may be particularly useful as readers begin to identify commonalities in the human experience and criteria for recognizing new instances of situations that reflect the operation of particular themes (cf. Smith, 1991).

Thematic generalizations abstracted away from the story to the world outside the story and connected to reasoning about how the author conveyed the message are designated as author generalizations (Hillocks and Ludlow, 1984). They reflect readers’ interpretations of the message the author intended to communicate in the particular literary work and tie the interpretations to those aspects of the text that readers are using as evidence for the author’s message. Author generalizations are therefore linked to a specific situation model and use evidence from the text itself, often specific patterns of language usage or rhetorical devices. In addition, author generalizations may also be a mechanism by which readers develop author schemas that represent characteristic style, craft, rhetorical devices, plot lines, and so forth of specific authors. Such schemas would be built up through reading multiple works and perhaps rereading previously read works by a specific author. Such author schemas might then, in turn, lead to predictions and expectations when reading additional works by particular authors. For example, across a number of O. Henry short stories, readers might come to anticipate an unexpected twist at the end of a story. Author schemas are not typically mentioned as part of a situation model representation for single texts. However, in the context of models of multiple document comprehension in history and science, several researchers highlight the importance of representing sourcing information, including the author (Goldman, 2004; Perletti et al., 1999; Rouet, 2006; Rouet and Britt, 2011).

In summary, a literal stance involves inferences that establish a textbase and situation model that reflects a coherent representation of what the text says and the situation referenced by the text. Such inferences create connections from sentence-to-sentence and from episode-to-episode. The information needed to make these inferences is largely contained within the text and everyday knowledge of motivated action. These inferences help establish the basics of the actors/characters, events, and goals of the story. It is these kinds of inferences that have
been the subject of much of the discourse comprehension research on situation models for narratives. An interpretive stance involves inferences that build from and go beyond the world of the text. That is, the interpretive stance draws on the literal, but generalizes from it with inferential reasoning that connects or associates the literal with more general tendencies of, or generalizations about, human nature and life’s principles that seem to govern the way the world operates (e.g., Don’t be greedy or you might lose what you have; The world isn’t always fair; Good things happen to bad people; If you are bossy, people won’t listen to you or like you; Do unto others as you would have them do unto you). These types of interpretive inferences may serve as “higher-order” organizational structures and provide a basis for creating intertextual connections in that they could be linked to both specific situation models of stories from which they were abstracted as well as to new situation models formed when reading additional stories either by the same or by different authors.

In the next section, we consider empirical evidence regarding interpretive inferences. Much of this work has been conducted in the context of contrastive expert-novice studies.

**Adopting an interpretive stance: studies of experts**

One way in which researchers have validated the existence of an interpretive stance is through research on expertise in the literary domain. There are several seminal studies that reflect discourse researchers’ efforts to explore this issue. We highlight two that are representative of the findings regarding expertise.

Graves and Frederiksen (1991) used a think-aloud methodology and compared experts’ (two English department senior faculty) and novices’ (undergraduates enrolled in a literature course) descriptions of a piece of literature. Participants read an excerpt (780 words) from *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker that consisted mostly of Black English Vernacular dialogue between characters. Participants were asked to read the excerpt one sentence at a time and comment on its content and style. Graves and Frederiksen analyzed the comments with respect to whether they repeated or paraphrased the text (text-based) or were situational and high-level inferences that reflected use of the text and/or prior knowledge (text-derived). Comments in their category of text-derived align with what we referred to previously as interpretive inferences. Comments were also coded with respect to the unit of text referenced: linguistic (e.g., lexical, syntactic, topical), conceptual propositional content (e.g., propositional meaning, coherence relations, logical relations), conceptual frame (e.g., description of character or setting, narrative actions, dialogue, goals and plans). Finally, comments were coded for what Graves and Frederiksen referred to as the discourse perspective. This analysis basically captured whether the comment described something about the text only or about the text plus reference to the author, the text plus reference to the reader, or the text plus reference to an author/reader relationship.

Results revealed multiple differences between experts and novices. First, novices’ comments were overwhelmingly text-based whereas experts’ comments were text-derived inferences. There were also several differences in the types of units referenced in the comments. Experts commented more on syntactic features whereas novices commented more on lexical/morphological structures (i.e., spellings or words). Experts made inferences about the narrative structure and functions of the dialogue, using the text to support their inferences, whereas novices tended to repeat the narrative events or what characters had said. Experts, but not novices, also commented on the author’s use of language (e.g., “There is a deliberate manipulation of the syntax”), the impact of the style of writing on the reader (e.g., “The lack of standard punctuation makes this difficult for the reader”), and the author’s intentional use of a specific style for purposes of engaging the reader (e.g., “It’s a self-conscious effort to do a kind of stream-of-consciousness style which is, of course, deliberately elliptical and telegraphic and invited the reader to fill in all the deleted syntax, punctuation, etc.”).

Overall, Graves and Frederiksen (1991) provided evidence that experts used the text to derive inferences about the larger meaning of the situation depicted in the text. In contrast, novices were focused almost exclusively on the textbase; that is, they focused on what the text explicitly said about an event and dialogue sequence. Equally significant is that experts considered how the author used language – the role of deliberate syntactic, semantic, and discourse choices – to engage the reader. This study thus provides evidence for the claims made by literary theorists that authors assume a set of conventions that readers will rely on in interpreting literary works (e.g., Rabinowitz, 1987). Similar differences between experts and novices have been found for poetry genre (e.g., Peskin, 1998; Warren, 2011).

However, what is not clear is how widely held these conventions are. That is, is knowledge of these conventions one of the distinguishing characteristics of literary expertise and a type of knowledge that the average reader does not have? Or are these conventions and their importance to an interpretive stance simply more explicit to literary experts than to novices? In either case, it seems likely that these knowledge differences.
could impact interpretations of the actual task instructions, leading experts to make a different set of assumptions about what the task requires than novices. For example, literary experts might see the task as requiring detailed examination of the text and interpretations of the author's message, whereas novices see the task as being more constrained, for example, to figuring out the action sequence. Of course, in addition to knowledge of shared conventions, literary experts also have far greater knowledge of a range of literary works, movements, and authors, than do novices. Thus, the foregoing analysis is just one of several possible explanations for the expert-novice differences observed by Graves and Frederiksen (1991).

There is also the possibility that literary experts are simply better text comprehenders than novices. However, the results of a second comparative study suggest that expert-novice differences for literary texts are specific to that genre and not due to some more generalized differences in text comprehension. Zeitz (1994) compared the memory and reasoning performance for three text genres of literary experts (graduate students in English) to two groups of literary novices—engineering graduate students and third-year high school students. Each participant read a poem, a short story, and a scientific expository passage and completed recall and recognition memory tasks as well as interpretation and reasoning tasks.

With respect to memory tasks in the Zeitz (1994) study, for gist recall of the poem the English graduate students outperformed the other two groups; however, for gist recall of the science text, engineering graduate students outperformed the English and high school students. A recognition memory task for plot statements and for inferences that were based on several sentences for the short story indicated poorer overall performance by the high-school students but an interaction for the two groups of graduate students: Performance of the two groups of graduate students was equivalent on the plot statements but English graduate students outperformed the engineering graduate students on the inference statements. The patterns of results on the memory tasks thus indicate that the "advantage" for the literary experts is restricted to literary genres and measures that reflect an interpretive stance. A similar conclusion applies to performance on the reasoning measures.

Zeitz (1994) carried out extensive analyses of a variety of characteristics of the responses to the reasoning tasks to establish that literary novices were working with more basic-level representations of the literary texts than were literary experts. As in Graves and Frederiksen (1991), literary experts drew on derived representations that reflected interpretive inferences based on the presented texts. However, for the science texts, literary experts worked with more basic-level representations and their performance was similar to that of the engineering graduate students. That is, literary experts adopted an interpretive stance only for the literary texts, demonstrating domain-specificity in contrast to some more generalized skill. For example, one set of results supporting this conclusion concerned whether the topic sentences were facts (literal information from the texts), interpretations (inferences using prior knowledge), or other. English students produced more interpretive sentences than engineering students, particularly for the literary texts. A content analysis of the topic sentences also indicated that all three groups showed similar content types for the science text, but for the literary texts the English students focused on language and theme whereas the other two groups concentrated on characters and events. Differences between the English and engineering graduate students were replicated in the argument structure of essays that were written for the literary texts. (Essays were not written for the science text.) English students had more sophisticated arguments that asserted more claims for which relevant evidence was provided than did the other two groups.

These two seminal studies of expert-novice differences in the processing of literary texts indicate that literary experts are more likely to adopt an interpretive stance; Zeitz's (1994) work further established that the greater likelihood of literary experts adopting an interpretive stance was specific to literary texts. Both of the studies reviewed here indicate that experts have a well-developed, knowledge base relevant to literary interpretation, similar to experts in other domains (cf. Chi, Feltovich, and Glaser, 1981). Theory and empirical data indicate that there are at least two critical, epistemological components of literary experts' knowledge bases: (1) literary texts are indirect and contain both a surface and a deeper meaning (Carlson, 1981; Purves 1971; Schmidt, 1982; Scholes, 1985; Schraw, 1997; Zeitz, 1994); and (2) authors are purposeful in constructing a surface text that uses conventions for providing clues to deeper meaning (Rabinowitz, 1987; Schmidt, 1982). In other words, literary experts' interpretive stance constitutes an "effort after meaning" that includes an orientation to discover conventionalized textual features and use them to construct multiple meanings that are abstracted away from the specific characters, events, and situations depicted in the surface text (Schmidt, 1982). They endeavor, as Vipond and Hunt (1984) put it, to determine the point of the text. Of course, there may be more than one intended message (Glasser, 2012; Gibbs, 2011), and readers may not agree with one another on the inferences they make about an author's point. Indeed, disagreements regarding the "point" of a literary piece often set the stage for literary argument.
Interpretive Inferences

There has been a fair bit of speculation about the second aspect of an expert's knowledge, namely the nature of the conventions that authors assume are shared by their readers. Perhaps one of the most well-developed proposals is that of Rabinowitz (1987), who posited that authors count on their readers' awareness and use of narrative conventions. He casts these conventions as four major types of rules: rules of notice, rules of signification, rules of configuration, and rules of coherence. Rules of notice direct readers to pay attention to and prioritize some details, characters, objects, or events over others. Rules of notice—really more heuristics than rules—suggest the potential importance of elements that, for example, appear in privileged positions in a text (e.g., in titles, in first or last sentences of a text), are semantically or syntactically stressed, are repeated frequently, are described in great detail although seemingly obscure or mundane, or that are unexpected or create breaks in the continuity of a text. Referring back to the Aesop's fable shown in Box 17.1, "dog" and "shadow" appear in the title. This positioning heightens expectations that these are key to interpreting the fable, although by no means ensures it. Rules of signification help the reader figure out how to make sense of things that we notice. Often this involves considering nonliteral, metaphorical, symbolic, satirical, or ironic meanings. For example, Appendix A contains an adapted version of a short story by James Hanley titled "The Butterfly" that we used in one of the studies we discuss subsequently. However, there are no butterflies in the story; only a caterpillar that gets killed before it turns into a butterfly. That there are no butterflies in the story but that it is the title might suggest that there is some symbolic significance to the butterfly and may lead the reader to consider what that might be. Rules of configuration help organize initially disparate symbolic elements into recognizable plot or thematic patterns (e.g., the love triangle, the triumph of good over evil) and provide a basis for predictions and expectations. Rules of coherence provide us with ways to reconcile apparent disjunctions and inconsistencies in expectations through metaphor, irony, or through a reframing in which they make sense. This process often points to potential moral, political, or philosophical messages of the text. Rabinowitz (1987) distinguishes configuration and coherence with respect to the questions they address and when they operate: Rules of configuration operate during reading and address "the question, 'How will this in all probability work out?'"); whereas rules of coherence operate once we have finished reading and allow us to answer the question, "Given how it worked out, how can I account for these particular elements?" (p. 112).

From a processing perspective, the four types of rules operate interactively and iteratively as readers' construct representations of literary text. Studies of literary experts provide evidence that they are explicitly engaging these rules during reading, and after reading when asked to provide or evaluate interpretations (Graves and Frederiksen, 1991; Peskin, 1998; Warren, 2011; Zeitz, 1994). Indeed, Warren (2011) reported that literary experts who read poetry outside of their expertise area indicated the need to know more about the common conventions, stylistic choices, and common themes of particular authors before they could provide informed interpretations of their work. In contrast, the performance of novices suggests that they adopt a literal stance only. The absence of evidence for an interpretive stance in novices could reflect lack of the knowledge that supports the kinds of inferences experts make or it could reflect differences in how they interpret task instructions in these experimental situations. In other words, the research to date does not allow us to determine what knowledge novices do have that would support the adoption of an interpretive stance and abstractions from the specific story world created in a literary text.

Other research indicates that even preschool and elementary school-aged children engage in metaphorical thinking and that they "get the point" of Aesop's fables (e.g., Goldman, Reyes, and Varnhagen, 1984; Johnson and Goldman, 1987; Winner, 1988). Lee's work on cultural modeling (Lee, 2001; 2007) also indicates that high school students have a wealth of strategies for recognizing figurative and symbolic meaning in song lyrics, films, and other forms of popular culture texts. However, they are not explicitly aware of how they know what they know. Cultural modeling is an instructional process for making those strategies explicit as a first step to building on them in adopting an interpretive stance toward the literary canon of school.

In an effort to better elucidate how literary novices approach the processing of literary texts and their assumptions about task-appropriate responses given particular instructions, in the next section we discuss findings from several studies that explore these issues. Specifically, we discuss studies that were designed to investigate literary novices' "sense making" for literary texts under different task conditions. Variations among task conditions were expected to differentially encourage or bias an interpretive stance. In some cases, the variations were in the text genre; in other cases, the variations were in the task instructions; and in still others, the variations were in the directness of the request for interpretations.

When do novices adopt an interpretive stance?

In the context Project READI, a large multi-institutional collaboration designed to examine evidence-based argumentation in literature,
science, and history, we have conducted a number of exploratory and
descriptive studies to attempt to elucidate the processes and resulting
understandings that “literary novices” construct. Our goal in conducting
this research has been to ascertain how these individuals “make sense” of
literary texts and the effects of different tasks on the likelihood that
performance reflects an interpretive stance. In this chapter, we discuss
only the performance of undergraduates.

The first study we describe examined essays produced in response to
specific questions that differed in terms of the bias they were intended
to create toward an interpretive stance versus a literal stance. The second
set of studies used think-aloud methodology to tap into processes of
comprehension during initial reading followed by specific question
prompts. The findings we report are consistent with the contrastive
studies discussed in the second part of the chapter (e.g., Graves and
Frederiksen, 1991; Zeitz, 1994); literary novices rarely adopt an
interpretive stance. However, the findings we report here also provide some
initial evidence that when explicitly prompted for interpretations of
literary texts, these novices demonstrate evidence of at least early forms
of the knowledge of conventions and inference strategies that literary
experts provide.

Study 1: task instructions that promote
an interpretive stance

In one of our initial studies (McCarthy and Goldman, under revision),
undergraduates (n = 114) read the short story “Harrison Bergeron” by
Kurt Vonnegut (1968). The story relates a dystopian future where the
government imposes handicapping devices on everyone so that they are
“all equal.” When a young man, Harrison Bergeron, rebels by removing
his handicapping, he is murdered. His parents witness this event, but
their handicaps prevent them from realizing that the government has
killed their son. The story was read under one of four task instruction
conditions. These conditions were designed to encourage a focus on
either plot, theme, or interpretation. A fourth condition left the focus
intentionally ambiguous. Table 17.1 provides the specific wording of
the task instructions in each of these conditions. Essays were written
with the text present. None of these undergraduates had taken more than
two semesters of college-level English courses.

Essays were analyzed with respect to the number of clauses they
contained. We sought to characterize the content of the essays with
respect to the degree to which they reflected a literal stance, an interpretive
stance, or both. Accordingly, we categorized each clause as reflecting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Essay writing instruction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Plot</td>
<td>What happened in this story? Use evidence from the text to support your claim.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme</td>
<td>Discuss the theme of the text using evidence from the story.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Argument    | Critics often claim that this short-story is a political satire warning us of the dangers of
           | letting “Big Brother” get out of control whereas others believe it is a story about human potential. Which do you think is the better interpretation? Use evidence from the text to support your claims. |
| Ambiguous   | What is this story about? Use evidence from the text to support your claim.                 |


Table 17.1 Four essay-writing instructions used in Harrison Bergeron study

one of the following: Verbatim copy of presented text; Paraphrase of presented text; Connection among ideas explicit in the text (text-based inferences); and inferences that were derived from the text but that went beyond what was stated to posit some form of message, symbolic meaning, moral, or generalization about the human condition (global/thematic inferences). The difference between text-based and global/thematic inferences corresponds to the distinctions discussed earlier in this chapter regarding the kinds of inferences reflective of literal versus interpretive stances. Verbatim, paraphrase, and text-based inferences were taken as indicative of a literal stance toward the text; global/thematic inferences were taken as indicative of an interpretive stance toward the text.

Consistent with predictions, participants in the plot instruction
wrote essays that reflected a literal stance toward the text whereas those
in the argument and Theme conditions wrote essays that reflected an
interpretive stance. Table 17.2 provides the evidence for this claim,
displaying the mean number of clauses per essay for each condition,
the mean proportion of inferences to total clauses, and the mean proportion
of global/thematic inferences to total inferences. Although essays
were longest in the Plot condition, only about one-fourth of the clauses
were inferences, and of the inferences only 8 percent were global.
In other words, essays in this condition predominantly consisted of
verbatim or paraphrased parts of the presented text. In contrast, in the
Argument condition, almost 70 percent of the clauses were inferences,
and of these, 55 percent were global/thematic. The trend for the Theme
condition is similar to that of the Argument condition. The lower portion
of Box 17.2 provides representative essays from the Argument condition.
Interestingly, participants in the ambiguous condition included a
higher proportion of inferences than in the Plot condition, but of these
inferences, almost 80 percent were text-based inferences.
Table 17.2 Length and composition of essays produced in the four task instruction conditions for Harrison Bergeron

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task instruction condition</th>
<th>Total clauses</th>
<th>Proportion of inference clauses to total clauses</th>
<th>Proportion of global inference clauses to total inferences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Plot</td>
<td>M 22.16</td>
<td>SD 5.46</td>
<td>M 0.26 SD 0.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambiguous</td>
<td>M 17.64</td>
<td>SD 7.56</td>
<td>M 0.49 SD 0.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argument</td>
<td>M 14.52</td>
<td>SD 5.81</td>
<td>M 0.69 SD 0.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>M 12.08</td>
<td>SD 3.49</td>
<td>M 0.56 SD 0.22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These data indicate that with instructions that reflect a more interpretive bent, participants were more likely to include interpretive statements in their essays than when the instructions emphasized what happened in the story. Box 17.2 provides representative essays produced by a subject in the Plot condition, and two essays produced by subjects in the Argument condition, the first choosing the Big Brother interpretation and the second the human potential interpretation. In addition to the obvious length differences, the Plot condition essay recounts the gist of the events in the story and gives us no information about the reader's response to it or what the reader thinks it means. In contrast, the essays from the Argument condition say very little about the actual story events. Rather, they focus on providing evidence for the interpretation they favor. When they reference the story, they are selective and incorporate events that illustrate a claim they are making about the interpretation they chose.

The results of this study indicate that "literary novices" do make inferences related to moral, philosophical principles and can organize their reasoning in support of an interpretive claim. However, they only performed in this way under certain instructional conditions that directed them to this type of response. When the prompt was ambiguous and used the more neutral language "What was this story about?" responses tended toward the literal to a greater degree than toward the interpretive. We hypothesize that literary novices adopt this literalist stance as the "default" mode of response, whereas literary experts take the interpretive stance as the default mode of response. These "defaults" may be related to differences between literary expert and novices in their standards of coherence for literary texts, with experts defining standards that encompass interpretive inferences whereas the standards of literary novices are at the situation model level only (cf. van den Broek, Bohn-Gettler, Kendeou, Carlson, and White, 2011).

Box 17.2 Representative essays for each condition

**PLOT CONDITION**

Basically what occurs is that we have jumped into the future. Everyone is equal by giving them handicaps or changing their appearance. There are 2 main characters named George and Hazel who are watching the TV. At first the TV show ballerinas, which of some of them have handicaps. Hazel talks to George about how beautiful the ballerinas danced. Then all of a sudden there is a news flash about a man who escaped from jail. They showed this boy at 7 feet tall and he also had many handicaps. A little bit after this the boy named Harrison Bergeron burst into the studio and called himself the emperor [sic] and took all of his handicaps off. He then found his empress in one of the head ballerinas and rips her handicaps off as well. He then says to her, "Shall we show the people the meaning of the word dance?" He tells the musicians to play and also takes their handicaps off. While the emperor and empress are dancing the handicap general bursts in and kills them with a 12 gauge. Then the screen goes blank. George walks back in the room and sees Hazel crying. He asks her why she is crying and she replies something happened on the TV.

She couldn't remember then it ended.

**ARGUMENT CONDITION**

**Big brother**

I believe that this is a story about letting "Big Brother" get out of control. The fact that in the first sentences it brings up God, law, and equality almost sets the idea that this is a political message. The story talks about George being "required by law" to wear the transmitter at all times. This is an example of government interference with people's individuality. The fact that people in this story are actually being "dumbed down" by the government and the fact that they are afraid to rebel, shows a government that is in all control. I view the handicap weights around there [sic] necks as a metaphor for, government pressure on their shoulders. I also think this story is showing us through Harrison that people have the power to rise up, but are constrained by government power.

**HUMAN POTENTIAL**

I think it's more so a story of human potential. As time progresses human advancement and technology continue to grow and develop and would be no surprise if this day were to come about. I believe society is often so intent to try to control mankind and life that the well-being and ending effect are often not the first thought. This story displays that through the idea of making everyone equal in each way. It is an unrealistic idea and is more prone to result in a less well-off society. It's good to have some people better than others in some way because it drives people to work hard to try
Box 17.2 (cont.)
to become better. If everyone is the same it gives no room for creativity or change and unintentionally may cue the demise of civilization. Human potential wouldn’t exist if everyone were prohibited from having their own ideas. This story shows that with such unbearable control there is a high likelihood of revolt and would most likely result in return to the way society was before the change.

Study 2: spontaneous and prompted processing as sources of evidence for an interpretive stance

The findings of the task manipulation study were based on an off-line essay product and did not tap the online processes in which readers engaged during reading and writing of the essay. The second study we report used think-aloud methodology as a window into the kinds of spontaneous processing in which undergraduates engaged while reading a short story. The think aloud was followed by a series of specific questions that asked for a summary of the story, and whether and what symbols participants noticed in the story. Responses were oral and the story was present throughout the think-aloud and question-answering portions of the study.

In this study, twenty undergraduates read an adapted version of the short story Butterfly by James Hanley (991 words) and another twenty read Eleven by Sandra Cisneros (1,266 words) (see Appendix A). They received instructions to read out loud and say what they were thinking at the end of each sentence. After reading, participants were asked to summarize the story and to answer a series of questions, two of which specifically probed for symbol identification and interpretation.

1. Symbol identification prompt: Sometimes stories have symbols or ideas, events, objects, or characters in them that actually stand for something else. Now I would like you to look carefully through the story you just read and tell me where that might be going on in this story. What makes you think that?


Think-aloud statements were parsed and coded for type of processing including elaborations, paraphrases, evaluations, comprehension problems, and successes (Wolfe and Goldman, 2005). Additionally, think-aloud statements were coded for mention of symbols or other rhetorical devices and for interpretive inferences. Interpretive inferences were categorized as thematic if they referenced specifics of the story or meaning of a symbol in the story context, or as global if they were stated more generally. If think-aloud statements mentioned the author or rules of notice, this was also noted. Summaries were scored with respect to whether they "retold" the story or elaborated upon it.

Responses to the Symbol Identification prompt were categorized by the symbol named and whether the reasons provided reflected thematic or global inferences. Similarly, responses to the second prompt were coded as thematic or global using the same criteria as described for the think-aloud inferences. Examples of thematic and global inferences are provided in Table 17.3.

The types of processing activities that occurred during the think alouds indicated that approximately 60 percent of the statements for each story were elaborations, with the majority being self-explanations. Approximately 20 percent were paraphrases and less than 5 percent were reports of comprehension problems. This profile is consistent with prior reports of the kinds of processing in which students engage when reading short narratives (Magliano and Millis, 2003).

Consistent with the findings of Graves and Frederiksen (1991) and Zeitz (1994), and with the Plot and Ambiguous conditions of our Task Manipulation study, there was little evidence of spontaneous interpretive inferences unless participants were specifically prompted. Less than 1 percent of the statements made during the think aloud were interpretations. Figure 17.1 indicates that the majority of participants failed to make any interpretive inferences in the think aloud during their initial reading, and interpretations were virtually nonexistent in the summaries. However, when prompted to identify symbols, over 70 percent of the participants explained the basis for their identification with interpretive inferences. Finally, when provided with a symbol and asked to interpret it, all subjects provided an interpretive inference.

A content analysis of the symbols named suggests that these literary novices were guided by at least some of the conventions reflected in Rabinowitz's (1987) rules of notice. That is, when specifically asked if they had noticed any symbols in the story, nearly all participants (90 percent for "The Butterfly" and 95 percent for "Eleven") provided a candidate symbol, and these converged on a small set of concepts in each story. Figure 17.2 provides the data.

Interestingly, in responding to the second part of the symbol identification prompt, participants did not voice rules of notice; that is, they did not make statements such as "Butterfly is a symbol because it is the title." Rather, they discussed the interpretive meaning of the named symbol in
Table 17.3 Examples of responses classified as thematic or global interpretive inferences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Interpretive Inference</th>
<th>Butterfly</th>
<th>Eleven</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thematic</td>
<td>I think the caterpillar reflected Cassidy's situation. The caterpillar was his (Cassidy's) best friend and gateway into the world. The caterpillar - I thought that was Cassidy. Like a caterpillar is a pretty much an insect and it turns our into a beautiful butterfly so right now Cassidy is growing - he's being morphed into something else and later on when he's an adult he'll become a wise one. The caterpillar symbolizes happiness and hope for Cassidy. I think it signified the life that Cassidy wanted to have and that he is being deprived of.</td>
<td>The sweater would be a symbol of her bad birthday feeling eleven. I think the red sweater was kinda maybe symbolizing her growing up and having to deal with things that might make her feel uncomfortable, and she just has to deal with it even though it's a day like her birthday and kind of ruining it. The sweater I have a feeling was her becoming eleven, her maturing and, uh, she wasn't ready for it. This story is about the oppression of the main character. The sweater was, by her putting on the sweater she's physically giving up to the teacher. I think that saying 102 - I think that could be a symbol for [what] she wants to be - not just older in number, but have more experience and be wiser. I think it means that she just wants to just push away this year basically - like she doesn't want to be eleven she's pushing that away. I guess as you get older you kind of get away from cake but it still makes you realize that it's your birthday. So in a sense age is only a number; you're as old as you feel you are. (Sweater) It's a symbol of power. This story is about how people have to struggle for power in the face of oppression. You still have to move on and just get over and go on with life. I think it's just the feeling of wanting to just give up and maybe just run away from everything and, but you can't like you have to address it and you can try to get it away, but still no matter what you do it's still yours.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global</td>
<td>Kids have a hope like growing up but sometimes it gets crushed. The caterpillar represents growing up. Caterpillar represents freedom. I think the caterpillar is just like a stage in either like, well, like it's life and it symbolizes for like people's life where you're like starting to grow.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 17.1 Percentage of participants (N = 20) who made interpretive statements during specific phases of the study.

Figure 17.2 Percentage of participants identifying indicated concepts as symbols.

the story (thematic interpretation) or with respect to the world outside the story (global interpretation). The percentages for each type of interpretive inference provided as a reason for identifying particular symbols within each story are shown in columns 2 and 4 in Table 17.4. Furthermore, when specifically provided with a symbol (caterpillar for “The Butterfly” and sweater for “Eleven”), all participants provided interpretive inferences. Thus, when the question identified a symbol for participants and asked them what it meant in the story, everyone
Table 17.4 Percentages of interpretive inferences for “The Butterfly” and “Eleven”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Butterfly</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prompted for</td>
<td>Prompted for</td>
<td>Prompted for</td>
<td>Prompted for</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>symbol</td>
<td>interpretation</td>
<td>symbol</td>
<td>interpretation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thematic</td>
<td>76.47</td>
<td>38.10</td>
<td>66.67</td>
<td>54.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global</td>
<td>23.53</td>
<td>61.90</td>
<td>33.33</td>
<td>45.45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Percentages are based on a total of seventeen statements from fourteen participants for “The Butterfly” and eighteen statements from fourteen participants for “Eleven.”

The results of this study indicate that during initial processing of these stories, participants were focused largely on constructing a coherent textbase and situation model that reflected a coherent plot. Explanatory inferences filled in gaps needed to connect the events of the story. It was not until they were subsequently prompted to think about symbolic interpretation of characters, objects, and events in the story that participants showed any evidence that they were able to process the information at that level. Responses to the prompts indicated that they were indeed able to identify symbols and reason about their meaning, suggesting that they do indeed have at least some knowledge of literary conventions that signal important elements of a text, however tacit this may be. What novices may be less aware of is that authors use these conventions to convey their message and that complete representations of literary texts include connections to themes and universals about the human condition such as are reflected in what we call here global interpretive inferences.

Concluding comments

Overall, results of our initial studies into literary interpretation on the part of “literacy novices” suggest that undergraduate literary novices have some knowledge of the conventions that authors assume in their readers and that literary experts make explicit when asked to respond to a literary text. That this knowledge only begins to appear in novices when they are specifically prompted suggests that they may have a different understanding of what it means to comprehend a literary text than do experts. As van den Broek, Goldman and colleagues have suggested (Goldman et al., 1996; van den Broek et al., 2001; van den Broek et al., 2011), these differences in what it means to comprehend may be reflected in the standards of coherence that literary experts apply when reading text they define as literature. Literary novices, on the other hand, may hold the same standards of coherence for literature as they do for other texts and may be “content” with a coherent representation of the basic plot elements. Alternatively, literary novices may, in some sense, know that comprehension of literary texts includes arriving at some message or point beyond the plot and characters, but they may be less apt to or able than experts to process at these multiple levels on initial passes through literary texts. Indeed, one aspect of literary text processing that may be overlooked in empirical studies of literature is the need to revisit a text multiple times to really get the point and be able to access and organize attended-to elements of text into meaningful patterns that convey the subtext or duplicity of meaning that is said to distinguish literary text from nonliterary. The findings we presented in this chapter, along with other emerging research of ours and others, suggests that there are productive starting points for enhancing “text comprehension instruction” to build on the nascent literary bent we have begun to explore in novices.

However, as we argued earlier in this chapter, rather than characterizing the texts as literary or nonliterary, it seems more productive to focus on the conditions that support adopting interpretive stances, as well as literal, toward texts. Adopting an interpretive stance fosters attention beyond the semantic and syntactic to the prosodic and pragmatic aspects of texts because all of these have potential significance for interpretive inferences that build toward the point or message of a particular literary work. Representing these aspects of meaning implies augmenting theories of single-text comprehension that posit largely semantic situation models and giving serious attention to how information about language use, theme, and author are represented not only with respect to the specific text in which they occur but to the formation of interpretive frameworks that are useful across multiple literary texts. What is needed is a literary instantiation of intertextual representational models analogous to those proposed for other disciplinary domains (e.g., Goldman, 2004; Goldman and Bloome, 2005; Perfetti, Rouet, and Brit, 1999; Rouet 2006; Rouet and Brit, 2011). “Nodes” in literary intertextual models would capture knowledge of genres within, for example, the narrative genre (e.g., tragedy or satire) and the various character and plot types that constitute them as well as themes specific to individual texts and their abstraction to principles of motivated human action, and universals of the human condition.
REFERENCES


Appendix A  Stories used in Study 2:

“The Butterfly” and “Eleven”

By James Hanley

The Butterfly

Brother Timothy’s robed made a strange noise as he strode up and down the passage. The priest’s face was red, his mouth twitched, and his fingers pulled nervously at the buttons upon his robe. One could see at a glance that he was angry. He muttered to himself, staring at a strong wooden door before him.

He simply could not understand the boy. Every time the name Cassidy came into his mind, the blood mounted to his forehead. It was the boy’s silence that was the enraging thing, his silence! And what was even worse was how happy the boy seemed. Curse him for his silence and happiness. The boy must have no conscience at all.

Brother Timothy stopped and stared at the wooden door. He listened. Not a sound. The boy might be standing behind it now, maybe thinking that he would be let out. Brother Timothy laughed then. That boy would not be let out until he explained himself, until he broke his silence. How to break it down then? Yes, one must try to think.

The priest drew a key from his pocket, opened the door, and went inside. The boy was sitting on the bed. He looked up at the Brother, but something in the other’s glance made him hurriedly drop his eyes again.

“Well, Cassidy!” said Brother Timothy, “Have you come to your senses yet?” The veins in his neck stood out. The silence galled him.

“Answer me, I tell you!” he shouted. But Cassidy did not speak.

“Look at me! Yesterday you missed mass, you and this other child Byrne. Did you ask permission to miss mass? Why were you truant? Why are you so unlike the others? And this silence! I will not stand it. You have the devil in you; it’s he who has trapped your tongue. But I’ll break you. Do you hear me? I ask you for the last time, why did you skip mass?”

Cassidy, a boy of twelve, looked up at the Brother. His lips moved, but he made no sound.

In fury, Brother Timothy struck him across the face.

Then Cassidy said slowly, “Brother Timothy, I told you yesterday.”
If silence had been poisonous, this was worse. ‘Is this how you think upon your conscience? Is this how you think out your explanation? Outrageous, boy! Give me that at once.’

‘But it’s only a caterpillar, Brother Timothy, a little green one. Soon it’ll be a butterfly. It’s so green and soft, and it crawls up my finger just like it knew me. Please, Brother—I—while I was sitting here all by myself it made me happy, I liked having it, I—’

‘How dare you!’ Brother Timothy grabbed the box and turned out the caterpillar. It fell to the floor and slowly began to crawl.

‘You have no right to skip mass and you have no right to be happy or anything else. Do you hear me?’ and with a quick movement of his broad foot Brother Timothy trod on the insect and crushed out its life. Cassidy looked up at the Brother. Then he burst into tears.

Eleven

By Sandra Cisneros

What they don’t understand about birthdays and what they never tell you is that when you’re eleven, you’re also ten, and nine, and eight, and seven, and six, and five, and four, and three, and two, and one. And when you wake up on your eleventh birthday you expect to feel eleven, but you don’t. You open your eyes and everything’s just like yesterday, only it’s today. And you don’t feel eleven at all. You feel like you’re still ten. And you are—underneath the year that makes you eleven.

Like some days you might say something stupid, and that’s the part of you that’s still ten. Or maybe some days you might need to sit on your mama’s lap because you’re scared, and that’s the part of you that’s five. And maybe one day when you’re all grown up maybe you will need to cry like if you’re three, and that’s okay. That’s what I tell Mama when she’s sad and needs to cry. Maybe she’s feeling three.

Because the way you grow old is kind of like an onion or like the rings inside a tree trunk or like my little wooden dolls that fit one inside the other, each year inside the next one. That’s how being eleven years old is.

You don’t feel eleven. Not right away. It takes a few days, weeks even, sometimes even months before you say eleven when they ask you. And you don’t feel smart eleven, nor until you’re almost twelve. That’s the way it is.

Only today I wish I didn’t have only eleven years rattling inside me like pennies in a tin Band-Aid box. Today I wish I was one hundred and two instead of eleven because if I was one hundred and two I’d have known what to say when Mrs. Price put the red sweater on my desk. I would’ve
known how to tell her it wasn’t mine instead of just sitting there with that look on my face and nothing coming out of my mouth.

"Whose is this?" Mrs. Price says, and she holds the red sweater up in the air for all the class to see. "Whose? It’s been sitting in the coatroom for a month."

"Not mine," says everybody. "Not me."

"It has to belong to somebody," Mrs. Price keeps saying, but nobody can remember. It’s an ugly sweater with red plastic buttons and a collar and sleeves all stretched out like you could use it for a jump rope. It’s maybe a thousand years old and even if it belonged to me I wouldn’t say so.

Maybe because I’m skinny, maybe because she doesn’t like me, that stupid Sylvia Saldivar says, "I think it belongs to Rachel." An ugly sweater like that, all raggedy and old, but Mrs. Price believes her. Mrs. Price takes the sweater and puts it right on my desk, but when I open my mouth nothing comes out.

"That’s not, I don’t, you’re not … Not mine," I finally say in a little voice that was maybe me when I was four.

"Of course it’s yours," Mrs. Price says. "I remember you wearing it once."

Because she’s older and the teacher, she’s right and I’m not.

Not mine, not mine, not mine, but Mrs. Price is already turning to page thirty-two, and math problem number four. I don’t know why but all of a sudden I’m feeling sick inside, like the part of me that’s three wants to come out of my eyes, only I squeeze them shut tight and bite down on my teeth real hard and try to remember today I am eleven, eleven. Mama is making a cake for me tonight, and when Papa comes home everybody will sing Happy birthday, happy birthday to you.

But when the sick feeling goes away and I open my eyes, the red sweater’s still sitting there like a big red mountain. I move the red sweater to the corner of my desk with my ruler. I move my pencil and books and eraser as far from it as possible. I even move my chair a little to the right.

Not mine; not mine; not mine.

In my head I’m thinking how long till luncheon, how long till I can take the red sweater and throw it over the school yard fence, or even leave it hanging on a parking meter, or bunch it up into a little ball and toss it in the alley. Except when math period-ends Mrs. Price says loud and in front of everybody, "Now Rachel, that’s enough," because she sees I’ve shoved the red sweater to the tippy-tip corner of my desk and it’s hanging all over the edge like a waterfall, but I don’t care.

"Rachel," Mrs. Price says. She says it like she’s getting mad. "You put that sweater on right now and no more nonsense."

But it’s not —

"Now!" Mrs. Price says.

This is when I wish I wasn’t eleven, because all the years inside of me—ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two and one—are pushing at the back of my eyes when I put one arm through one sleeve of the sweater that smells like cottage cheese, and then the other arm through the other and stand there with my arms apart like if the sweater hurts me and it does, all itchy and full of germs that aren’t even mine.

That’s when everything I’ve been holding in since this morning, since when Mrs. Price put the sweater on my desk, finally lets go, and all of a sudden I’m crying in front of everybody. I wish I was invisible but I’m not. I’m eleven and it’s my birthday today and I’m crying like I’m three in front of everybody. I put my head down on the desk and bury my face in my stupid clown-sweater arms. My face all hot and spit coming out of my mouth because I can’t stop the little animal noises from coming out of me, until there aren’t any more tears left in my eyes, and it’s just my body shaking like when you have the hiccups, and my whole head hurts like when you drink milk too fast.

But the worst part is right before the bell rings for lunch. That stupid Phyllis Lopez, who is even dumber than Sylvia Saldivar, says she remembers the red sweater is hers! I take it off right away and give it to her, only Mrs. Price pretends like everything’s okay.

Today I am eleven. There’s cake Mama’s making for tonight, and when Papa comes home from work we’ll eat it. There’ll be candles and presents and everybody will sing Happy birthday, happy birthday to you, Rachel, only it’s too late.

I’m eleven today. I’m eleven, ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, and one, but I wish I was one hundred and two. I wish I was anything but eleven, because I want today to be far away already, far away like a runaway balloon, like a tiny o in the sky, so tiny-tiny you have to close your eyes to see it.