

How students in Eritrea and Norway make sense of literature

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Summary

This study is about how people make sense of literature. More specifically, it explores how Eritrean literature in English is read by students at two institutions of teacher education, one in Norway and one in Eritrea. It is therefore a comparison of two interpretive communities. One underlying assumption is that culture, especially how national identity is constructed, maintained and challenged, influences the discursive positions and interpretive strategies available to readers. The students' responses are analysed in the light of their national cultures and the social, educational and institutional contexts that they share. A second assumption is that each individual response cannot be completely accounted for by these factors. Readers, then, give meaning to texts, and texts achieve meaning first when they are read. But a text limits the coherent interpretations available to a reader.

There are few qualitative comparative studies about how people make sense of literature, and this in itself is a rationale for this study. What comparative studies there are typically organise respondents by nationality, but refer only briefly to their culture and context. An important component of this study is therefore a methodological discussion of what a comparative study of nationally defined groups of readers entails. A further motivation is that there is currently virtually no research in the humanities in Eritrea.

The bulk of the material is provided by twelve Eritrean and ten Norwegian students of English, who wrote about three Eritrean literary texts: a fable, a short prose narrative and a play. They also answered a questionnaire about their experience and expectations of literature. To contextualise the literary texts I review the political and aesthetic space of literature in Eritrea, and provide an overview of Eritrean literature in English.

Both groups of students reported finding fiction useful because it expanded their horizons and gave them an opportunity to learn about other cultures. Unlike the Norwegian students, most of the students in Eritrea looked to literature first and foremost with the expectation that it should contribute to upholding a moral society and their own moral integrity.

The students in Eritrea were fairly consistent in being assertive in response to all three texts. Unlike the students in Norway, they were confident of having found the meaning of the texts they read, using strategies apparently developed through encounters with oral literature, the literature of which they had had most experience prior to their studies. The students in Norway were more likely to point out the individuality of their responses, with the possibility of there being other interpretations. The responses of the two groups were most similar in regard to a previously unfamiliar literary text about young people, where both were concerned with the importance of friendship and the innocence of childhood. They responded most differently to the nationalist play *The Other War*. The students in Eritrea consistently reproduced a national narrative template which was not available to the students in Norway, whose preferred interpretive strategy was to offer an understanding in terms of the characters' interaction, emotions and earlier experiences. This strategy, which they brought to all three texts, did not necessitate an understanding of social and political contexts, nor a moral standpoint.

Student texts provided a rich material and they were well-suited to a research situation where transparency was an important consideration. A broader understanding of context than is found in most earlier studies of reading has proved conceptually valuable in accounting for the strategies and discursive positions of the two interpretive communities.

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Picture 1 courtesy of Svein Foss, Picture 2 courtesy of Susan Nacey

Acronyms

BMA	British Military Administration (in Eritrea from 1951 to 1960)
ECTS	European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System
EIT	Eritrean Institute of Technology
ELF	Eritrean Liberation Front
EPLF	Eritrean People's Liberation Front
ESL	English as a second language
HUC	Hedmark University College (<i>Høgskolen i Hedmark</i>)
LMS	learning management system (such as Its learning and Fronter)
NCA	Norwegian Church Aid (<i>Kirkens Nødhjelp</i>)
NGO	non-government organisation (such as Norwegian Church Aid)
NORAD	Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation
NSD	Norsk Samfunnsvitenskapelig Datatjeneste (Norwegian Social Science Data Services)
NUEYS	National Union for Eritrean Youth and Students
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
PFDJ	People's Front for Democracy and Justice
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNHDI	United Nations Human Development Index

Glossary

the Armed Struggle	EPLF name for the war between Ethiopia and Eritrea, 1961-1991
<i>the Derg(ue)</i>	the name used in Eritrea for the Co-ordinating Committee of the Armed Forces, the Police and the Territorial Army of the Ethiopian government 1974-1991
<i>kebele</i>	an urban administrative neighbourhood council under the Derg
the Martyrs	EPLF name for fighters who died in the Armed Struggle
<i>netsela</i>	thin white cloth with embroidered borders that many Eritrean women use to cover their hair and upper body
Sahel	mountainous area in north-western Eritrea from which the EPLF organised their campaign after 1979

Note on Tigrinya names and spelling

Eritreans (and Ethiopians) have a different culture of naming to the Norwegian and Western culture. A person's second name is a patronymic – the first name of the father. People in Eritrea are now required to add the first name of the grandfather after the name of the father. Thus the name Yohannes Ghebremichael Kifle is made up of a given first name, followed by the name of Yohannes' father Ghebremichael and his grandfather Kifle. This applies to women as well, who retain their names after they have married. There is no morphological marker as there is in *Sigurdsdottir* and *bin* Abdullah. Children are thus named so that they can be identified in relation to their father, their siblings and their cousins, but not in relation to their mother.

In some Western academic writing Eritrean authors and scholars are referred to in the Eritrean tradition, using their given name and patronymic, and then referred to by their given name only. Referring to somebody, even the president himself, by just his given name, is respectful. A patronymic alone would in Eritrea be misunderstood, referring not to the person in question, whether woman or man, but to their father. Nonetheless, I have chosen to follow this practice, using just the patronymic, and representing it as though it were a surname, or family name. I do so to align my text with the way Eritrean authors are usually represented in library catalogues and academic bibliographies. It is not a comfortable alignment, and can perhaps be compared with how inappropriate it would feel, both in real life or in an academic paper, to use “Bert” and “Stan” to refer to Umberto Eco and Stanley Fish.

Another point to note is that Tigrinya names for people or places, indeed even the word ‘Tigrinya’ itself, occur with different spellings. The names have a standard phonic orthography in Tigrinya script, but there is no standard orthography in English. One thing is that the same name is spelt differently by different people. More confusing is the common practice that the same person can write his or her own name in different ways: sometimes Haille writes his name with only one ‘l’; Tesfai might spell his name Tesfey, and so on. This applies not only to the students in this study and to the authors themselves, but to how one and the same student may refer to a particular character in a literary text, spelling the character's name in several ways, none of which need be the same as the way it is spelt in the printed text. I have retained the students' spelling of names throughout.

1 Introduction

1.1 Research questions

The questions that motivate this study have to do with how we make sense of the world and the role that literature plays in this process. I am concerned both with how we put our cultures and contexts to use in making sense of literature, and also with how making sense of literature contributes to our understanding of our and other people's cultures and contexts. To be more specific, this is a study of how literature is read in two distinct national cultures and contexts: an Eritrean and a Norwegian classroom. The purpose of this enquiry is to explore

how Eritrean literature in English is read in Norway and Eritrea.

I have done so by looking at how a group of Eritrean students and a group of Norwegian students respond to the same three Eritrean texts. I ask what light can be shed on the creation of meaning, by considering the responses of the two groups in relation to their respective contexts and cultures. This study is therefore a contribution to ongoing debates about the part that context plays in what we say and how we understand the world. In its approach and analytical perspective it has, I believe, something to say about how the larger contexts to which students belong interact with the academic literacies of the institutions of education that they attend.

This work is an empirical study in two countries, one of which, Eritrea, is barely represented in humanities research. I have been concerned to discuss methodological issues of appropriateness, productivity, comparison and ethics with a view to developing a more general understanding of what is involved in a qualitative study involving two such different countries. The objective of exploring sustainable and ethically acceptable methods is necessitated by the paucity of academic research about and in Eritrea with regard to how literature is read. Bernth Lindfors, who has worked extensively with African literature, once wrote that "a little knowledge may be a dangerous thing, but it can also be a delightful thing, leading to insights that otherwise might never occur" (Lindfors, 1995:80). I have shared his delight in my exploration of the reception of Eritrean literature.

More unexpected than the paucity of relevant research in Eritrea is the fact that there are so few comparative studies of literary reception from other countries. This may have to do with comparative studies of reading being a complex research field, a point both made and demonstrated by earlier studies (Greaney & Neuman, 1990). To find out how Eritrean literature is read in the contexts of two national cultures requires both an exploration of what 'literature', 'national culture' and 'context' denote, and a thorough presentation of the two contexts where

this research was carried out.

As I addressed the research questions, it soon became apparent that an acquaintance with the more general *literary* context in Eritrea was necessary to an understanding of the literary texts in their time and place. There being no comprehensive presentation of Eritrean literature in English, I have attempted to identify everything written by Eritrean authors that is available in English, and that can, albeit somewhat cautiously, be termed ‘literature’. In so doing I became increasingly curious as to why it was these particular texts that appeared in, or were translated into, English. Hence what started as a survey became an investigation into the political context that authorised this body of literature. Adapting a question from Peter McDonald (2009), these issues can be usefully investigated by asking “What is the space of the literary in Eritrea?”.

1.2 Background

The start of the relationship between Norway and Eritrea can be dated to 1949, when Norway, as a member of the UN Eritrea Commission, voted for a confederation of Eritrea with Ethiopia (Smith-Simonsen, 2006). More important for today’s Norwegian-Eritrean relations is that left-wing political organisations in Norway came into contact with the Eritrean liberation movement towards the end of the 1970s. Norwegian Church Aid, one of the few non-government organisations still allowed to maintain a presence in Eritrea at the time of writing, became involved in Eritrea in 1977 (Smith-Simonsen, 2006:124).¹ Smith-Simonsen details how networks of solidarity with non-government organisations in Norway were built up over time, and how through them the Norwegian state became increasingly involved with the Eritrean liberation cause. Some years after independence, in 1996, Eritrea became one of Norway’s main bilateral partners, but the war with Ethiopia in 1998-2000 and the subsequent deterioration of the political and human rights situation meant that Norway became less enthusiastic about this partnership. An initiative in 2003 to involve a Norwegian institution of teacher education with a new programme for teacher education in Eritrea was therefore put on hold for a year and a half, before Hedmark University College (HUC) was given the go-ahead to collaborate with the College of Education at the Eritrean Institute of Technology (EIT) in May 2005. In the period 2005-2007 I was involved in this NORAD-funded project, whose purpose was to facilitate curriculum review and staff development at EIT. The idea of exploring systematically how students understand Eritrean literature emerged during this project.

¹ In its Country Programme Plan 2005-2009 for Eritrea, Norwegian Church Aid (NCA) writes that “all attempts to carry out civil society type activities are considered to be subversive criminal acts against the state (NGO proclamation, 2005). All NGOs are instructed to work only with government agencies and within their priorities” (2007:2). Nonetheless NCA has plans for working in Eritrea until 2015, “as long as our church partners and the local population strongly urge us to stay, we will do so in solidarity with the people” (Benedicte Larsen, pc 25.11.09, my translation).

Gaim Kibreab says that both in-country and outsider researchers require a permit, that it is nearly impossible for social scientists to obtain such a permit, and that there is no government authority mandated to grant them (Kibreab, 2009:10). The possibility of access to an unresearched field was therefore in itself a motivating factor. Tricia Redeker Hepner writes that “ethnography is needed perhaps nowhere so urgently as it is in Eritrea today. As access to information and the country itself becomes increasingly restricted, it is vital to record and reconstruct people’s actual encounters with the past, present, and future” (Hepner, 2009:xi). I would not go so far as her in insisting that the need for ethnography in Eritrea is more urgent than in other countries that are also relatively inaccessible to outside researchers, and where conditions for research are difficult for in-country academics, but Eritrea is certainly an extreme instance of these constraints.

Hepner’s motivation was to counter what she terms “official, homogenizing nationalist narratives that euphemize and justify the tragedies of war, political repression, forced migration, and human rights abuses” (2009: xii). This is the tenor of much recent writing about Eritrea from outside the country, but I have tried to steer clear of writing from a particular political position, despite widespread international condemnation of current developments in Eritrea. Although I acknowledge the intensity and importance of this debate, my project is to find out what young people can and do say in the public spaces offered by literature at two particular institutions. Nonetheless it is important to emphasise that regardless of topic, conditions for research in Eritrea were curtailed by the political situation – some questions could not be asked, some methods could not be used, some circumstances cannot be detailed, some putative explanations cannot be written and some sources cannot be cited.

1.3 The material

The students in Eritrea were taking a Bachelor’s degree in English and may well be assigned to teaching positions on completion of their studies. The students in Norway were studying English at the Department of Teacher Education and Natural Science at Hedmark University College, and many of them had already chosen to become teachers. An obvious choice was to involve students taking a course in African literature as part of their intermediate level English studies, since I have taught this course biannually since 2002, and was to teach it again at the time when funding came through for this research project.

Altogether fifty students answered a questionnaire about their experience with and expectations of literature. Twenty-two of them – twelve in Eritrea and ten in Norway – also wrote about all three literary texts. What they wrote is the central material of this study, and it is these students on whom I have concentrated. The texts were the fable “The Monkey and the

Crocodile”, the short prose piece “Anisino” and the play *The Other War*. In each country I gave the students one of the texts at a time, and immediately afterwards they completed a writing task based on that text. The presentation and interpretation of the student texts sees the students not first and foremost as individuals, but as members of two groups. They are choirs, singing in two particular classrooms. They are regarded as two interpretive communities, whose reception of the literary texts is constituted by and constitutive of the sociocultural contexts in which they arise: the classroom and the institution, as well as the broader educational, demographic, linguistic, historical and political contexts. I have identified each student by location: (E) indicates Eritrea, (N) Norway. Each student has in addition a randomly allocated number, for example E7 or N2.

The letter of informed consent, the questionnaires, two of the three literary texts, the written texts that the twenty-two students wrote in response to them and an overview of Eritrean literature in English, are to be found in the appendices.

1.4 The role of literature

The cultural anthropologist Fredric Barth once wrote:

If we want to understand something of other people’s lives, we have to accept *their* perceptions of what is important in life; we must listen to them and their priorities. [...] about justice and belief and love and death and violence, on freedom and what they count as personal fulfilment. (Barth, 1991:8, my translation)

If we do indeed “want to understand something of other people’s lives”, why bother with literature? I can begin to answer this question by quoting a proverb from one of the peoples of Eritrea, the Bilen: “He who desires success badly would not hesitate to plough at night”. It expresses, apparently, the Bilen people’s suspicion of excessive ambition, for it is difficult, if not impossible, to plough during the night (Hamde, 1989:64). Living in Hedmark in Norway, where the short growing season means that farmers not infrequently plough by the light of their tractor headlamps, my assumption on first reading this proverb was quite the opposite – that it expressed admiration for someone who is prepared to work hard to achieve his goals. Proverbs are a literary form that encodes culture in a particularly compact format, but all literary forms encode the ways in which people make sense of their world. By studying cultural expressions, and how they are received, one can come some way towards understanding “something of other people’s lives”. How a person makes use of literature can tell us a great deal about how that person makes sense of the world. When students respond to the particularities of a literary text they can articulate values and attitudes that might not surface when they think about their own everyday lives, and which might not be activated by more generally formulated questions about

their attitudes and values.

That these arguments are of pertinence to the study of literatures in the Horn of Africa is emphasized in one of the few longer secondary works about the literatures of the region:

Understanding the Horn of Africa through the literatures of its people is a road less taken by those in power or those who endeavour and hope to divine a better future. What we say about our immediate or distant neighbors through our stories, asides, riddles, fables, and in written prose fiction signals or at least alludes to how we perceive others and how we would like to be perceived. (Ahmed & Adera, 2008:15)

Ali Jimale Ahmed goes on to argue that more research is needed into the interstices between politics, memory, narrative, and imagination as they relate to the countries of the Horn.

1.5 Theory and approach

Thinking of theory as a way of exploring material, rather than as a way of answering questions, I use it to open up and develop an understanding of

- what reading and writing about literature involves (chapter 2)
- the terms ‘culture’, ‘nation’ and ‘context’ (chapter 4).

I also use theory in a narrower sense to provide an account of some features of the student texts, especially the positions that students assume in their own texts and how they relate to narrative structure. I use sociological, historical and political texts about Eritrea and Norway to describe the context in which the student texts arose. Also these texts express more or less explicit theories about what constitutes society, history and politics.

Yet strong and untheorised images also inform my approach. Often when I read something by an Eritrean student, I can see him, slender and soberly attentive, sharing a wooden desk with one or two co-students, leaving other desks empty. Through the open classroom door and unpaned, unshuttered windows I see the red-sanded campus stretching away in the heat. Similarly, when I read the work of a Norwegian student I can picture her, casual and friendly, seated at a horseshoe of Respatex tables with her drink and her papers spread about her. Beyond the high windows of the brightly lit classroom, I see bare trees, months of snow and a white picket fence.

After having gathered the material and articulated a methodology, I began the work of combining these resources to produce a transparent, accountable, relevant and plausible presentation of the material. It can be visualised as working at the centre of an inverted triangle (Figure 1). In one field are theories that pertain to nationhood, culture, literature and reading. In another field is contextual information about Eritrea and Norway, gathered from published sources, but also from anecdotes, opinions and stories that I have been told. Both these fields seem potentially infinite.

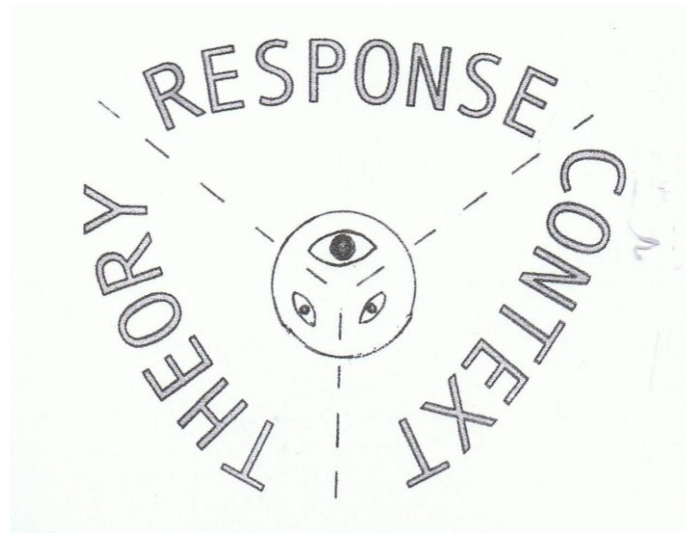


Figure 1: The research triangle

In the third, uppermost and finite field is the material elicited from the Eritrean and Norwegian students. Their texts were for some time the undivided focus of my attention, but gradually I could look at them and also have an eye to one or both of the adjacent fields. Finally I took my point of view in the middle of this triangle, with my attention swivelling between the three fields, sometimes straying too far from the centre, but trying always to return to it, and to make more porous the lines between the fields. In making sense of the texts, I found that the more I looked outwards, the more I saw. Yet I realize that everything that I have made sense of could have been understood differently. Indeed, it is one of the facts of life in interpretive research that other approaches and other theories might have been just as good, or even better.

1.6 The role of context

Olga Dysthe (1993), in a case study of three classrooms in the USA and Norway, argues for the importance of what goes on outside the classroom for understanding what she describes as “the dynamic interplay of contexts, academic tasks and students’ reactions”. But a broad holistic approach, she says, is “simply not feasible for just one researcher” (1993:14). I am aware that describing the context of culture of two nations is a perilous undertaking, but unlike Dysthe I believe that it is feasible. In the case of Norway, my immersion in a particular part of the national culture may mean that I tend to see the larger picture in the light of my local experience. In the case of Eritrea, drawing a context of culture is complicated by the polemical character of much that is written about the country. Yet though it is challenging to try to describe two such different nations, and Eritrea in particular, with a view to contextualising the written texts of students living in those nations, *not* to do so would be to leave untouched the overarching question that this study sets out to engage with, namely how national culture and shared context form the way we read literature. I believe it is better to try to address this

question, even if it means the answers are partial or occasionally misinformed, than not to ask the question at all.

1.7 A multidisciplinary study

Inasmuch as all the texts in this study are in English, it could arguably be said to be a study both in Eritrean and in English literature. It is a study of reception, not of literary criticism, and its primary focus is on how the Eritrean literary texts are understood by ‘ordinary’ readers in a classroom, or ‘empirical readers’, as Umberto Eco would call them (1994). However the study shares concerns with other academic fields, especially cultural and linguistic anthropology and sociology, in that I analyse the students’ reception of the literary texts in the light of their cultures and contexts.

In looking in detail at what the students ‘say’, and how they position themselves towards their reader, this study has drawn on theoretical insights from conversation analysis. Inasmuch as it is concerned with how students accept, overlook or negotiate the messages of social control and tradition that are encoded in the Eritrean literary texts, it can be read as a contribution to the concerns of identity and ideology that characterise cultural studies. Finally, this study deals with academic literacy, inasmuch as it “treats reading and writing as social practices that vary with context, culture, and genre” (Lea & Street, 2006:368). This means that it is concerned with institutional practices, with whose meaning counts, with different student experiences and expectations, and with issues of power outside the academic institutions.

1.8 Chapter by chapter

This first chapter has introduced the dissertation to its readers. A concluding chapter sums up and reflects on the answers that I can provide to the question that motivates this study, and reviews the methodological and theoretical foundations on which it builds. The rest of the thesis is divided into three parts: Part One: Theory and Method; Part Two: Context; and Part Three: Response. Parts Two and Three start with a word cloud generated by ‘wordle’² from the most frequently occurring lexical words in that part, visualizing the major concerns of these two parts, their different foci, and what they share.

Starting then with Part One: Theory and Method, Chapter 2 looks in a general, theoretical and predominantly Western way at how readers read literature, and writers write about it. In chapter 3 I provide an overview of some earlier studies of comprehension and literary reception, especially those with a comparative perspective, as well as studies of how people of different nations use academic discourse, before situating my own research in relation to them.

² www.wordle.net

A central concept is the polysemous ‘culture’, and in chapter 4 I work towards a functional definition that will allow me to relate ‘culture’ to ‘the nation’. I also explain how I use the pivotal concept of ‘context’. In chapter 5 I look at the approach, methods and analysis that underpin this study, as well as the ethical challenges that collecting and writing about the material involved.

A comparative perspective structures the presentation of Parts Two and Three. The overall pattern in Part Two is that a contextual domain of Eritrea is presented, followed by the equivalent contextual domain in Norway. The selection is based on the contribution these domains can make to an understanding of how the students responded to the literary texts. In Part Three the presentation moves to and fro between the two groups of respondents. I hope in this way to provide a plausible and comprehensible narrative that facilitates a comparative and contrastive perspective.

Part Two: Context has four chapters. Chapter 6 deals briefly with Eritrean and Norwegian history and demography, and devotes some time to describing issues of national identity and the political context in Eritrea, as well as looking at certain social practices in the two countries that relate to the themes of the three literary texts. Chapter 7 deals with the educational context, including a look at the language situation, and then chapter 8 reviews the literary background and expectations of the students, based on their answers to questionnaires, and looks at some of the challenges that I and the students met in working with learner Englishes. Chapter 9 is about the literary context in Eritrea, with a special focus on Eritrean literature published in English. I also review the functions of national literatures, and of Eritrean literature in particular, and ask who actually reads this literature. Part Three: Response deals with the classroom-based research that addresses the question this study sets out to investigate, namely how students respond to Eritrean literature in English. It is made up of chapters 10, 11 and 12, one for each of the three literary texts. Each chapter begins with a presentation of the literary text, and its place in its Eritrean context, before I enter the ‘interpretive triangle’ to make sense of how the students responded to it.

Part One: Theory and Method

2 Reading and responding to literature

2.1 An overview

In this chapter I consider issues that relate to how we read and respond to literature. Section 2.2 presents and expands on a table that shows the different ways that students can ‘read’ a text, and I concentrate particularly on ‘responsive’ reading, the way of reading that has been required of students in this study. In section 2.3 I consider whether being literature is an inherent quality of some texts, or a socioculturally designated category. The longest section is 2.4, which deals with various interrelated issues that have to do with how we make sense of literature. Finally, in 2.5, I formulate the position from which I have investigated how the students have read and responded to the three literary texts in this study.

2.2 What is reading?

2.2.1 *Many ways of reading*

I start this enquiry by asking how students read, for there is much to be gained by challenging the assumption that reading is a straightforward perceptual activity, and by starting my investigation with an overview of the various relationships between the eye, the page and the conceptualising intelligence. Table 1 shows a range of activities that are called reading. I am talking not only about reading strategies that the student deliberately chooses, but also about habits and adaptive skills developed in the course of classroom encounters with literature and other texts. Most of these ways of reading can apply both to languages that one has mastered, and languages that one is learning. Many of them can come into play when a student prepares a literary text for the classroom, or when it is read for the first time in the classroom. This table is neither exhaustive nor consistent. The categories are of various kinds: some are reading habits, others strategies, some are ways of responding that co-occur with reading, and others come after the reading but influence how we read and re-read. This means that the categories are not mutually exclusive; rather, they overlap in various ways. Furthermore, a reader may use several ways of reading in the course of his/her encounter with a particular literary text.

Those who write about how readers respond to literature often assume that reading – defined here as the perceptual activity of moving one’s eyes along lines of words – is an uncomplicated activity, common to all readers. The purpose of reviewing ways of reading here is therefore not to present a complete overview of how we read, though that would indeed be a worthwhile endeavour, but to make clear that reading can be done in *non-responsive* ways, and that one

must therefore be a little wary of building a description of student texts about literature on theories of reading that take as given a responsive reading. For it is my contention that many theories of reception *assume a responsive reading*, but that many readers of literature in the classroom read in other ways.

Table 1: Ways of reading

Type	Category	Typical activities
Surface reading	sounding out	learning to match symbols to sounds
	sliding	reading immediately before falling asleep, prompting, proofreading
	synchronised	reading while listening to or watching a performance of the same text
Selective reading	skimming	getting the gist
	spotting	picking out particular information
	skipping	leaving out parts
	literature-for-language	looking for and modelling learner language on illustrative examples in the literary text
Storylining		finding out what happens
Responsive reading	sensitive reading	being sensible of and sensitive to the nuances of the book
	schooled reading	a self-aware analytic reading for academic purposes
	creative response	setting to music, writing own text, moving/dancing
	affective reading	“It made me cry/ laugh/ angry”, associating with some experience or ‘non-academic’ idea external to the text

The type ‘surface reading’ includes ways of reading where meaning is partly dislocated from the words on the page or screen. It includes the categories ‘sounding out’ and ‘sliding’ to point out that it is quite possible to move one’s eyes along the lines of letters, forming the words, almost without their having any meaning to the reader. Not only does this happen just before we fall asleep with an open book in front of us, or when a prompter follows a speech, but it happens quite often in the foreign-language classroom. People with their thoughts elsewhere, or with insufficient vocabulary and text competence to decode a text, can literally ‘go through the motions’ of reading without engaging with meaning.

Synchronised reading includes reading film or TV subtitles or following the written script of a recorded or live reading/performance. The dynamics of how the one medium supports the other will vary in the course of the performance and between readers, but the written text will at

times be subordinate to the performed text, and I have therefore included synchronised reading in the type of surface reading.

The type ‘selective reading’ describes what we can rightly call reading strategies, in this case strategies where only part of the text is read. Skimming is described by Aud Marit Simensen as listening or reading to get the overall gist of what is said or written (Simensen, 2007:149), whilst spotting³ has to do with reading or listening for particular information or phrases. Skipping is a not uncommon reading strategy, also in tertiary education, where students leave out parts of a literary text that they find dull or less important in some way. A literature-for-language approach, where texts are mined for illustrations of grammatical and cohesive text devices, was found to be the most common use to which literature was put in foreign language classrooms in many countries (Brumfit & Benton, 1993:5).

Would not many theorists of reception dismiss the types of reading that I have called surface and selective? The answer, I think, is that they would indeed, because nothing less serious than a responsive reading is compatible with their argument. And perhaps, for the more general argument, there is little point in talking about how less than competent, less than committed, readers construct meaning. Rabinowitz, for example, talks of a fuller and more generally recognized sense of reading where

the ability to read is usually construed (and is so used in this book) to involve something more than the ability to parrot, something more than phonetics and memory. It is rather, somehow involved with understanding. But what is understanding? (Rabinowitz, 1997:15)

He answers his own question by taking as his measure of understanding the ability to paraphrase, a skill that relates to storylining. But for a classroom study, especially a study such as this one that involves both a second or foreign language and an educational tradition where memorising and verbatim reproduction are favoured outcomes, we must reject the presumption of this “fuller” sense of reading, however “generally recognized”, and allow for the possibility that ‘thinner’ and less generally recognized senses of reading are involved. We must be aware that theories of reading may fail to consider how literature is put to use in a foreign language classroom, and we should not assume that all students possess the minimum level of text competence that Rabinowitz assumes.

Storylining involves reading straight off the page, as though the text is transparent, and the reader has direct access to what actually happens and what characters are actually like. Such readings give us the storyline; they are similar to what Louise Rosenblatt (1978) meant by

³ Simensen uses ‘scanning’ where I use ‘spotting’. In common parlance scanning is sometimes also used to mean the same as skimming – reading through a text to get the overall gist. Scanning also refers to the electronic copying of digital information. To avoid possible confusion with these usages I introduce the term ‘spotting’.

“efferent reading”: reading to take something away from the text, namely an uncritical understanding of what the text is about. Storylining equips the reader to summarise a literary work, and to give an account of the plot and characters.

2.2.2 *Responsive reading*

The final type, ‘responsive reading’, occurs when the reader’s focus is primarily on giving a spoken, written or non-verbal response to a text. A particularly demanding form of ‘sensitive reading’ is called for by the author-theorist Umberto Eco. He holds that texts are written for an ideal reader, the Model Reader. This reader returns to the literary text and searches through it to find all the traces and clues that the author has placed there.⁴

‘Schooled reading’ is a way of reading responsively, and critical analysis is its main activity. In this category one is expected to demonstrate an awareness of the literary text as construct, and here, according to Rabinowitz, one finds the most jaded readers. Schooled reading requires an open-ended set of skills, where the text is understood as language set apart. It is typically motivated by the objective of teaching or studying a literary work in the classroom, or writing about it with a view to presentation or publication. Students of literature at tertiary level often partake in a process where they move from storylining to schooled reading, which latter is frequently assumed to be the highest form of reading by those who practise and write about it.

Reading which leads the reader to create a new text is not in itself a way of reading, but a way of responding that can also feasibly occur in combination with skipping and storylining. ‘Creative response’ is a commonplace activity in the didactics of literature, especially at primary and secondary level. It can include setting a poem to music or writing a text of one’s own that is in some way inspired by the literary text. ‘Affective reading’ is again not in itself a way of reading, but a way of responding to a literary text that can occur in combination with skipping, storylining and schooled reading. It involves a non-analytical response that the text evokes, be it an emotion or some sequence of ideas or memory.

2.2.3 *Early studies of schooled and affective reading*

It was an investigation into how students read poems that pioneered published studies about how readers read. It also provoked writing about what it means to read and interpret literature. The systematic attention I.A. Richards (1929) paid to what he saw as the misinterpretations of his respondents, most of whom were well-schooled undergraduate students of English, both women and men, was an important provocation for the development of Rosenblatt’s thinking

⁴ Eco exemplifies the Model Reader in his own reading of Gérard de Nerval’s *Sylvie*. His own fiction provides texts that reward similar multiple re-readings.

about how readers respond to literature (Purves, 1988), which I discuss below. Richards gave his students poems with no title, author or period, and no prescription as to how they were to be read or valued, rather as I tried to present the Norwegian students in this study with literary texts unencumbered by interpretive guidelines. Richards recorded and articulated how they ‘misinterpreted’ the poems. Whether or not one agrees with his assumption that poems can be correctly interpreted, his categorisation of his students’ misreading includes points of interest for the present study. He found that some students had problems understanding the literal meaning of the texts and that others made irrelevant and personal associations to the poems. He decried the overproduction of stock responses, whereby a reader is triggered to present views and emotions that are already fully prepared, “so that what happens appears to be more of the reader’s doing than the poet’s” (1929:15). Another pertinent source of ‘misreading’ was preconceptions about the functions of poetry. He concluded that

the wild interpretations of others must not be regarded as the antics of incompetents, but as dangers that we ourselves only narrowly escape, if, indeed, we do. We must see in the misreadings of others the actualisation of possibilities threatened in the early stages of our own readings. The only proper attitude is to look upon a successful interpretation, a correct understanding, as a triumph against odds. We must cease to regard a misunderstanding as a mere unlucky accident. We must treat it as the normal and probable event. (1929:315)

Nine years after Richards published his study, Rosenblatt wrote *Literature as Exploration*. A highly influential proponent of the importance of the reader, she recognised each reading as an event: “A novel or poem or play remains merely ink spots on paper until a reader transforms then into a set of meaningful symbols” (Rosenblatt, 1983:25).⁵ Rosenblatt’s work from 1938, which she has revised and republished three times, is described by Purvis in his introduction to the fourth edition as “the major document” on the relationship between reader and literary work (1983:iv). Rosenblatt’s project, he says, is to replace a pseudo-objective study of things to do *with* literature with the individual’s experience *of* literature. For Rosenblatt the value of literature lies in its potential for developing individual readers by enriching their emotional, moral and social lives. She describes the relationship between a reader and the text as a personal, aesthetic transaction with a text that is stable through time, although capable of arousing limitless individual responses.

Rosenblatt was not only, or not even primarily, a theorist, but a committed educationalist. Her agenda was to move students’ relationship to literature away from a formalistic academic praxis that, in her view, favoured the analytical over the personal:

⁵ References are to the fourth (1983) edition of her work.

We can ask of every assignment or method or text, no matter what its short-term effectiveness: does it make literature something to be regurgitated, analyzed, categorized, or is it a means towards making literature a more personally meaningful and self-disciplined activity? (1983:287)

In contrast to Richards, Rosenblatt asserts “the dignity of the common reader and of literary experience as a potential source for understanding the self and the world” (1983:xiv). She assumes like Richards that a text has a true meaning, but she also sees readers as integrated subjects who bring their sensitivities and experience to each reading event. Rosenblatt’s emphasis on the particularity of a response to literature shows her to be a forerunner of all those who assume an idealised responsive reading.

Every time a reader experiences a work of art, it is in a sense created anew. *Fundamentally, the process of understanding a work implies a re-creation of it, an attempt to grasp completely the structured sensations and concepts through which the author seeks to convey the quality of his sense of life. Each must make a new synthesis of these elements with his own nature, but it is essential that he evoke those components of experience to which the text actually refers.* (1983:113, original italics)

For Rosenblatt the reader’s fund of relevant memories makes possible any reading at all (1983:81). A literary text, she says, will have “very different meaning and value to us at different times or under different circumstances. Some state of mind, a worry, a temperamental bias, or a contemporary social crisis may make us either especially receptive or especially impervious to what the work offers” (1983:35). Rosenblatt believes that all readers necessarily share a context of fundamental emotions, relationships and life experiences that make it possible for literature to communicate with them. Yet at the same time she insists that the validity of a reader’s response can be measured with reference to the text itself. “A complex work such as *Hamlet* offers the basis for various interpretations; yet their acceptability will depend, first, on whether they take into account as many as possible of the elements present in the text, and second, on whether they do not imply elements that are not present in it” (1983:115). She calls the text a “‘control’, the means of avoiding arbitrary and irrelevant interpretations” (1983:282).

Rosenblatt kept an unstinting focus on both the individuality and particularity of a reader’s response and her belief in the universality of human experience. It was her continued conviction, also in the 1983 edition of her work, that the validity of any interpretation can be checked against evidence within the text. The position that meaning is inherent in the text has been both supported and refuted, as we will see in section 2.4. But her understanding of a literary work as “an event in the life of each reader as he re-creates it from the text” (1983:282) is an enduring contribution to theories and classroom studies of reading.

2.3 What is literature?

Common to both Richards and Rosenblatt, and indeed to many who write about how literature is read, is an understanding of literature as a category of texts that are intrinsically different from other texts. I argue here that to say that a text is literature is not to say something about the text itself but about the space of the literary. To define literature is to explain why a text is accounted as such, and by whom.

Derek Attridge opens his discussion on the singularity of literature by saying that “all attempts since the Renaissance to determine the difference between ‘literary’ and ‘non-literary’ language have failed – and that this is a *necessary* failure, one by which literature as a cultural practice has been continuously constituted” (Attridge, 2004:1, original italics). Instead he distinguishes literary from non-literary reading. Non-literary reading, he says, is responding to ideas or information, whereas literary reading is “responding to the words in which these arguments and representations are couched, in their singular and inventive arrangement” (2004:86). For him, then, it is the special way that language is arrayed that characterises literature. This special way exists independently of the reader, but is only realised as literature when a reader responds appropriately to it. Ruth Finnegan, who has worked with oral literature in Africa and elsewhere for over forty years, has a similar approach to Attridge’s inasmuch as she describes oral literature as “a broadly recognisable dimension of human artistic production, in which verbal formulations are in some way set apart, the focus of special attention” (Finnegan, 2007:223). This position, general as it is, also offers an aesthetic delimitation of what counts as literature.

Jonathan Culler also claims that literature is language detached from other purposes, but for him it is distinguished by possessing some qualities that make it responsive to interpretation. Literary works “have been published, reviewed and reprinted, so that readers approach them with the assurance that others have found them well constructed and ‘worth it’”, and “many of the features of literature follow from the willingness of readers to pay attention, to explore uncertainties” (Culler, 1997:25-27). Attridge and Culler are making general claims for all written literature, apparently, and understandings of literature based on aesthetic criteria underpin the writings of most theoreticians of literature in our time. Yet frames of understanding from a Western academic space, however huge, can obscure what is actually going on when they are called on to explain what goes on elsewhere. They are awkward, if not irrelevant, when it comes to much written literature in Eritrea, as I argue in 9.3.3.

There are Western theoreticians of literature who do not define it by aesthetic criteria. Terry

Eagleton suggests that literature be understood not as a recognisable dimension or set of qualities in a text, but as a number of ways in which people relate to writing:

There is no ‘essence’ of literature whatsoever. Any bit of writing may be read ‘non-pragmatically’, if that is what reading a text as literature means, just as any writing may be read ‘poetically’. If I pore over the railway timetable not to discover a train connection but to stimulate in myself general reflections on the speed and complexity of modern existence, then I might be said to be reading it as literature. John M. Ellis has argued that the term ‘literature’ operates rather like the word ‘weed’: weeds are not particular kinds of plant, but just any kind of plant which for some reason or another a gardener does not want around. Perhaps ‘literature’ means something like the opposite: any kind of writing which for some reason or another somebody values highly. As the philosophers might say, ‘literature’ and ‘weed’ are functional rather than ontological terms: they tell us about what we do, not about the fixed being of things. They tell us about the role of a text or a thistle in a social context, its relations with and differences from its surroundings, the ways it behaves, the purposes it may be put to and the human practices clustered around it. (Eagleton, 1996:8)

What Eagleton does here is to make central how socially and historically determined is the category of literature. This is a useful awareness with which to approach the space of the literary in Eritrea. But two addenda are required to his suggestion that literature is writing that “somebody values highly”. There need only be one person who values a text highly for it to be read as literature; and pre-publishing censorship may mean that it is only the author who has the opportunity of valuing it.

Eagleton’s argument, that it is in the nature of literature to have no nature, just as it is in the nature of a weed not to *be* a weed, but to be perceived as one, seductive though it is, is problematic for both his own writing and mine. As Culler might say, Eagleton displaces rather than resolves the question of what literature is.⁶ If train timetables can be literature, then Eagleton has thrown out the question of what literature *is* completely. Yet he goes on to discuss a body of largely canonical literary works, not train timetables.

A more robust alternative to Attridge and Culler’s understanding of literature as an inherent quality of certain texts is offered by cultural studies. Kathleen McCormick agrees that ‘literary’ is not necessarily a textual category, but a social and institutional one that describes texts in a particular use (McCormick, 1994:198). In cultural studies texts are regarded as sociocultural products, to be understood in their sociocultural context of production and reception. What counts as (good) literature has to do with ideology and power. Literature is not an object for calm study, but a cultural expression, and as such it can be a site of struggle, and deadly serious (Hall, 2001). An understanding of literature as a sociocultural and ideological expression underpins the discussion of the literary context in chapter 9.

⁶ Culler uses the same metaphor as Eagleton to indicate the complexity of factors that determine whether a plant is a weed and whether a text is literature.

2.4 How do we respond to literature?

I now turn to a consideration of some of the many ways of thinking about the relationship between texts and their readers and position my work in a landscape where, as Appleyard has said, “there is scarcely a contemporary philosophical or literary perspective that cannot be enlisted in the discussion of how the reader engages the text” (Appleyard, 1991:7). I see six central and interrelated issues that are particularly pertinent to the present material. These issues have to do with

- ideology
- how a particular readership is written into texts
- the argument that texts have inherent meaning
- collective interpretation
- texts in use
- assertiveness and uncertainty in interpretation

The first issue requires a working definition of what ideology is, and a general account of how language and power are encoded in texts. My discussion here draws on work in cultural studies. The second issue has to do with the relationship between the text and the readers whom authors have in mind as they write. Although this undoubtedly varies from author to author, I hope to show in later chapters that the three literary texts in the present study were written with particular readers in mind. Here I sketch the general argument. The third issue refers to the debate as to whether literary texts have inherent meaning, or whether it is readers who give them meaning. It should not be confused with the debate mentioned in the previous section, as to whether readers bring *aesthetic value* to texts, thus making them literary, or whether literary texts have inherent aesthetic value. Richards and Rosenblatt have represented the position that texts do have inherent meaning, and Umberto Eco represents a contemporary revisiting of the same position. I review the writings of Stanley Fish as an advocate of the opposite view.

The fourth issue has to do with how groups make sense of texts by employing a range of shared interpretive possibilities. The fifth issue introduces a terminology for describing in more detail how texts are put to use in different contexts. The last issue has to do with certainty. When readers say what they think about the text, or when they claim to know what a text means, how certain are they of their own interpretations? Are they spontaneous and obvious interpretations, as Fish claims, or can one entertain incompatible interpretations? And is it easier to be certain about what one thinks of a literary text than about what one thinks in real life? (Eco, 1994:116). Eco’s last question links this issue to the discussion in 4.2.1 about our

certainty or uncertainty in relation to which cultural values to adopt in real life. According to Eco, reading fiction is a far more comfortable activity than trying to read the actual world.

2.4.1 *Ideology*

Hall describes ideology as distinctive chains of meaning that form part of the social formations and conditions which prescribe the way we can make sense of our social reality. Ideologies can only change, when they change at all, through collective processes. As individuals we ‘speak through’ a particular ideology of which we are often not aware, because we understand the categories that we use to be common sense. Race, for example, like gender, is misunderstood to be a natural category, and hence “racism is one of the most profoundly ‘naturalised’ of existing ideologies” (Hall, 2006:397). This matters, because how we talk about things determines how we understand ourselves in relation to everybody else, both locally and globally.

Hall’s discourse enables the discussion of ideology in terms of the production and reception of meaning through texts. Hall is particularly interested in the role that the media play in producing ideologies, through consistently and repetitively representing the social world in such a way that representations ‘go without saying’ rather than being seen for what they are – components in a contestable ideology. Hall writes about how we watch and listen to, as well as how we read, *everyday* texts, and this perspective is important in that the present study is concerned with texts that are more ‘everyday’ to one group of readers than to the other. James Procter summarises Hall’s position on how the interests of power and dominance are served by language:

Language is ideological in the sense that it is through language that the struggle to make the world mean takes place and in language that certain meanings of the world become dominant/legitimate and others are rendered marginal/illegitimate. This struggle is never equal because certain groups and classes will always have more of a ‘say’, better access to the institutions (the media for instance) where meaning is secured than others. (Procter, 2004:46)

In 6.2.1 I show how the Eritrean state reinforces particular understandings of history and society as incontestable. As McCormick says, ideology serves to give us “seemingly coherent representations and explanations of our social practices, and the language by which we describe and thus try to perpetuate them” (McCormick, 1994:74), and it does so by making “some things appear more natural to write; it also works when we read to suggest what is natural, concealing struggles and repressions, forcing language into conveying predominantly those meanings reinforced by the dominant forces of our society” (1994:74-75). When power structures and epistemologies built into the language of a society and its texts are systematically different from those of the interpreter, a potential failure of communication “cannot be righted merely by more sensitive textual interpretation” (Eagleton, 1996:63-64).

Hall offers a way of dealing with ideology in texts, by looking at how different audiences generate meaning. His contribution to reception theory lies not least in his interest in how *groups* make sense of mediated information, and the extent to which they share, adapt or resist the ways in which it is presented to them (Hall, 2001). These responses he calls dominant (or preferred), negotiated and oppositional respectively. The premise for his argument is that the dominant ideology of a society is encoded in its texts – his particular focus was on television broadcasts – and that this encoding can be variously decoded by its audience. A dominant decoding accepts and reinforces the position offered to the authorial audience, whilst an oppositional decoding will reject the same position. A negotiated understanding neither accepts nor rejects the position offered to the authorial audience, but develops an understanding of the text in other terms that make more sense to that particular audience.

2.4.2 *How a particular readership is written into texts*

I turn now to a related issue, which can be seen as addressing the question, “Is there a reader in this text?”. It has to do with the perspectives and positions that the text offers its potential readers, what McCormick means when she says that texts have repertoires (McCormick, 1994:88). The idea that particular readers are in some way inscribed in literary texts has given rise to an array of terms and considerable obfuscation. I concentrate on Peter Rabinowitz’ concept of the authorial reader, a hypothetical person who the author assumes will be the reader of his/her text.

Rabinowitz’ premise in *Before Reading* (1998) is that an author writes features into the text with the expectation that the reader will find them. For Rabinowitz the authorial reader (or the authorial audience, the terms are interchangeable) is someone who shares an understanding of these features, which he calls the conventions of the text, and these conventions can be all sorts of things, including the connotative flavour of words, references to specific places and a particular understanding of who is right and who has rights. Very often it will involve an assumption of particular historical or cultural knowledge, knowledge that the contemporary audience was assumed to have, but that an audience at some distance of time or space may lack. This means that we can talk of the authorial audience as a social convention, rather than as a claim about the author’s intention. To fully understand a literary text as the author intended, is to read it as the authorial audience. It is possible to read it in different ways that may give other insights, but to read it in the belief that one is the authorial audience, and nevertheless miss some of the conventions that the author assumed his readers would share, is in Rabinowitz’ terms, to ‘misinterpret’ the text. Authors, then, design their writing for some more or less specific hypothetical audience, the authorial audience, and their success is to some extent

dependent on guessing this right (1998:21).

It would follow from Rabinowitz's argument that the less hypothetical the audience, the more likely the text is to succeed in sharing conventions with its actual audience. In a situation where the audience is known and the purpose of the text is to promote new ways of understanding the world, some conventions must be shared, but others must be imposed. Such processes are involved in the construction of national identity, and are particularly clear in emerging nations (Wertsch, 2002:69). It is a process that requires a massive effort. James Wertsch demonstrates with reference to the Soviet Union how when all spheres of existence were nationalised, and history above all, narrative form was a cultural tool for making events coherent. He suggests that the Soviet narratives were underpinned by templates. These templates are abstract structures that can underlie several different specific narratives, each of which has a particular setting, cast of characters and dates (2002:62). Thus when teaching a people how to understand their past, and through that how they should deal with the present and the future, a list of specific historical narratives can be constructed out of a few "basic building blocks". Characteristic of such narrative templates is that they differ from one culture to another, and that they are not readily available to consciousness. In 6.2.1 I use Wertsch's suggestion that a nation repeatedly instantiates a narrative template to account for its history to sketch a national narrative template for Eritrea. This template serves primarily for the telling of history, but can also be traced in literary texts.

2.4.3 *The argument that texts have inherent meaning*

This section addresses the third issue, namely whether texts have an intrinsic meaning, independent of by whom and when and where they are read. Richards (see 2.2.3) would have found a positive answer to this question quite obvious. It is also the commonsensical view, and one which has many advocates. McCormick writes that "believing that literary texts possess timeless truths is certainly a dominant part of most students' literary repertoires; it is the product of a dominant assumption of their literary educations" (McCormick, 1994:78).

Eco is a staunch defender of his own fictional texts as the repository of multiple but *finite* meanings. Thus he can say "reading is like a bet. You bet that you will be faithful to the suggestions of a voice that is not saying explicitly what it is suggesting" (Eco, 1994:112). He explains that when it comes to fictional universes, "we know without a doubt that they do have a message and that an authorial entity stands behind them as creator, as well as within them as a set of reading instructions" (Eco, 1994:116). Thus the text makes some interpretations relevant, and others irrelevant. Only relevant interpretations are true interpretations, the rest are 'using' the text, to daydream, to rework earlier experiences or to relive personal passions. I note with

reference to Table 1 (p.10) that Eco is talking about a sensitive or a schooled reading and that he would dismiss creative response and affective reading as making private use of the text: “There is a dangerous treason, typical of our time, which says that one can do what one will with a work of literature and read into it anything our ungovernable impulses suggest” (Eco, 2004:13, my translation). As we will see in the next sections, the point is that for Western readers at least, “our ungovernable impulses” have long been under the control of socially constructed literary repertoires and interpretive strategies.

However when Eco argues that some readings of canonical texts are more valid than others because they are accepted and have stood the test of time, he is in effect suggesting that texts do not have *intrinsic* meaning. Thus he, like so many other advocates of the intrinsic meaning of the text, finds himself advocating what Stefan Collini has called cultural Darwinism (Eco & Collini, 1992:16). By taking social acceptance as a measure of interpretive validity, Eco steps into the pragmatists’ ever-open arms, and demonstrates that what he presents as a stand-off between those who claim that texts have meaning and those who claim that it is readers who create meaning is perhaps no more than a reluctant tango between two interdependent partners.

Eco does resist the pragmatists’ claim that readers can use texts *in any way they like*, and that all readings are equally valid. Richard Rorty, a self-confessed pragmatist, has presented this view forcefully. He says that different interpretations are no more than “different grids you can place on top of a text to make sense of it” (Eco & Collini, 1992:105). The same view is expounded by Stanley Fish (1980), who sees the range of interpretations available to a reader/listener as socially prescribed. His views are explored in the following section, not least because he provides the terms ‘interpretive strategies’ and ‘interpretive communities’, which I use extensively in this study.

2.4.4 *Collective interpretation*

Interpreting works of literature, says Fish, is an individual activity constrained by the interpretive community to which the reader belongs. It is a central assumption in this study that how readers make sense of a text is a function of, but not wholly determined by, the interpretive communities to which they belong. An interesting perspective arises from comparing Fish’s position to that of Rosenblatt, who, we remember, emphasises the importance of the reader as an explorer of literature, and sees literature as a text with a fixed meaning. Whilst sharing Fish’s concern with what the reader brings to the text, Rosenblatt focuses on the individual’s

experience, where Fish is concerned with collective strategies.⁷ Like Rosenblatt, Fish's project is to make legitimate the reader's response to a literary text as the object of literary enquiry, but he is concerned to evaluate the reader's response not in relation to the authority of the text, but in relation to the authority of the interpretive community from which the reader's response is generated. He does so by walking his reader down the following path:

1. Interpretation is the reader's immediate response to a text, and not a secondary activity performed subsequent to a neutral description of that text. Such a neutral description is not possible. Any description, however humbly the critic insists that he is looking only at the text itself, must use terms that are conventional and therefore represent an interpretive strategy. The fact that these terms (he gives 'line', 'alliteration' and 'metaphor' as examples) may appear obvious, demonstrates not their objectivity but the extent to which a particular interpretive strategy (in his example New Criticism) holds sway. 'Ordinary language' is a term which for Fish, just as for Hall, is in no way indicative of objectivity, but only of the dominance of 'ordinary language' as the dominant interpretive strategy (1980:269-271).

2. It is an epistemological fallacy that there can exist an interpretation of any literary work which is complete and true. "The choice is never between objectivity and interpretation but between an interpretation that is unacknowledged as such and an interpretation that is at least aware of itself" (Fish, 1980:167).

3. The fear of an endless and chaotic plurality of interpretations has worried critics of Fish's project. Fish argues that a plurality of response will not be *endless* because it is circumscribed by the available interpretive strategies, and although these are unstable through time, they are mediated and stabilised by the interpretive communities which share them. An interpretive community is the *context* in which an acceptable set of interpretations is generated and received.

4. A plurality of response will not be *chaotic* because any dissenting interpretation is only interesting, or indeed intelligible, when it is posited as a response to, and usually as an improvement on, an already existing interpretation.

If 'interpretation' is the activity we 'do' when we encounter a text, we can try to make sense of what Fish means by 'interpretive strategies' and 'interpretive communities'. He defines an interpretive community as an entity that produces meaning and form from shared, pre-existing interpretive strategies. An individual interpreter is not a free agent who can readily move between interpretive communities, but a product of a particular community. This community is

⁷ The second edition of Rosenblatt's book *Literature as Exploration*, published in 1968 and widely acclaimed at the time that Fish was developing his theory of interpretive communities, may have been part of the literary landscape in which Fish fought his campaign to radicalise how we conceptualise the reader and the text.

public and conventional, and hence not objective. But since the strategies and the meanings and texts produced by it are shared, they are not subjective either (1980:14). In this definition interpretive communities are relatively stable ‘authorizing agencies’ that share what Fish calls variously ‘situations’, ‘institutions’, or ‘norms’. From his examples we understand that interpretive communities exist over time and are either co-habitant, for example at a particular department at a particular university, or dispersed, for example all adherents of New Criticism (or Eritrean nationalism, for that matter).

Fish maintains, then, that the text does not exist as a permanent entity capable of objective interpretation, but that a text *does* exist “if one means by text the structure of meanings that is obvious and inescapable from the perspective of whatever interpretive assumptions happen to be in force” (1980:vii). When he abolishes the text as a source of objective meaning, Fish aligns with the ambitions of Nietzsche (“God is dead”) and Barthes (“the Author is dead”) to identify, theorise and thereby accelerate the demise of what have been certainties. He has been strongly criticised for advocating perspectivism, the tenet that no one interpretation of the world (Nietzsche) or of a text (Fish) has objective precedence over another. I, however, would rather criticise him for inadequately accounting for the terms of membership of an interpretive community in which a particular interpretive strategy has currency. Such a community, says Fish, is constituted by interpretive agreement, *at the moment of agreement*: “the fact of agreement, rather than being a proof of the stability of objects, is a testimony to the power of an interpretive community to constitute the objects upon which its members (*also and simultaneously constituted*) can then agree” (1980:338, italics added).

Given the centrality of the interpretive community to Fish’s theory, it is surprising to find parts of the definition in brackets. Perhaps this is because his focus here and elsewhere is not on the composition or reality of an interpretive community, but on the false opposition of objective and subjective interpretation. Or perhaps it is so obvious that it goes without saying (or with saying only in brackets) that the community of common interpretation only exists as long as it utters common interpretations. Or perhaps Fish does not wish to get entangled with the apparent circularity of this argumentation. But Fish was not interested in the nitty-gritty of how these communities were constituted and maintained. McCormick complains that his attempt to account for the socially constructed reader stops enquiry because he doesn’t consider how communities develop, how one becomes a member of one and how one can be a member of diverse and contradictory communities (McCormick, 1994:41). It is a limitation of his theory for my purposes that he does not address the substantiality and stability of interpretive activity

required to constitute a strategy, nor the substantiality and stability of strategies required to constitute an interpretive community.

2.4.5 *Texts in use*

McCormick acknowledges that readers and texts are themselves produced, and that reading (and interpreting) are cognitive activities that always occur in a social context (McCormick, 1994:68-69). Unlike Fish, McCormick provides a terminology for examining the factors that come into play when readers meet texts. She refers to ‘a text in use’, and marks out a contrastive position in relation to what she describes as the two other main approaches to the study and teaching of reading (1994:13). One of these two is a cognitive approach concerned with information-processing. It underpins the studies in section 3.3 in the next chapter, which deal with comprehension and assume that a text has one fixed meaning. The other approach she calls expressivist. It privileges what the reader brings to the text and tends to emphasize the richness and uniqueness of the reader’s background. As a classroom practice it encourages individual, ‘authentic’ responses. McCormick argues that expressivists lack a theory of the text that can replace the commonsensical assumption that texts have meaning in themselves (1994:30). She promotes an interactive model of reading which “stresses that first, both readers and text contribute to the reading process and second, that both texts and readers are themselves ideologically situated” (1994:60). Texts are always ‘in use’, she says, meaning that they are produced under determinate conditions, and are reproduced under other determinate conditions.

In his early research on television audiences, David Morley talks of “the repertoire of discourses at the disposal of different audiences” as a key factor in how audiences construe television news programmes (Morley, 1980:171). McCormick develops this idea, saying that readers have individual repertoires of literary and general ideologies. By general repertoires she means knowledge and expectations about everything from politics to lifestyle. Readers often take their repertoires for granted, she says, until confronted with a different understanding of the same text (McCormick, 1994: 79). The *literary* repertoire of a particular reader is built up of their knowledge and assumptions about what literature is, based on what they have read and what they have picked up (1994:84). McCormick identifies two aspects of readers’ literary repertoires, namely their cognitive style (their tolerance for ambiguity, their readiness to see double meanings etc.) and their reading strategies. By reading strategies she makes more detailed the category of responsive reading (see Table 1, p.10), referring to a battery of interpretive devices that readers can adduce, including how they create themes, identify with characters, look for a consistent point of view, create literal/figurative distinctions, fill in gaps, relate the text to other texts or to personal experience, read playfully for multiple meanings, and

relate their own response to larger aspects of their culture. And she explains that depending on which of these reading strategies are brought into use, the text will be opened up to certain readings, and become inaccessible to others.

2.4.6 *Assertiveness and uncertainty in interpretation*

The last issue has to do with the relative certainty with which a reader responds to a text. We cannot be sure that we have understood other people's narratives, whether they are anecdotes told over a cup of coffee, or full-length works of fiction, but the extent to which readers and listeners experience and express certainty in their interpretations can vary from bafflement to militancy. When it comes to literary texts, as Appleyard (1991) says, it is the general ambition of Western education to raise students' awareness of multiple meanings and textual ambivalence. Kramsch values the possibility this gives for "acknowledging differences within oneself and seeing oneself with the historic context of one's own biography" (Kramsch, 1993:234). Uncertainty is characteristic of much contemporary Western thinking, where writers express not so much beliefs as more or less strongly-held and sometimes also mutually incompatible opinions.⁸ Sometimes narrators cultivate an ironic distance to the opinions available to them. In Justin Cartwright's most recent novel *To Heaven by Water* (2009) the main character comments:

If the Bushmen believed that trance dancing put them in touch with the spirits, that was fine by him: it was as valid an explanation as anything he believed. In truth he is not sure exactly what he believes: I have beliefs but I don't believe them. (Cartwright, 2009:292)

The extent to which we occupy, or stand apart from, the dominant beliefs of the cultures we are a part of, is an aspect of how the literary texts in this study are read. I propose that some of the ways in which one can express certainty or uncertainty when responding to a literary text include

- exhortation. The writer asserts the correctness of his/her understanding by urging the reader to adopt the same understanding, and to behave in accordance with it.
- assertive value-laden statements that admit no alternative view
- rhetorical questions
- cognitive verbs in the first person

This last is a rhetorical device that can express both certainty and uncertainty. The assertiveness of statements can be emphasised through the use of 'I think', 'I hope', 'in my opinion' and

⁸ That this is not a new concern is evidenced by Nietzsche's essay "On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life" from 1874, in which he criticizes our surfeit of historical knowledge ('our' understood here as a term embedded in Western epistemology). It led, he said, to a carnival of gods, customs and arts that fills our minds as a spectacle, but which are not felt to be ours (Perkins, 1992). The tenability of incompatible positions is also discussed in 4.2.1

similar phrases, underlining the writer's involvement with what is written, and bringing it to the attention of the reader. But these same phrases can also lessen the assertiveness of a statement, hedging the writer's opinion, or opening up the possibility of alternative opinions. The reader can also be engaged in the writer's *uncertainty* by

- the asking of real rather than rhetorical questions
- direct expressions of ambivalence about aspects of the text
- the presentation of competing ways of making sense of the story

One might expect to find that when they respond to literary texts, the Eritrean students have a clear understanding of what beliefs they should hold, and perhaps, as Fish says, some of them experience these beliefs as immediate, obvious and authoritative. One may expect that several of the Norwegian students, particularly perhaps those that are older, or those who have lived for some time in other countries, not only entertain but also occupy a relativist position.

Constructing meaning is not only something that goes on *while* reading, but also what happens afterwards, when one talks or writes about a text. The last sections present two important factors that influence what different groups of readers say and write about texts they have just read – academic literacy and institutional conditions.

2.4.7 *Academic literacy*

“Writing is a social act, and every successful text must display its writer's ability to engage appropriately with his or her audience”, writes Hyland (2001:571). Whether writing a response to a literary text or writing an exam, the students in Norway and Eritrea write in relation to differing traditions of academic socialisation, rather than in relation to a universal academic standard. Academic socialisation is part of a tripartite discourse of academic literacies developed by Mary Lea and Brian Street (2006). This starts with the atomised skills of correct vocabulary, formulation, punctuation and paragraphing, moves on to academic socialisation, which covers the “ways of talking, writing, thinking, and using literacy that typified members of a disciplinary or subject area community” (Lea & Street, 2006:369), and ends up arguing for an understanding of academic literacy which covers the broader ideological, institutional and epistemological framework within which students are socialised. The last two terms overlap considerably when we put them to use to describe the contexts of student writing. Often, as Lea and Street point out, the assumptions of a particular academic socialisation are not made explicit to students, so that they have to guess how independent and how self-effacing they should be in answering the assignment, to mention just two factors. I reserve the term ‘academic socialisation’ for aspects of the student texts that have to do with the subject English,

whereas important aspects of academic literacy in this study have to do with the students' individual and collective relation to authority, to teachers, to foreigners, to women and, in the case of the Eritrean students, to outsiders or guests.

2.4.8 *The institutional conditions of reading*

Some recent research has been concerned with how a text is read differently depending on the sociocultural context of its reading. Smidt (1989) lists books, buildings, teachers and co-students as part of a text's context, and he makes the point that a story read in a classroom is in important ways not the same text as the same story told or read in a different setting, to which no particular response is required. Bo Westerberg, in a study of the reception of literature in a Swedish secondary school, concludes that "as soon as a text is read in school, it is read under the special conditions and terms of the school" (Westerberg, 1987:91). He refers to this aspect of reception with a phrase coined by Linnér: "the institutional conditions for the reading of literature". Westerberg makes the further point that a story read in a classroom with the class teacher is in important ways different from a story read in an interventional situation, such as when a researcher comes to the school to find out how the students respond to particular literary texts. Westerberg identifies the similarities and differences in how the interventional aspects of research relate to the 'everyday' teaching of literature with the same pupils. "They [the students] are told by someone who resembles a teacher to read exactly this text exactly now and be finished at exactly then." The answers you get, he says, are to the questions you ask, and students have an instrumental attitude. In everyday teaching they want good grades and so they respond as they believe they are expected to respond. Westerberg found the students in his research to be less instrumental in their attitude because he was not a teacher, but at the same time they were also negative to the whole idea of his research project "since it doesn't fit into the curriculum, doesn't give grades and disturbs the general set-up" (Westerberg, 1987:91-92, my translation).

Regardless of whether student texts are elicited in the course of everyday teaching or through research intervention, what the students write is not the spontaneous thoughts of a group of individuals who choose to read the same text. Their texts are institutionally framed and elicited, written in response to an assignment prescribed by the teacher/researcher. It is this person who, in setting the task, determines what sort of answers are appropriate, as well as dictating when, where and for how long the students should write, and who will listen to or read their response. Furthermore, as Lise Kulbrandstad (1998) shows, the tasks themselves may point the reader to a particular understanding of the text. In her study of the reading comprehension of four young immigrants to Norway, Kulbrandstad reminds us that we can't be

sure if it is the reader's original response to the text that we find, or whether the tasks themselves help the readers to a better understanding of the text (Kulbrandstad, 1998:143). Hence, even when the student texts are written in a personal and informal tone, they are institutional products, and cannot be equated with 'what the respondents really think'.

2.5 Where I stand

In this last section I sum up how key terms relating to reading and responding to literature are used in this study. A *literary text* indicates that a text has been valued in a particular sociocultural context. It does not imply a universal and independent category with common inherent qualities that mark literary texts off from non-literary texts. *Readers* I recognise as cognitive subjects who make choices that cannot be predicted, but also as sociocultural subjects who makes sense of texts, be they literary or not, from amongst the *interpretive strategies* available to them and from the academic literacy and institutional context of reading into which they are encultured. Each reader is in dialogic interaction within an interpretive community, adopting a range of interpretive strategies within that community, but also adapting them, thereby reconstituting that community by incrementally maintaining, reconstructing or challenging these strategies every time they are put to use. Understanding a reader as in this way balanced between autonomy and social determination has become widely accepted, given the inadequacy of categories of gender, class or race in predicting how empirical audiences make sense of texts (McCormick, 1994:52). An interpretation is endorsed by the interpretive community to which the reader belongs, but is intelligible also to members of other interpretive communities. Patrick Chabal reminds us that in an African context, agency can be expressed not by making individual choices but by showing respect for age and the spiritual world, the collective good and an ethic of reciprocity (Chabal, 2009:79-81).

Readers, then, give meaning to texts, and texts achieve meaning first when they are read. But texts pre-exist their readers, and not only as marks on a page or screen. In themselves texts limit the coherent interpretations available to a reader. *A text, then, is made up of the ideology it encodes, the conventions it shares with its authorial audience, and its interpretive possibilities.* Texts encode or contest dominant ideologies, and they do so more or less successfully depending on the extent to which they share the conventions of their audience. These conventions and this ideology are both external to and encoded in the text. They can be reinforced when a text builds on a familiar *narrative template*, or contested when a text makes play with such a template. An interpretation is endorsed, as Fish observes, by interpretive communities, but, as Eco insists, not everything that calls itself an interpretation deserves to be so named. Esoteric and private decodings are not part of the inherent meaning of a text, and this

distinction, hard though it is to put into practice, derives from a valid distinction between the curtailment prescribed by the community and by the text itself.

The range of interpretations that a text can accommodate can be hypothetically exemplified in relation to the fable about a monkey and a crocodile that is discussed in detail in chapter 10. It involves a monkey eating dates. He is transported across a river on the back of a crocodile, having been enticed by the promise of bigger dates. In mid-stream the crocodile tells of his intention to kill the monkey and use his heart to save his wife, but the monkey outwits him. While it makes sense to say that this story is about a monkey and a crocodile, about friendship, treachery and quick-wittedness, it makes less sense to say that it is about rivers, and it does *not* make sense to say that the story is about bulimia. Such interpretations would foreground and distort the setting (the river), or import a theme (bulimia) that is perhaps triggered by the monkey's enthusiasm for dates, but which is not part of the text's ideology, shared conventions or interpretive possibilities. It does, however, make sense to interpret the fable by replacing the animals with people. The message of the story, which in at least one sense *is* the meaning of a fable, remains the same. It will vary from one interpretive community to another, but will be contained within the range of possible interpretations that the text sustains and the interpretive community endorses.

In asking *how* students make sense of a literary text I am therefore asking which of the text's interpretive possibilities are available to them as individuals and as members of an interpretive community. I also ask which conventions the student readers share with the authorial audience. But the biggest 'how' has to do with the readers' contexts – their national, social and educational contexts, as well as the challenges of reading and writing in English and the constraints and expectations of the academic literacies and institutional conditions within which they read and respond. This 'how' has to do with *how the students put their cultures and contexts to use in making sense of literature* – their own literature in the case of the students in Eritrea, other people's in the Norwegian case.

In the next chapter I review earlier studies that have investigated the relationship between a person's culture and how they make sense of and write about texts.

3 Some earlier studies of how we read and write

3.1 An overview

Studies into how readers make sense of texts fall into two main types. Firstly there is research carried out in educational institutions, looking at actual classroom practice, and typically driven by an educational agenda. In Scandinavia, at least, these studies characteristically make use of the teacher's privileged access to students, where the teacher becomes a researcher of her own teaching, or gives an external researcher access to her pupils. This tradition is represented in Sweden by Gun Malmgren (1992) and Lasse Malmgren (1997) and in Norway by Smidt (1989) and Hvistendahl (2000). My research is of this type. Such studies can risk being dismissed as being about particular pupils in a particular class in a particular institutional context, but I argue that they have an outreach far beyond the few cases with which they deal in detail.

The role of the teacher/researcher is somewhat problematic in these studies, inasmuch as the complex power relation between teacher and student underpins what is read and what is written, and how what is written is understood. The teacher selects literature in conformity with the national syllabus, and with an eye to the textbook and the preferences and capabilities of her pupils, but from the pupils' point of view they must read (or at least have a reading survival strategy towards) what this representative of the educational establishment requires them to read. Although the power relation is arguably less pronounced with regard to students at tertiary level in Norway, a further complication here is the extent to which the students are committed to a process of academic socialisation where they aspire to 'objective' critical reading.

The second type of reader research involves groups outside educational settings, and often has a sociological perspective. The respondents in such studies can be either already existing reading groups, or groups that are put together for the research purpose, but a significant point of difference to the first type is that the respondents in these studies are voluntary readers. The research projects *Cultural Rules of Interpretation in Six European Countries* (1992- 2000) based in Jyväskylä in Finland, and *Devolving Diasporas* (2007- 2010) based in Stirling in Scotland, belong to this type. These two studies take a comparative perspective. A problem here is that any generalisation one might wish to generate must take account of the particular and often circumstantial way that the research participants are recruited. Furthermore the type of literature involved can be dictated by practical limitations, and may therefore be unlike literature that the respondents might otherwise choose to read. When groups are constructed for the sole purpose of research, issues of time, participant motivation and money become important, and researchers have tended to use short and provocative texts to get maximum response in minimum time.

In this chapter I first present two longitudinal studies of reception in Norway, and two short studies of reception in Eritrea, these being the only studies of their kind in these two countries, as far as I am aware. All quotations from the two Norwegian studies are in my translation. In the present study an important assumption is that there are systematic *national* differences in how literature is perceived, and that groups of readers recruited from different nationally defined contexts will demonstrate some of these differences. In this chapter I present an overview of other studies about how nationally identified groups read literature. I also look at a selection of studies that look at national characteristics of academic writing.

This presentation is of course not exhaustive. I do not consider those studies, and there are many of them, that deal with cross-cultural differences in communication styles or with non-academic writing strategies. Nor am I concerned with the acquisition of cross-cultural reading skills, or with studies that deal with child readers. When it comes to how we read, I concentrate on studies that are about how student and adult readers make sense of the cultural content of what they read. These studies usually involve the reading of literary texts, although I also refer to a couple of studies that make use of factual textual material. I concentrate on two approaches that have particular relevance for my research, and illustrate these approaches with reference to some studies within each. The studies that adopt the first approach are discussed in section 3.3. They are comparative and share a concern with the measurement of reading *comprehension*, understood as the ability to identify and recall correctly units of information in a text. These cross-cultural comprehension studies focus on the ability to extract and recall information from culturally unfamiliar texts. The second approach is discussed in section 3.4. The studies here are concerned not with comprehension and information but with how texts are *received*, that is, how readers make use of their literary and general repertoires when they read a text. Most studies in this group shares a *comparative* approach, investigating how different groups of nationally-defined readers respond to the same literature. Section 3.5 reviews some comparative studies of how students represent themselves in their academic writing.

3.2 Earlier studies of literary reception in Eritrea and Norway

Very recently two academics who write about Eritrean literature have begun to consider the reception in the capital city Asmara of two recent texts by one of Eritrea's most prestigious authors – Beyene Haile. Ghirmai Negash's interest in the reception of his novel *Teberesh's Shop* (*Deqwan Teberesh*, 2003) was prompted by its being criticised for literary elitism and political ambiguity. "These critics' concerns need to be represented and evaluated for they have been heard repeatedly in Eritrean intellectual and literary circles since the novel's publication" (G. Negash, 2009:10). Negash reports that readers have been "overwhelmed by the intricate design

of the novelist's narrative and the genuinely erudite nature of his writing", and he ascribes the response of these readers to inadequate levels of engagement (2009:10-11). Criticism of the book has focussed on the negative representation of Eritrean intellectuals, a group that is already at risk "given the predominantly traditional and conformist culture of Eritrea, the EPLF's brutality against intellectuals during the Armed Struggle,⁹ and the present government's hostility towards that group" (2009:11). Again Negash defends the novel, offering three arguments: that the novel is not an attack on all intellectuals, but only on pseudo-intellectuals; that as a work of fiction it is not required to be accurate, but creative and unpredictable; and that Haile may be mouthing the government position, because his alternative is silence. Negash, then, uses the reception of the novel not so much to explore how readers construct meaning as to situate the reader and the author in the political space of the literary in Eritrea.

In a lecture on a recent play by the same author – *Weg'i lebi* – Christine Matzke¹⁰ reflected on the fascination that this complex play held for Asmara audiences, and suggested that it had to do with the multiple non-linear positions it offered to its audience, allowing people to find things of relevance to their own lives and to the situation in Eritrea.

There are to my knowledge no other studies of literary reception in Eritrea. The marginal position of reception is not particular to Eritrea. In *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory* (Quayson & Olaniyan, 2007) there are 97 articles by central scholars of African literature and not one of them addresses issues of how readers respond to literature.

In Norway there are two studies of literary reception that have been of particular importance for the present study. They deal with the reception of literary texts in upper secondary schools. In addition to their value as studies of reception, they are also of interest for the light they shed on how literature has been approached and studied in Norwegian schools, since the pupils' experience of literature in these two studies may be similar to the school experience of the respondents in the Norwegian group in my own material.

The studies, by Smidt (1989) and Hvistendahl (2000), describe the researchers' own classroom experience as teachers of Norwegian literature over a period of two to three years, and hence both, unlike my study, have a didactic and a developmental perspective. Smidt's study tracks the process of combining the requirements of the syllabus and the pupils' need for personal involvement, reinforcement and challenge in their encounters with literature. His is a

⁹ I consistently use the EPLF term for the thirty year war between Ethiopia and Eritrea, for want of a politically neutral alternative.

¹⁰ Christine Matzke: Of outer space? Inner landscapes in Beyene Haile's play *Weg'i lebi*. Paper presented at the Higher Seminar in Language and Culture, Falun, 13.10.2009.

study of a teacher – himself – and six of his pupils as they work with literary texts in Norwegian over a period of three years. Smidt is particularly concerned with the institutional, social and psychological context of what he describes as the pupils ‘textual work’, a term he uses in preference to ‘reading and interpreting texts’ (Smidt, 1989:14). Smidt is interested in how pupils use literature to meet their psychological needs: on the one hand, the need to confirm the familiar, for example in their enjoyment of childish texts, stories that are read aloud or work situations that involve working closely with their classmates; on the other hand, the need to be challenged by the unfamiliar, to develop both as young adults and as school achievers in their encounter with new and sometimes resistant literary texts and the tasks that the teacher gives them. Smidt is concerned with the way that the pupils and he, as teacher, use literature to rework their own life experience. “The meaning of a text is created from the relevance the text acquires in every new situation, as we work with it”, he explains (1989:234). With his emphasis on exploring what the texts mean for each individual pupil in his class, he challenges the conventional activity of literary analysis that places pupils in what he describes as a strangely abstract position: “Whom are they writing for? What are they actually writing about? And why, for goodness sake?” (1989:245). Smidt’s fascination with and empathy for his pupils, and his interest in the insights that they provide about his own didactic assumptions, functioned as a model when I came to the texts that ‘my’ respondents wrote. But unlike him I am not concerned with process and development over time, but only with discrete responses, and I am interested in the broader national and cultural context to which the students’ responses give me access.

Hvistendahl (2000) chose to focus not so much on the social processes within the classroom as on the sociocultural experience and value systems that pupils brought to their reading from *outside* the classroom. She too made a longitudinal exploration of her own classroom, focussing on four minority language pupils’ encounters with canonical Norwegian literary texts. She argues for the importance of educationalists asking not only “what, why and how”. “Where” is also something a teacher needs to think about, and by “where” she means “the cultural context in and around the individual classroom” (2000:364).

As their teacher for three consecutive years, Hvistendahl could identify aspects of the pupils’ response that she found interesting or unexpected, or that bore witness to the pupils’ personal histories of origin and transmigration, and further explore with the pupils how they created meaning in their encounters with the Norwegian texts. One of the four pupils was Yonathan. She describes him as “an exiled Eritrean and Anglo-African” (2000:176). Although he was educated for ten years in Kenya after his family left Eritrea, he nonetheless comments on

Eritrean attitudes and cultural values, which he has learnt from his family and his Eritrean friends, from the vantage point of exile.

The case of Yonathan is frustrating with regard to the present study. As the only Eritrean *in any country* whose reception of literature has been the object of careful and documented study, he would seem to be a unique and important point of reference. On the other hand, Yonathan's context, as an exile Eritrean and as a pupil in a Norwegian school, means that he is not embedded in the contexts and cultures that the twelve students in Eritrea share. Hvistendahl sums up what typifies Yonathan's reading and writing about Norwegian literature. "It is justice and equality that are the recurrent themes in Yonathan's reception", she says. "Literature that deals with social injustice engages and upsets him [...]. Yonathan's deep involvement with questions of social justice, and his fundamental belief that all people are equal, are, I assume, linked to his having grown up in postcolonial African society and with the Eritrean liberation struggle, which has framed his existence" (2000:221- 222).

While the Eritrean liberation struggle may have "framed his existence", as Hvistendahl says, it has done so from an exile perspective, which, though definitely Eritrean, is often very different from an in-country perspective (Conrad, 2006). This is also demonstrated by some of Yonathan's comments, which have an international perspective that I did not find amongst the students within Eritrea. For example, the Norwegian texts that made most impression on him were those that dealt with "the situation of people in the world, yes, that – that is the most important, society and the system, how the system affects other people's lives" (2000:218). Sadly, therefore, the fact of his belonging to an exile community, and of having been schooled entirely outside Eritrea, means that I do not return to Yonathan later in this dissertation.

My study differs from Smidt and Hvistendahl's studies both in that the respondents are college students and in that I know them less well than Smidt and Hvistendahl knew their pupils. The present study was carried out over a much shorter period of time, and its purpose was not didactic or developmental but motivated by research questions to do with comparison and context. Furthermore my approach was based not on everyday teaching but on an intervention in it. By focussing on a small number of pupils, and following them for two or three years, Smidt and Hvistendahl's studies have both depth and length. By choosing very different pupils they can also be said to have breadth. Their material is primarily illustrative, and does not easily allow them to generalise. Nor is this their ambition.

Although I do not have access to the kind of background information about the students that enriches and broadens Smidt's and Hvistendahl's work, my study is broad in that more students are involved. What *depth* the present study has relates not only to the intensity of the gaze that I

directed at the student texts, but also to the focus on the cultures and contexts of Eritrea and Norway. The most obvious difference, however, between my work and that of Smidt and Hvistendahl, is that the present study is comparative.

3.3 Cross-cultural comprehension

Comparative reading studies that are concerned with comprehension typically involve storylining and a ‘right or wrong’ view of what understanding a text entails. They seldom even require respondents to develop an independent paraphrase of the text, which is usually written or manipulated for the purpose of the study. The research reviewed under this heading is nonetheless relevant for the present study because it selects groups of readers on the basis of their cultural or national identity and systematically explores whether this identity enables them to read culturally familiar texts ‘better’ and faster than unfamiliar texts. The studies in this group typically show a preference for the statistical comparison of how well readers understand cultural information that the researcher has already identified in the texts. Culture is understood as a stable characteristic of a nationally defined population. Units of information are seen as objectively identifiable and the texts, literary or otherwise, are assumed to have one correct meaning. The argument typically moves from the finding that readers have difficulties in understanding unfamiliar culture to the conclusion that reading about foreign culture can slow the acquisition of reading skills, and they go on to recommend didactic countermeasures.

A theoretical platform for many of these earlier studies is schema theory and the idea that recognition and recall are significantly improved when one has access to a relevant set of internalized cognitive schemata, which the reader has developed on the basis of previous textual encounters and experience in life. Schema theory was developed by Frederic Bartlett, who in 1932 published *Remembering*, a psychological treatise in the positivist mode (Bartlett, 1932). From the outset Bartlett was interested in the ways that readers made sense of culturally unfamiliar texts. Steffensen et al. talk of the relative neglect of Bartlett’s theory. In their opinion, ever since Bartlett’s day the actual instances of intrusions, gaps, inferences, and distortion in text recall have provided the most compelling evidence of the role of schema in discourse comprehension and memory (Steffensen, Joag-Dev, & Anderson, 1979:20). In those early studies that did follow up the implications of schema theory, performance levels with regard to both comprehension and retention are taken as valid measures of the relevance and importance of the reader’s schemata. Steffensen et al. find a “glaring defect” in these studies, namely that by using only one group of respondents, who find the unfamiliar less comprehensible than the familiar, “one cannot rule out the possibility that the foreign material is inherently more difficult” (1979:12). A complete design, they say, should have two groups of

subjects with different cultural heritages and two texts, one of which presupposes the cultural framework of the first group, and the other that of the second group.

Their own research involved adults native to India and America, and presented them with two texts about an Indian and an American wedding. Whereas a wedding is a ritualized pageant in the US, it is often a fraught financial endeavour in India, and the researchers expected that readers would use their very different cultural experience and expectations in their attempts to make sense of the culturally unfamiliar text. The two texts were letters written for the purpose of the study, and a range of tasks and measures were employed to investigate the role of cultural schemata. The research included both quantifiable and more open-ended questions. Its underlying assumption was that the texts' one correct meaning was that of a putative native reader. Reviewing their material they draw the following conclusions:

The changes people make when recalling passages can be roughly divided into two types. There is a category we call elaborations that consists of culturally appropriate extensions of the text. A native would say of an elaboration that it was a statement implied by the text, or perhaps even a paraphrase of a literal text element. The other category is distortions. These are culturally inappropriate modifications of the text. Most that we noted involved stating a text element in such a fashion that a native would say the point had been lost. Also included were outright intrusions from one's own culture. Schema theory predicts elaborations where a text is incomplete and distortions where the reader's schema diverges from the schema presupposed by the text. (Steffensen, et al., 1979:15)

The conclusion they draw is didactic, namely that providing relevant schemata is profoundly important in equipping the reader to understand, learn and remember (1979:19).

Five years later Andersson and Barnitz published an overview of field research in cross-cultural reading, in which they commend Steffensen et al.'s study. They refer to other research, including the elaborations and distortions observed when comparing the recall of American and Australian women who listened to an Aboriginal and a Western story (Steffensen & Colker, 1982), and Johnson's study of Iranian and American readers. Johnson's conclusion was that cultural familiarity was more important for comprehension than either semantic or syntactic complexity (Johnson, 1981).

Gayle Nelson explored content schemata (as distinct from formal schema that are concerned with how the text is organised). She used mostly literary texts on the assumption that "literature is more culture specific than other types of reading material" (Nelson, 1987:424). Nelson made use of four Egyptian and four American texts in English, that were manipulated so that they were equally 'readable' to the ESL Egyptian students taking an intensive English course in Cairo. Nelson found confirmation of schema theory inasmuch as the students performed significantly better when the content was Egyptian. However, and perhaps more unexpectedly, students were also asked which of the texts in each Egyptian/American pair they enjoyed more,

and here Nelson found that “although there were some strong preferences for readings, there were neither strong nor significant overall correlations between performance and preference” (Nelson, 1987:427).

Salim Abu-Rabia (1996) asked students to answer multiple choice questions based on short, linguistically-controlled and culturally-loaded stories. His material has been taken to show that whilst cultural familiarity facilitated reading comprehension for both Israeli and Arab students in Israel, cultural familiarity was not a significant variable for reading comprehension for Arab students in Canada, whereas language was. Here the Arab students achieved higher scores when reading texts in English than in Arabic, despite Arabic being their home language. Abu-Rabia seeks to explain this apparent discrepancy with reference to the different policies of integration in Israel and Canada, arguing that “their becoming familiar with other cultures within 2 or 3 years is related to the multicultural atmosphere in Canada,” and describes this atmosphere as one that “gives a warm and supportive learning atmosphere at the level of policy and daily life” (Abu-Rabia, 1996:6). Abu-Rabia’s study was ostensibly concerned with schema theory, but his findings require alternative explanations. He should rather, I think, have explored the implications of comparing the reading comprehension scores for Jewish and English texts, when the Jewish texts are based on religious and moral pieces from the eighteenth century and the English texts are taken from a 1990 Canadian school anthology. The fact that the Arab, Jewish and English stories differ with regard to subject matter, pedagogical intent and contemporary relevance represents a serious threat to the internal validity of Abu-Rabia’s research, since these factors systematically influence the accessibility of the cultural content.

What makes the approach in all of these studies of lesser relevance for my own material is their focus on quantifiable reading skills, such as reading speed and number of units of information recalled, and their assumption that there is one correct reading. Terms like ‘cultural information’ or ‘culturally-loaded’ are used but not defined or exemplified. In this approach differences between individuals are treated as statistical variation, and individual voices are not heard, far less discussed.

3.4 Cross-cultural reception

Under this heading I review those studies that consider how individuals or groups from distinct cultural backgrounds create meaning when they read the same or a similar literary text. These studies seek to explain the systematic similarities and differences between the groups in terms of the cultural and textual experience that the readers, as a group and as individuals, bring to their reading. 3.4.1 deals with studies involving two groups that are contrasted and compared. In 3.4.2 I look at bigger studies, where five or six nationally-defined groups of readers are

compared. In 3.4.3 I look at an apparently different sort of study, namely one that examined the attitudes of different sociologically-defined groups to a television programme. I include it here because of its comparative design, and because it makes use of Hall's terminology in describing how the ideology of texts is decoded, an approach I make use of in discussing *The Other War*.

3.4.1 *Comparing two national groups*

A study carried out by Fathi Yousef looked at the way Middle Eastern and American adults understood a short story, "The Sculptor's Funeral" by Willa Cather. The story is about a successful sculptor whose body is returned to his family for burial, and how his family and others react to his death. Loudest in her grief is the mother, a woman who, says the family lawyer, had always dominated and bullied the son and everyone else, "for there never was anybody like her for demonstrative piety and ingenious cruelty". American readers followed the many textual indicators that judged the mother's demonstrative grief to be vulgar and superficial. The Middle-Eastern adults had different expectations as to how genuinely felt grief is expressed and understood the mother's grief to be strongly felt (Yousef, 1986). Yousef's research is weakened by the precariousness of claims based on the idea of there being an essential culture for such diverse and unstable groups as "Middle-Easterners" and "Americans". Yet he does provide an interesting example of how a passage can be read 'against the authorial intent' when readers bring different cultural and textual expectations to their reading.

Fiona Brutscher asked Irish and German readers, men and women, to respond to a postmodern story, "Impossible Saints" by Michele Roberts, that has obscene language and themes she judged to be taboo. She hoped to provoke strong reactions that "should lead to distinct results". Brutscher approached her material with explicit hypotheses about how the various categories of readers would react to the story. Answers to a digital questionnaire were submitted by clicking options, and the responses were statistically analysed. Brutscher's main finding was that "judgments on taboo and obscenity are highly dependent on culture and to a certain degree dependent on gender" (Brutscher, 2007:284). By limiting the possible responses of the readers to one-click (and occasionally multiple-click) options, the study is able to test hypotheses but does not explore the range of other meanings that this story may have had for its readers. Brutscher sees readers' reactions as a way of making visible the disguised, socially imposed cultural grid that all readers, indeed all people, have internalized (2007:279). A weakness of this study is that literature is not seen as an aesthetic or a sociocultural artefact but simply as a means by which differences between Irish and German men and women can be highlighted. If gaining "distinct results" to sexually explicit material was the guiding criterion in her selection of a text, she could just have well have questioned her research participants on

their response to a pornographic text or photo. Brutscher herself, however, simply claims that one judges literature as one judges life:

There is obviously a connection between the judgment of a fictional situation and that of lived experience, because testing reader response is inseparable from studying what sorts of values, meanings, affects and ideas the reader assigns to literary texts. (2007:285)

An empirical cross-cultural study by Andrew Smith of the reception of two novels shows considerably more theoretical and methodological insight. In Smith's study three small groups of Scottish readers in Scotland read Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, the seminal Nigerian novel about Igbo village life and the impact of British imperialism upon it. A group of Nigerian readers in Nigeria read Iain Crichton Smith's *Consider the Lilies*, a Scottish novel about the Highland clearances. The two novels share the theme of the destructive impact of an intruding power on a rural community (the Christian church and a colonial British administration in the one case, a feudal landowner in the other). Both books have made a significant contribution to the two countries' understanding of their respective histories. Smith explains that the Scottish novel draws on "a foundational myth in Scottish nationalist sentiment, and the novel itself, which has an established curricular status, has become part of the propagation of that structure of feeling" (Smith, 2003:307).

Smith takes a Marxist position, considering the social contexts of production and reception as crucial to what a literary text means (2003:241). There is, he claims, a fundamental difference between a local reader and one who does not belong to the local audience, and although we obviously need to be aware of the complexity of the concept of 'a local reader', "pointing out the fuzzy edges of such diacritical statements comes a poor second to appreciating their necessity" (2003:272). But the term 'local reader' is complicated in Nigeria, as it is in Eritrea, by there being a geographical divide (south/north for Nigeria, highlands/lowlands for Eritrea) that is also, roughly speaking, a Christian/Muslim divide. Furthermore both nations are so multi-ethnic that, as Smith says of Nigeria, "it is debatable whether anything like a *popular* national culture can be said to exist" (2003:238, italics added). But Smith observed that assertions of ownership to cultural products do nonetheless form the basis for interpretative agreements and he reasons that the affiliation a reader has to a text is felt rather than rationalised (2003:275).

Smith discusses his readers both as members of a nationally situated group and as individuals. One of his most interesting findings is that many of the Nigerian readers right from the start identified with the Scottish story – "it has a perception of things Nigerians have", as one respondent said (2003:308). Nearly all the Scottish readers, on the other hand, mentioned a

feeling of initial dislocation when they started reading *Things Fall Apart*. This was sometimes replaced by “an epiphany of recognition” as they went on reading and began to understand Igbo society in terms of their own Scottish experience (2003:254). Smith’s findings show a continuum of difference from those Scottish readers who defend the colonial project as they had been taught it at school, to the alignment that most of the working class readers made with the Igbo villagers. Smith explains this difference between Scottish readers thus: “Not everyone, after all, has the same social investment in a glorified national history” (2003:264).

Most Scottish readers, however, struggled to get involved with *Things Fall Apart*. Smith cites one reader who said “it may sound insular, but I am not interested in Africa, and when I choose books in the library, I steer clear of anything [...] about Africa” (2003:309). When reflecting on the initial difficulty experienced by nearly all the Scottish readers, and the initial ease with which the Nigerian readers met the Scottish text, he turns to Spivak’s term “sanctioned ignorance” to describe how deliberately *not* knowing about something can be used to define that ‘something’ as unimportant and not worth knowing. And therefore, he argues, it might be “useful to think of European sanctioned ignorance with regard to Africa, and Africa’s necessary knowledge of Europe, as two sides of the one historically minted coin” (2003:312).

Smith’s study uses a radically different approach to Brutscher, inasmuch as he is interested in the literary text not as a tool to make readers articulate their attitudes, but as a complex social, economic and cultural product. Where Brutscher quantifies the responses of Germans and Irish, men and women, Smith listens out for the individual voices within the groups. There is in fact so much variation in the way the different groups in his study are constituted that he calls into question the validity of his comparative findings. His exploration of his material, however, offers insights that are relevant to the present study, and I will mention one more example here. Smith asked his Scottish students to write a short essay about any aspects of the novel that interested them. Many chose to retell, or ‘re-plot’ as he calls it, and Smith gives us an interesting reflection on his own assumptions about retelling. He started off assuming that critical distance is a sign of quality in the student texts, and he was, he says, inclined to dismiss those essays that gave a plot summary as naive and uncritical. However, he came to understand that this was “an essentially judgmental paradigm” and that re-plotting is the characteristic critical position of oral storytellers, the very tradition on which Achebe so deliberately draws.

The apparent absence of a critical personality in an essay that reprises the plot of *Things Fall Apart* clearly cannot mean the actual absence of critical choices in that re-telling. There are actions of editing and emphasis which imply basic critical decisions. Rehearsing the story may represent a lack of critical distance, but not of critical thought; a re-telling is itself a new ‘reading’. (Smith, 2000:26)

An unpublished study by Elisabeth Ibsen carried out in the early 1990s involved the short story “The Fishing-Boat Picture” by Alan Sillitoe (Ibsen & Wiland, 2000:67-79). It was read by students at upper secondary school in Norway, and by slightly younger teenagers in an industrialized part of northern England. The story itself is set in northern England in the years before World War 2, and told by a postman narrator looking back over his wasted life and marriage. Ibsen wondered whether teenagers in the 1990s could make sense of the story. The students were invited to write a reading log. Ibsen found that the Norwegian students read a message about how alcohol can ruin people’s lives, and she comments that this is “quite a typical Norwegian way of looking at literature, the belief that literature should teach a moral lesson” (2000:69). Despite their having been taught about the class system in Britain a few weeks earlier, she found that none of the students referred to the sociocultural setting of the story. The pupils in northern England did much the same tasks as the Norwegian pupils. They differed in socio-economic background to the Norwegian pupils, and they were a little younger. Ibsen found the reading logs to be the best material to compare “as they represented the written source least influenced by external factors” (2000:69-70). She noted that

Both groups often resorted to summarising, and both groups expressed likes and dislikes. The Norwegian students wrote longer and more expressively. The English students had more questions about details and responded to content. (2000:71)

3.4.2 *‘Multinational’ comparison*

Turning now to studies that have compared more than two nationally-defined groups, I start with the Research Unit for Contemporary Culture at Jyväskylä University in Finland, which has produced several cross-national studies of literary reception. Katarina Eskola headed a project in which researchers in six European countries investigated how two groups of readers – young students and middle-class professionals – made sense of a very short and very violent Finnish short story by Rosa Liksom. The choice of a short story, despite it being “not today’s most characteristic medium”, was grounded in literature carrying “notions of national culture as well as moral and aesthetic values. These notions may be expected to serve as a foil to the erosion of those values [which is the subject of the story itself]” (Kovala & Vainikkala, 2000:21).

Researchers in each country organised the national studies according to their own fields of interest, so that although they all used a qualitative approach, their findings were not strictly comparable. Commenting on their work, Hall remarks on the problems of confounding cultural difference and national difference. Whilst national identity is still a powerful force that can be put to many ends, it is internally differentiated and changing all the time. “All that you can do”, he advised, “is reflect during it [the research period] or afterwards on the categories that you are

obliged to treat as if they were more stable than they actually are in a changing situation” (2000:317).

Kovala and Vainikkala also note that gender and age were significant interpretive parameters (2000:18). But whilst gender was more significant than generation in the Bulgarian study, generation was more significant than gender in the other five countries involved. The relative importance of these two factors varied, depending on what sort of questions the researchers were interested in. It was especially questions about which characters the respondents identified with, and how they felt about the story, that produced strong and gendered patterns of response. Also the extent to which respondents used paraphrase varied with gender, but in Germany it was men who generalised, in Bulgaria it was women, and in France it was usually the middle-aged, as against the student, respondents. This and other different patterns that the various national research teams found lead Kovala and Vainikkala to conclude that their findings discourage generalisations based on so-called stable background variables (2000:64).

Another study from Jyväskylä University looked at how young people in five countries responded to fantasy stories. It is the questions that the researchers asked, more perhaps than their findings, which are helpful when I turn to my own material. The overarching question that they put to their material was “what can be read off from these responses in relation to the on-going changes in our societies” (Hirsjärvi, 2006:1). The research team was interested in “some crucial issues in contemporary culture and in particular to the question of community and the relationship of individual desires to the idea of community” (2006:1). They asked their readers to write a response to three open-ended questions. The research team selected from a comprehensive set of questions in order to analyse the responses. The questions were divided into seven categories. One category they called ‘Individuality, family and society in the story’, which they used to consider moral codes, how cultural ‘otherness’ was dealt with, and whether respondents took a moral stand themselves. Another interesting category involved the expression of emotion and the search for “patterns of identification, repudiation, or ambivalence vis-à-vis the characters” (2006:4).

An ambitious project that investigated reading in groups of different nationalities ran from 2007-2010. Entitled “Devolving Diasporas”, it set up reading groups in Scotland, Tunisia, Nigeria, India and Trinidad and selected three novels and an anthology of poetry that all the groups should read. All three novels were contemporary and set in London. They were chosen because there was “a certain consensus about [their] literary value in the present global literary marketplace” (“Devolving Diasporas”, 2008). From the outset the reading groups were very different, reflecting the social styles of the different nationalities, the organisational affiliation of

the groups, how participants were recruited and the personal style of the group facilitators. Several reading groups reported that what was unfamiliar and fascinating to one group of readers was felt by other readers to be dull and overly familiar. Thus *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali, a novel that introduced an enthusiastic readership in Britain and elsewhere to the lives of Bangladeshi immigrants, was regarded as old hat by Glaswegian readers who lived in areas where many Bangladeshi lived. Similarly *Small Island*, a novel by Andrea Levi about Trinidadian immigration and race relations in the UK, was read by Trinidadians as just another rehash of familiar history.¹¹ These responses are reminiscent of the overfamiliarity that leads some Eritrean students to be less than enthusiastic about Eritrean literature, which to me and many of the Norwegian respondents seemed so fascinating.

3.4.3 Morley's study

I now turn to David Morley's study of how viewer audiences responded to news coverage in the TV programme *Nationwide*. The study is cross-cultural inasmuch as it describes groups in terms of socio-economic class, education, political allegiance, age and gender. Although apparently very different from the other studies discussed here, Morley's 1980 study of how groups responded has proved a useful point of reference. This is due, most importantly, to its being concerned with a TV discourse that is political, just as I am concerned with a play – *The Other War* – that is political. At a methodological level it has interest because it attempts to put Hall's theory of encoding and decoding into practice, something Hall himself did not do, but something I also attempt in chapter 12.

The TV message is treated as a complex sign, in which a preferred reading has been inscribed, but which retains the potential, if decoded in a manner different from the way in which it has been encoded, of communicating a different meaning. (Morley, 1980:10)

Morley's study is also useful because he developed Parkin's (1973) simple categories of dominant, negotiated and oppositional reading into a more differentiated model, a complex spectrum that better enabled him to discuss the "actual decoding positions within the media audience" (1980:20). Morley preferred to work with groups rather than individuals, and he worked with groups that were not put together for the purposes of his study. He gave as his reason that "much individually based interview research is flawed by a focus on individuals as social atoms divorced from their social context" (1980:33). His finding was that differences within a group were far less marked than the differences between groups. He saw individuals in the groups as sharing a cultural (or sub-cultural) orientation that led them to decode messages in

¹¹ Fuller, D., Benhayoun, J., Prasad, G., Laughlin, N., Isma, R., Allan, D., et al.: Roundtable discussion at the conference "Reading After Empire: Local, Global and Diaspora Audiences", Stirling University, 03.09.2008. .

particular ways that pre-existed but did not entirely determine their individual responses.

Although predisposed to see socio-economic class as the central category (1980:14-15), he found that class was only one of several social factors that played a part in how groups ‘read’ the messages of *Nationwide*. Two of the groups he studied were students at a teacher training college, most of them women. The London-based, largely Conservative, teacher training students were sympathetic to student activities featured in the news, even though most other viewers shared the dominant encoding of them as ‘wasting time’. Morley ascribes this sympathy to their involvement in an educational discourse, which means that they negotiated the dominant Conservative encoding of the programme, despite their sympathy for the Conservative party. He gives the same reason – involvement in an educational discourse – to account for their criticism of the programme for not being serious or worthwhile (1980:141-142).

Morley defended the importance of looking at the detail of what people actually said, at the same time as he aspired to succinct objectivity, and saw the lack of a systematic way of describing what the respondents said as a major ‘limitation’ of his study. It seems to me, however, that this is a necessary limitation, given the complex subject of his research. Morley’s perception of “the absence of any adequate method which would enable us to formalise and condense the particular responses into consistent linguistic and/or ideological categories” (1980:163) has to do with ideals from quantitative research where a measure of validity is that independent researchers reach the same results, and that these results can be articulated in the same terms. Such ideals mark several of the studies discussed earlier in this chapter, and, as I have shown, they have produced consistent categories at the expense of saying something that properly describes the complexities of reader and audience response.

3.5 Academic writing tells us something about the writer

3.5.1 National discourse positions

An aspect of the student texts to which I pay attention has to do with how students position themselves in their own texts. Recent research sheds light on how different nationally-defined groups use a range of linguistic features, and pronouns in particular, to do so. That personal pronouns are used differently by different nationalities when writing scientific articles is clearly established in a quantitative study by Netsel et al. (2003). They tagged all recent articles on biomedicine in the MEDLINE data base from the fifty most published nations. These included European and other Western countries (amongst them Norway), many other non-European nations and some African nations. They then compared these articles – almost half of which were from countries where English was not the first or official language – with regard to a range of linguistic features. One of these was the relative frequency of personal pronouns in the

first person versus the number of passive constructions. They remark on what they describe as a remarkable difference in the implied presence of the author in his or her research, depending on which nation they belong to (Netsel, Prez-Iratxera, Bork, & Andrade, 2003:446).¹²

I know of no studies of academic writing in Eritrea, or in East Africa, for that matter, and Fløttum et al.'s study (2006) is the only one of which I am aware that *discusses* the discursual positioning of Norwegian writers. In their work the study of first person singular subjects in texts is largely an attempt to systematise the various roles that authors assigns to themselves. These roles they describe as writer, researcher, arguer and evaluator (Fløttum, Dahl, & Kinn, 2006:67).

Making use of insights from studies of other countries necessarily entails the uncertainty of extrapolating generalisations between cultures and contexts. However three quite recent studies of academic writing, in Hong Kong, the UK and Greece, are of interest because they adduce a range of putative reasons for the willingness or unwillingness of academic writers to use the pronoun 'I'. These reasons provide a range of possibilities for understanding the academic writing of the students in Eritrea and Norway.

In his study of how undergraduates in their final year in Hong Kong used personal pronouns, Hyland explored why these students avoided using 'I'. He found that this avoidance was most marked when the students were involved in a 'high-risk function' such as elaborating an argument or making a claim. Amongst those students who did use a personal pronoun, many preferred the rhetorical distance that 'we' allows (Hyland, 2002:1108). Hyland suggests that the avoidance of first person pronouns is to a large extent culturally and ideologically determined:

There are several possible reasons why these students might choose to avoid self-mention in their reports: recommendations from style manuals, uncertainties about disciplinary conventions, culturally shaped epistemologies, culture-specific views of authority, conflicting teacher advice, or personal preferences. (Hyland, 2002:1107)

Ivanič looked at several linguistic and discursual features that students in the UK used to position themselves when writing academic assignments. One of these was the use of the pronoun 'I'.

Using 'I' in association with at least some of the knowledge claims and beliefs acknowledges the writer's responsibility for them and property rights over them. [...] I would suggest that those writers who choose to make their role in knowledge-making explicit are taking a different ideological stance from those who don't. (Ivanič, 1998:308)

Koutsantoni found a very different pattern in her investigation of research articles and student writing in Greece. When students use 'I', says Koutsantoni, they are positioning themselves as

¹² The use of the first person pronoun and the passive construction was very similar in the Norwegian and the UK articles.

aspirant members of the academic community. She tries to account for some of the rhetorical practices in her material in terms of Greek culture. Personal pronouns are one of the linguistic variants she identifies. Her analysis is rooted in a holistic tradition of explanation that looks pragmatically at what writers are doing when they choose pronouns and other linguistic features. More precisely, she explores the manifestation of four parameters that Hofstede (1980) found to differ between nations: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism-collectivism and masculinity-femininity.¹³ Since his findings about Norwegian attitudes are based on surveys carried out in 1968 and 1972 their accuracy as cultural parameters can no longer be assumed, but the categories as such are of considerable interest:

Power distance relates to cultural attitudes towards status and social hierarchies, the degree to which a culture believes that institutional and organizational power should be distributed unequally, and whether the decisions of the power holders should be challenged or accepted. *Uncertainty avoidance* describes the extent to which a culture feels threatened by uncertain situations and seeks to avoid them by establishing more structure. *Individualism-collectivism* relates to the degree to which a culture relies on and has allegiance to the self or the group. Finally, *masculinity-femininity* indicates the degree to which a culture values behaviours such as “male assertiveness” and “female nurturance”. (Koutsantoni, 2005:100, original italics)

Using this framework and Hofstede’s findings, it is possible to understand the open and unhesitating expression of values and opinions in Greek academic discourse as being a reflection of the national characteristic of high uncertainty avoidance, its tendency towards rigidity, dogmatism and intolerance of different opinions (Koutsantoni, 2005:102).

Hyland (1996) theorises hedging, basing his conclusions on research in the UK. He argues that the way students and academic experts use personally attributed hedges (such as ‘as far as I/we know’) is motivated by the need to show deference to readers and to allow for alternative opinions. Norwegian respondents, I believe, use hedges in much the same way as the UK students in Hyland’s study. Koutsantoni argues that while this interpretation might be valid in individualistic societies, it is not valid in collective societies, such as the Greek, where hedging is used to protect the writer from personal criticism (Koutsantoni, 2005:125). As to Eritrea, there is no doubt that the dominant social ethos has been collective rather than individualistic. Therefore the explanation offered for the collective society to which the Greek students belong, namely that hedging protects them from personal criticism, may better explain the possible occurrence of hedging in the Eritrean material.

¹³ Hofstede’s research was commissioned amongst the national staff of countries where subsidiaries of a US-based multi-national were based. The cultural indices that Hofstede developed were compiled on the basis of a longitudinal survey of the work-related attitudes of employees, involving 117,000 survey questionnaires from 66 countries, including Norway (Hofstede, 1984).

3.6 Concluding remarks

In the comparative quantitative studies of reading presented here, researchers tend to focus on tabulating scores. This means that they regard sociocultural factors that give rise to differences in the collection procedure or in the recruitment group as a disturbance, rather than as factors that should be brought into prominent dialogue with the scores. Another tendency is the use of literary texts with an extreme, taboo-breaking content. Clumsily used they produce ‘findings’ that reinforce stereotypes, without providing insight into how meaning is developed and negotiated. More variously used, as in the Jyväskylä group, they provide a complex picture, suggesting significant national and gender differences between readers. But in that the Jyväskylä group of researchers tolerated great variation in methodological and interpretive approach between the various national research teams, their study provides somewhat precarious grounds for intercultural comparison.

Rather than look at extreme texts, it is more fertile to look at texts that might otherwise be read by the groups of readers one is interested in. This means that one must deal with the complex responses that are elicited, and relinquish ambitions of succinctness and reliability. The findings of the two major reception studies in Norway, the comparative studies of Smith and Morley, and the ‘multicultural studies’ of section 3.4.2 cannot be summed up in tables, or for that matter validated in my own material. The methods and reflections that they bring to their work illustrate the limitations and advantages of the range of approaches they have used. They also illustrate the risks one must take in order to make sense of a reader’s response. One might say that individual case and group studies give us insight, and the possibility of recognising patterns of response in other studies. By their own example they encourage sensitivity to the ideological and psycho-social factors in the respondents’ texts, but they are not, and do not aim to be, predictive of the actual response of readers in other studies.

The work of Hyland, Ivanič, Koutsantoni and Hofstede suggests categories that have proven useful in describing the academic literacy of different nationally-defined groups. The studies of the first three focus on more academically ambitious texts than does mine. When it comes to studies of national discourse positions in the humanist domain (as opposed to the domain of science and technology), Fløttum et al. expect that the use of personal pronouns would be more widespread, regardless of nationality (Fløttum, et al., 2006:21). Is this expectation borne out by my material? To what extent can one expect to find national differences in the frequency and function of statements with personal pronouns? Will national differences be evident also in the ‘subjective’ domain of responding to literary texts? Netsel et al. did not explore the function of pronouns, but only their frequency. However by first counting

the various personal pronouns in the student texts, and then looking at the discursual function that these pronouns serve, we can gain insight into how readers go about presenting their understanding of a text. Whilst Hofstede's categories were not based on writing at all, but on answers to multiple-choice questionnaires, they provide the categories that have proved most productive in discussing the student responses: uncertainty avoidance and individualism-collectivism.

Descriptive categories based on perceived cultural differences between one nation and another must be used with great caution, for indeed, what is cultural difference and what does it mean to belong to a nation? These terms, whilst pivotal concepts in the comparative studies in this chapter, are remarkably undertheorised by the researchers themselves. In chapter 4 I make a contribution towards filling this gap.

4 Culture, nation and context

4.1 An overview

This study asks how students in Eritrea and Norway read literature. The main concern of this chapter is to investigate the key theoretical concepts that underpin the assumption underlying this question: that it is meaningful to talk of a national culture, and that it is meaningful to talk of contexts that groups of students share. This involves clarifying what ‘culture’ and ‘nation’ mean here, and investigating how the two terms relate to one another. It also involves considering how to put the term ‘context’ to work, something it must do at many levels.

There is another important reason for exploring the term ‘nation’. Not only the students, but also the literature to which they responded, are Eritrean. The discussion in chapter 9 about the functions of national literature draws on the understanding of nation developed in this chapter. The *actualities* of Eritrean nation-building and the narratives of Eritrean nationhood are explored in chapter 6.

“Life is translation, and we are all lost in it”, concludes social anthropologist Clifford Geertz in his essay “Found in Translation” (Geertz, 1977:799). It is a little bit of life that is under investigation in this project – and its translation from something out there to something on these pages requires a workable conceptual framework. I could have built a framework around the concepts of discourse or identity, narrative or translation. I do in fact draw on all these terms, but build the conceptual and interpretive framework to which they contribute on an understanding of culture and context, both polysemous terms, with which we must now ‘come to terms’.

4.2 Three key terms

4.2.1 Culture

Not surprisingly, the term ‘culture’ is used in so very many inconsistent and often conflicting ways, and in so many academic fields, as well as in everyday discourse, that Jan Thavenius (1999) asks whether it can serve an analytic function in empirical research. He answers his own query by seeing the complexity of the term as a mark of its importance. ‘Culture’ is a term we need in order to analyse and discuss important aspects of social life, he says, but we need to revise our understanding of it all the time and we need to be aware that cultural categories are contingent and relative. And despite the complexity and extension of the term, we can take comfort from his aphorism: “Not everything is culture, even though most things can be seen from a cultural perspective” (Thavenius, 1999:92, my translation). Hans Fink (1988) has described it as ‘hypercomplex’, by which he means that its component meanings are both in

conflict with one another, and indisputably interrelated. The hypercomplexity of the term, he says, parallels the hypercomplexity of social reality:

For studies of culture in all their various forms this term ‘culture’ means that nothing can a priori be excluded as culturally irrelevant in a particular context. The term ‘culture’ does not give an unproblematic delimitation of the object of research (just as the term ‘nature’ does not serve this purpose for natural science). One must make explicit the necessary delimitations and take responsibility for them. And something important will always be left out. (Fink, 1988:23, my translation)

The way forward, as Fink and Thavenius point out, is to focus on the purpose to which *we* will put the term, but we should also be aware of alternative ways of understanding it (Lundgren, 2002:28-29). I start by looking at a few of these alternatives, before identifying the purposes to which I myself put the term.

Much confusion, it seems, arises because culture is used to refer to what a group has in common over time, but it can also refer to the values that an individual is guided by at a particular point in time. These two usages can be illustrated in caricature. On the one hand cultures can be described like entries in a lexicon, each entry with a determinate description that we can learn and then use with explanatory force: “She writes like this because of her culture: she is Maori”. In fact comparative studies of how people read literature tend to use the term in this way, as though it described a closed set of lexical entries, and this untheorised understanding jeopardises the validity of the conclusions that they draw. The work of Greaney and Neuman (1990) is one of many possible examples, inasmuch as they use the finite term ‘country’ and the contingent term ‘culture’ interchangeably. Also two theoreticians of nationhood to whom I refer later in this chapter, Ernest Gellner and Monserrat Guiberneau, tend towards a lexical understanding that equates a nation and a culture.

For a more enlightening use of the term, let me return to Geertz, for whom what has meaning for a group of people is what makes it a part of their culture. Thus attitudes and values that are held in common are part of what constitute culture. He provides a complex and inclusive, but still stable, lexical definition of culture as

an historically transmitted pattern of meaning embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life. (Geertz, 1973:89)

Geertz is an anti-mentalist, in that he claims culture to be observable as actions in the public domain. It can therefore, he says, be described and studied because it does not require privileged access to the emotions and intellects of individuals. However I would argue that though we can talk about culture without this access, cultural meaning does have a psychological existence independent of behaviour, although to explore cognitive models of

culture from Bartlett (1932) to van Dijk (2008, 2009) is beyond the scope of this thesis. Geertz maintains that the analysis of people's actions is a search for their meaning, an activity that is in important ways similar to the work of a literary critic (1973:9). What culture is not is "something to which social events, behaviors, institutions or processes can be causally attributed" (1973:14).

Ann Swidler criticizes Geertz because, she says, culture is much less consistent than he proposes.

If we wish to explain individual action or wider social patterns in cultural terms, it will no longer do to say 'Americans do it this way' or 'the French do it that way' because of their culture. Cultures are complex and contradictory, and even a common culture can be used in very different ways. Thus, effective cultural explanation depends on understanding how culture is put to use. (Swidler, 2001:5-6)

Swidler can represent my second caricature: culture-on-a-trolley. In this view culture is made up of symbols, meaning, values and patterns of action more or less systematically laid out, where individuals can browse, select and reject items according to their taste, their previous experience and the company they keep. Swidler's own study is based on a group of primarily middle-class Mid-Western Americans, who shuffle and combine inconsistent paradigms about interpersonal relationships. We readily use contradictory ideologies under different circumstances, says Swidler, and this in itself seems an important insight to bring to the present material. People have multiple cultural repertoires, and thinking of culture as a repertoire allows us to ask not only what someone has in their repertoire, but why they perform some items more frequently than others, and under what circumstances (Swidler, 2001:25). Swidler argues that she, unlike Geertz, is able to account for the use to which individuals put the cultural repertoires to which they have access.

This 'trolley' understanding of culture has wide academic currency, it seems. Swidler's study of what some US Americans think about love and interpersonal relations allows her to develop insight into how people put culture to use. She is, however, dealing with a particular, though undeniably important, aspect of life, but not, as she claims, with "a common culture". Her study therefore risks generalising from one aspect of life to a common culture. That findings about how some people from one region of the US can account for how *all* people relate to *all* the interpretational paradigms available to them makes her practice-oriented understanding of culture, in my view, as flawed as the lexicalised understanding in the first caricature. Despite the immediate insights her study provides into a central aspect of human life, I note also her conceptual slide from culture to ideology. Yes indeed, people can choose between *ideologies*, and they can build them into repertoires of behaviour that are appropriate in certain contexts,

and not appropriate in others. Furthermore, though people can deal with incompatible ideologies about interpersonal relationships, this is an exhausting undertaking. Were such ideological choices to be made about all aspects of life, the task would be overwhelming and require an agency too enervating to sustain. Stanley Fish maintains that in fact a single human consciousness cannot be relativist:

while relativism is a position one can entertain, it is not a position one can occupy. No one can be a relativist, because no one can achieve the distance from his own beliefs and assumptions which would result in their being no more authoritative for him than the beliefs and assumptions held by others, or for that matter, the beliefs and assumptions he himself used to hold. (Fish, 1980:319)

In other words, according to Fish, all our beliefs, at any one point in time are generated in a context which we occupy and from which we understand the world. Fish does not seem to entertain the possibility that a person may *not* hold firm beliefs. But this, as Swidler shows, is surely the case.

Wendy Griswold (2008) notes that the interpretational force of a practice-oriented understanding of culture has lost currency in the public domain. Since ‘nine-eleven’ many people have wanted to find out what could explain religious terrorism, and needed an understanding of culture that could provide explanations for alternative systems of collective meaning (Griswold, 2008:42). The increased research interest in culture and context over the last thirty years (2008:xv) can also be understood as an aspect of globalisation, which generates a pressing need to understand groups of people who seem to think differently from ‘us’.

Perhaps the apparent opposition between the lexical and the trolley understanding of culture can be lessened by thinking of cultures as entries in Wikipedia, an encyclopaedia continually under revision to which most readers and some writers have access, and with hyperlinks between the entries. From a sufficient distance, we can talk about different cultures. Indeed, we cannot really manage without doing so, as Thavenius says. Nor, I maintain, can we manage without seeing individuals as having access to a complex but relatively stable individualised matrix drawn from the cultures and contexts of their experience. Agency they have, inconsistent they may be, but they do not endlessly renew their cultural repertoire from a trolley-of-choice.

Thavenius draws a comparison with how we talk about women and men as having two distinct cultures, although we know that women differ greatly from one another and that some women share many characteristics with some men (Thavenius, 1999:93). When we talk about different cultures, we have to be aware that the term provides a rough and ready way of talking about something extremely complex and that it can be as misleading as it is helpful. An awareness of the complexity and contingency captured in Swidler’s critique of a lexical understanding of culture must therefore be combined with a working definition that allows for

the discussion of groups in terms of the *common* culture which makes life meaningful to them in their shared contexts. The different ways in which they make use of this culture, and indeed the extent to which it is ‘common’, is the topic of Part Three: Response.

4.2.2 *Nation*

The students in this study belong to two nations, and are compared on this premise. To understand what belonging to a nation might mean, one must consider how nations have come into historical being, in what ways their meanings have changed over time, and why today they command such profound emotional legitimacy. Guibernau distinguishes between a nation and a nation-state. In modern political discourse, he writes, the term ‘nation’ refers to “a human group conscious of forming a community, sharing a common culture, attached to a clearly demarcated territory, having a common past and a common project for the future and claiming the right to rule itself” (Guibernau 1996:47, cited in Oliphant, 2004:11). Guibernau contrasts the members of a nation who are conscious of forming a community, with a nation-state which seeks to create a political entity – the nation – and develop a sense of community stemming from it. “While the nation has a common culture, the nation-state is an expression of nationalism and has as its objective the *creation* of a common culture, symbols and values” (Guibernau 1996:48, cited in Oliphant, 2004:18).

Gellner writes about what he describes as marriages between nation-state and culture with reference to European nationhood. There are patterns that some countries share, at least when seen from a certain distance, he says (Gellner, 1997:15), and their marriages can be harmonious or demonic, voluntary or coerced. The marriages of constructed states to multiple cultures, such as we have seen in Eastern Europe, are precarious. These marriages called for both political and cultural construction, and relatively brutal foundation work had to be undertaken to force a whole from the ethnic patchwork (1997:67). Mostly harmonious are those marriages where culture, territorial and political delimitation coincided long before the emergence of nation-states, and amongst these marriages, alongside nation-states based on London, Paris, Lisbon and Madrid (1997:71), I think Gellner could place Norway.

Guibernau’s distinction between a nation and a nation-state oversimplifies the very many ways in which a state and its peoples are related. Although many sociologists use the term nation-state to underline that all nations are made rather than found, it can also carry normative connotations that favour the happy marriages of cultures and *nations* in Western Europe, over the demonic marriages of newer nation-states, as in Gellner’s argumentation. I prefer to use only

the term ‘nation’, which acknowledges that both Norway and Eritrea are imagined and constructed, though at different times and in some different ways.¹⁴

4.2.3 *National culture*

The idea of ‘culture’ relates to the idea of ‘nation’ in complex ways, as we have seen. Common for many of them, however, is that a constructed nationhood reifies culture in that it enables people to talk about culture as though it were a constant (T. H. Eriksen, 1993:103). In an article entitled “Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Cultural Difference” (1969), Fredrik Barth and a group of Scandinavian colleagues developed a different understanding of how ethnicities are constructed and maintained. When republished in 2001, Barth recognised that what was said of ethnic communities could also hold true for nations, and how they are imagined (Barth, 2001:846). Barth and his colleagues showed that belonging to a group, be it an ethnic group or a nation, is constructed not by what they have in common but by cultural difference to others. The cultural features that gain significance are those that distinguish different groups *from* one another, and they are important because they mark boundaries and are emblems of identity, not because they are the most characteristic or the most enduring for the groups in question (2001:835). The simplest basis for belonging to a group or nation occurs when people collaborate to create an *apparent* discontinuity by underlining some few, clearly contrastive symbols and signs, rather than identifying themselves with the whole changeable register of cultural variation in a population (2001:840). This thinking also breaks with the idea that history can offer objective reasons for ethnic identity, and sees instead the writing of history as a struggle about who has the resources to represent, or ‘own’, the past (2001:836).

Speaking of Africa’s colonial history, Patrick Chabal says that ethnicity was “a hybrid category, encompassing a range of social, cultural and economic markers” (Chabal, 2009:22). It could be negotiated in many ways. With colonisation it became formalised and less flexible and the idea of tribes as distinct and non-negotiable was developed for administrative and political purposes. This tendency, he says, has been reinforced after independence (2009:32), although the imperative to build a strong and stable nation requires that the idea of tribe be deconstructed in favour of an ideology of nation-building. The term ‘nation-building’ was first used of the process of consolidation that many ex-colonies attempted in the early years of post-colonial

¹⁴ The idea of nationhood as imagined comes from Benedict Anderson, who famously defined a nation as “an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (Anderson, 2006:6). By ‘imagined’, he means not that nations are unreal, but that they cannot be directly experienced, since one cannot meet or know everybody in the nation to which one belongs. One must imagine them and oneself as belonging in a community together.

independence. This process aimed to build functional communities from the many ethnic groups within the political boundaries of the new state (Bø, 2006:10).¹⁵

In speaking of nationalism in Europe, Anderson argues that it came into being within “large cultural systems that preceded it” such as religion, rather than as a political ideology (Anderson, 2006:12). Anderson’s point, that nationalism draws on the same cultural systems as religion, goes a long way towards explaining why people are willing to die for nations, a question which Anderson raised, and which is of particular interest for Eritrea, where national loyalty and sacrifice are so prominent in the public rhetoric. He may well be right to claim that belonging to a particular nation is felt to be a necessary condition of life, and that this is why the nation can ask its people to make sacrifices that they wouldn’t make for a society which they could enter and leave at will.

Anderson’s thinking about what it means to belong to a nation has been hugely influential, but I am wary of adopting his generalisations to explain what it means for the students in this study to belong to Norway or Eritrea. Anderson argues that most people regard the nation as fundamentally unselfish, noble and bigger than the sum of its parts, and that “regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” (2006:7). In one sense this thesis can be seen as a confrontation with generalisations of this kind. Rather than claiming that “the nation is always conceived”, I explore how the students, as members of two nations which both, in different ways, emphasise “a deep, horizontal comradeship” as constitutive of their national cultures, put their cultural repertoires to use in responding to literature. To do so involves looking at the various contexts in which these responses are generated, and this again requires a working understanding of what the term ‘context’ can do.

4.2.4 *Context*

‘Context’ is perhaps not quite so hypercomplex a term as ‘culture’, but it would seem to have many synonyms and competing discourses, as van Dijk’s (2008, 2009) work shows. Perhaps the crux of the terminological complexity has to do with focus: the term is used of both a small setting, such as a verbal interaction in a classroom, observed in linguistic detail at close range, and national histories, described in a longitudinal perspective. William Hanks is helpful in identifying what both these usages have in common, and how they differ.

¹⁵ Later the term has come to be used retrospectively of processes in nineteenth century Europe whereby a continent of multinational states was politically reorganised to become a continent of national states, which needed a nation-building ‘social cement’ to replace the authority of the monarchies.

The fundamental role of context is its role in the production of discourse meaning. It is basically undefined: we do not know what its components are, and if they will ever be detailed enough. Contexts have two major dimensions: *emergence* in verbally mediated activity, interaction and co-presence, and *embedding* in broader frameworks. (Hanks 2006, referred to in van Dijk, 2009:199)

For Hanks emergence requires co-present participants, an assumption common to conversation analysis and much anthropological theory. In 5.2.2 I argue that individual writing in a classroom also has a social, interactional aspect, and hence that in Hank's terms it *is* an emergent context, and the responses that the students write are a local dimension of context, embedded in a broader social field. But van Dijk (2009) criticizes Hanks, and indeed many other theorists of context, for labelling without explaining. He points out how under-theorised context is, for it is often used as a synonym for environment, situation or setting, and left at that. In academic as well as everyday usage 'context' simply indicates that smaller events should be understood in a larger perspective. Van Dijk proposes that we need a mentalist model which could explain how individual response is embedded in non-verbal contexts. However, despite promising in the subtitle of *Society and Discourse* to explain "how social contexts influence text and talk", he admits that virtually all theories and field research relating to context are concerned not with written text but with spoken dialogue (2009:180). It is beyond the scope of the present project to undertake a fuller exploration of the mental and social processes that produce an emergent context from its social, political and culturally embedded contexts, and which could account for the fact that somehow or other people who share these objective contexts accomplish *textual* activities (such as the writing of a response to a literary text) in ways that arise and draw on shared contexts but differ from one individual to another. (To say that people have agency is also, surely, to label and not to explain.) Contexts, then, are both personal and collective, and they produce discourse that is both personal and collective, and a study of their interaction must integrate individual and collective approaches, showing how the one is to be found in the other.

We have earlier seen how Swidler separated the term culture from its ethnic bonds, and used it instead to talk about how an individual can choose from different and competing ideologies, or systems of meaning-making, that co-exist in a society. She appropriates the term context with the same audacity, and sees context not as the setting in which a communicative event occurs, but as the link between culture and action. If 'action' is understood as the writing of a response to a literary text, her thinking can again help to conceptualize this project, this time by seeing context as structuring cultural meanings and giving them "coherence and direct implications for action that they often lack in the thoughts and feelings of individuals" (Swidler,

2001:161). Her explanation is only applicable to *political* context, for she develops her argument with reference to politically unstable historical situations, and her thinking can therefore account for how culture determines action for politically unstable nations such as Eritrea. The weaker link between culture and action in Norway can correspondingly be explained by the nation's relative political stability. Swidler argues that without an analysis of contexts, we cannot understand why cultural choices matter more in some times and places than others" (2001:175). "Culture's effects are strongest where the context demands and enforces public cultural coherence", she says, and in uncertain or strongly politicized situations "people are more alert as to how they should act" (2001:170). She also accounts for the constraints and impulses to conformity of expression that exist in a totalizing political context, which can determine which culture, i.e. which meanings, are dominant, and indeed which culture is available at all to an individual.

Whether or not most individuals hold consistent unified cultural views, they rapidly understand the contextual meaning of taking one side versus another, and the potential meanings of expressing doubts, attempting to qualify their opinions, or objecting to aspects of what has become defined as a unitary position. (2001:171-172)

Swidler argues that we are too inclined to regard culture as internalized meanings and practices, rather than as people's knowledge of which cultural repertoires are appropriate in the public domain (2001:180). Swidler's understanding of political context as culture in action is productive in exploring the political context of Norway and Eritrea, but when it comes to education and literature in the two nations I use context to mean not 'culture in action' but simply situation, setting or practices.

4.3 Concluding remarks

In this chapter I have delimited culture to two usages. Firstly it is what Geertz calls 'webs of significance' (Geertz, 1973:4), social behaviour that has meaning over and above its phenomenological description, something to be interpreted rather than experimentally examined. Culture organises meaning in a community, and includes narrative templates (see 2.4.2) which guide a community in making sense of the otherwise overwhelming complexity of experience. I draw on this lexical understanding of culture, widespread in everyday speech and also in much comparative academic fieldwork. A practice-oriented, individualised understanding of culture is also relevant, for it can account for how individuals make use of competing cultural meanings. Comparing what has meaning to people in groups or nations presupposes a culture that they have in common, (though there may be much that they do *not* have in common). I cannot talk of culture in Eritrea and Norway without also following this discursive practice. For, as van Dijk observes, if we are to distinguish between a description

based on shared *social practices*, such as, say, a group of students of English may share, and a description based on *culture*, such as, say, people of all ages living in Eritrea may share, “we probably wind up again by applying the term culture preferably to *ethnic communities*” (2008:157, original italics). Since I do *not* want to wind up talking about ethnic communities, I must talk of culture as the common webs of significance of a politically-defined nation. In this definition, culture is what has meaning for a group of people who are already in some other way – common location or common language being the most obvious – defined as a group. They constitute an interpretive community by virtue both of the cultural repertoire that they share, but also by virtue of being in Eritrea, or in Norway and sharing political contexts, social practices and educational experiences.

‘Nation’ in this thesis refers to a macro-political construction which must have a strategy for integrating or downplaying internal ethnic difference, and which emphasises common history, common values, common achievements and distinctness from others. I have questioned whether Gellner’s study of the different ways that European nations have used culture to create a unified nation-state can account for the creation of non-European nation-states. Redie Bereketeab (2000) claims that a European model of nationhood cannot properly explain the Eritrean case, where people must balance national and sub-national ethnicity and the disruption of the unity narrative which some Eritreans share with Ethiopia, and chapter 6 considers at some length how Eritrean nationality is constructed.

The third key term – context – is a one-word-fits-all term that describes the many domains of which a person has experience. In this study embedding contexts define the students as an interpretive community. The students are thus members of a larger interpretive community, and at the same time, as a group they *constitute* an interpretive community. An understanding of an interpretive community as founded in the embedding contexts of a nation is broader than any exemplified by Fish in his discussion of the term.

In Part Two, I use the understanding of national culture and context developed here in presenting the cultures and contexts of the two groups of students in this project.

5 Methodology

5.1 An overview

This chapter is about the methodology needed to answer the question, “How do students in Eritrea and Norway make sense of literature?”. It requires

- an understanding of what sort of research this is
- ways of selecting, finding out about and describing respondents in the two countries
- suitable literary texts
- determining how to elicit response to these texts
- establishing how to analyse the response of the students as individuals and as members of an interpretive community
- an awareness of the project’s ethical dimensions, and my own role within it.

In section 5.2 I review Edward Said’s (1978) admonition to those in the West who write about ‘the rest’ not to ‘other’, and discuss what is implied by saying that this is a sociocultural and comparative study. In section 5.3 I review how comparable groups of respondents were recruited and the categories used to describe them. In 5.4 I describe in some detail the reasons that led me to reject interview as a way of finding out about the students’ background, and the format of the questionnaires that the students answered. Section 5.5 explains the grounds for choosing the literary texts for this study. Section 5.6 is about how the students’ response to the literary texts was elicited, and the assignments that were given for each text, and section 5.7 focuses on how their response was analysed. In the final section, 5.8, I discuss some ethical issues, including how consent was secured, and what that consent entailed, and I consider the roles and responsibilities of a researcher towards her students and towards the systems within which she works. In particular I describe conditions for research in Eritrea.

5.2 Approach

5.2.1 *Writing about other cultures*

Certain epistemological and ethical issues arise in studies involving people in countries at a considerable cultural remove from that of the researcher. Whilst I consider some of the general issues here, I also refer to Eritrea as a particular case, since some people question the desirability of foreigners doing research in Eritrea. One argument for their scepticism could be that a Westerner reinforces a description of the world based on concepts of individuality, education and literature that have been constructed almost exclusively in the West. This places a responsibility on researchers to question the terms in which they understand the world.

In this project a British citizen, with English as her first language, studies ‘the other’ – students in Norway and Eritrea. Said warns against ‘othering’, a position where one studies an

exotic object and draws comparisons by taking the cultures with which one is most familiar as the norm against which other cultural behaviour is measured (Said, 1978). In designing and carrying out a study that interprets other people's lives, one must be continually on guard against this tendency. 'Othering' is not much of a risk with the students in Norway, whose culture I am familiar with and to a large extent share. In Norway there is a greater danger that I may think I already know more or less what I will find, and dismiss as exotic outliers individual voices that run counter to these expectations. The risk of being 'othered' is more pronounced for the Eritrean students, and my relative unfamiliarity with Eritrean society makes it more likely that I mistake outlying individual voices for widely held opinions.

Although the neutral 'outsider' position is an ideal to which one may aspire, it cannot be achieved in practical research. In fact the opposition implied by the terms 'insider' and 'outsider' is itself dubious, since one by virtue of being a researcher usually complicates or even loses one's insider status, even when researching one's own culture (Bridges, 2003:134). The epistemological debate about whether an outsider can write truly about another culture becomes ethical only when it assumes the position that outsiders *ought not* to attempt to research a community to which they do not belong (2003:137). The reason why such research would be ethically unacceptable would then be that it in some way caused harm. One way in which research can be seen to cause harm in Eritrea is through the appropriation of authority from a people who feel that they have been repeatedly marginalised and misrepresented. Eritrean educationalists report that they find not being recognised as equal partners problematic. They say

... that lack of understanding can always be excused, but lack of respect always limits the outsiders' access to informants and information and thereby also his or her claim to knowledge and truth. (Bjørndal, 2002:50-51)

The following excerpt from an interview with an Eritrean anthropologist on the home page of the ruling party's website illustrates two factors that pertain to who should do research in Eritrea: a pride in the country and its resources (in this case expressed through the claim that the country is where human life began), and a scepticism about foreign researchers, who are seen as potential meddlers.

Researches are more representative and are well interpreted and explained when they are done by native experts. I am not denying the expertise of foreigners; but what I am trying to say is that native researchers should have the upper hand in researches like this one.

Human remains that were found in *Buya* are evident that supports the beginning of life in the region. This alone could attract international researchers and visitors. It is wise, therefore, to have your own skilled professionals in order to avoid any damage, lose or misinterpretation, and to ensure ownership. (Tsfay, March 2, 2009)

For this scientist, respect is not enough. The mere fact of not being Eritrean disqualifies non-Eritrean researchers.

5.2.2 *A sociocultural approach*

“The qualitative researcher studies a social setting to understand the meaning of participants’ lives in the participants’ own terms”, writes Valerie Janesick (2000:383). Klaus Bruhn Jensen builds on the same idea when he identifies three distinctive features of qualitative research: it is concerned with how meaning is generated and used to orient oneself in social interaction; meaningful actions are studied in their natural contexts; and the researcher is an interpretive subject throughout the research (Jensen, 2002:236). By conceptualizing writing about literary texts as a site of social interaction and meaningful action, this study can be said to share these three features. The student texts are instances of social interaction, for although written individually, the very term ‘response’ indicates that they are written in interaction with a text written by another person. What is more, the students must assume, more or less explicitly, an interaction with a reader, namely the person who elicited their text. I return to discuss the role of literary texts and written assignments in sections 5.5 and 5.6. Writing a text is a meaningful action whether instigated as an intervention by the researcher, or when it is part of everyday teacher-student interaction. As Kovala and Vainikkala say:

Reading is a silent experience but it takes place in relation to many voices, codes and contexts. Talking about one’s reading experience draws on socially determined discourses, and it is up to the researchers to identify them and analyse their particular configurations. (Kovala & Vainikkala, 2000:19)

Janesick reminds us that one must stay as close to the data as possible, and at the same time find the most effective way to present one’s findings and to convince the reader of the meaning of the study (Janesick, 2000:383). As aids in this process I kept three types of notes: a diary, a book of thoughts and a log. In the diary I noted date by date the events that marked the passage of this project from idea to monograph. In the ‘book of thoughts’ I collected ideas and noted new questions and new areas to explore. In the log I described in detail each classroom encounter with the students and noted my immediate thoughts and concerns. These log entries were, with one exception, written immediately after the encounters.

This study combines the ambitions of sociocultural and ethnographic studies, two approaches that have apparently different agendas (Mäkitalo & Säljö, 2002:65). In a sociocultural approach social action is the primary object of inquiry, and analysis is concerned with its meaning, whereas in an ethnographic approach one is concerned with the nuts and bolts of how communication is achieved. To see these nuts and bolts and to look at discourse from the respondents’ perspective ethnographers try to bracket their cultural knowledge. Åsa Mäkitalo and Roger Säljö commend an approach that combines a sociocultural perspective with ethnomethodology, provided it does not use some favourite aspect of context “as an explanatory

concept without empirically grounding the relevance of the aspect invoked for the institutional practice we study” (Mäkitalo & Säljö, 2002:66).

Relating the student texts to the many contexts in which they arose requires a sociocultural approach, for as Mäkitalo and Säljö argue, one must be familiar with the “traditions of argumentation and their constituting possibilities within institutional practices” in order to explain individual instantiations of these traditions (Mäkitalo & Säljö, 2002:57). Just as “traditions of argumentation” are necessary to understand how an individual speaks in a particular social interaction, contexts are necessary to an understanding of how the students respond to a particular literary interaction. Contexts are therefore presented *before* the response in this study.

5.2.3 *A comparative approach*

“No person knows his culture, who knows only his culture”, writes one of the Norwegian students in this study. Of course the person who knows only his culture is a theoretical being. This theoretical being does know her/his own culture in the sense that s/he embodies and enacts that culture, but s/he would not know it *as* culture. A comparative approach is one way of knowing culture *as* culture, because it necessarily involves more than one group of people, and the questions generated through comparison can shed light on what might otherwise have been taken for granted. When assumptions, values or meanings are found in one group but not in the other, we become aware of them as ideological, or as culture. This is especially true for the group of Norwegian students, whose context is so familiar to me that without a comparative perspective I might not see what they write as expressions of ideology and culture (see Hall, 2001).

The two groups of respondents (or students – I use the terms interchangeably) are selected on the basis of their being in Eritrea or in Norway, and the individual members of each group are assumed to share cultures and contexts with each other that they do not share, or do not share to the same extent, with the other group. I expect, therefore, that there will be similarities *within* each group and dissimilarities *between* the groups. An apposite concern is that one will always find differences if one assumes that they are there and goes looking for them. I meet this concern by assuming that the Eritrean and Norwegian students also have things in common, and I have gone looking for them too. It is crucial to what I am trying to do that the students are distinguished not by ‘being’ Eritrean or Norwegian, as though nationality were an essential category, but by the cultures and contexts of which they have experience. For convenience I make frequent reference to the respondents as ‘Eritrean’ and ‘Norwegian’, but these must always be understood as contingent categories.

The identification of the students as members of a group is based on two factors. Firstly, they are members of a particular college class, and secondly they are part of a national interpretive community formed by two open-ended sets of contexts that extend far beyond the literacies and codes that are particular to their college class. Their classroom context is only a part of the totality of contexts which make up the interpretive communities to which they belong. Designating students as members of the group does not say anything about whether the participants in each group are aware of sharing a collective identity. As members of these interpretive communities the students aspire to two different academic literacies, and I must beware of judging them in relation to the academic literacy with which I am most familiar.

5.2.4 *Collective and individual explanations*

Describing a group of people *as a group* necessitates holistic explanation, since it assumes that it is in important respects both coherent and distinct from other groups. The holistic position is that “individuals are what they are because of the social whole to which they belong” (Fay, 1996:50). Holism, says Brian Fay, has a special appeal in the social sciences because it talks of groups and similarities, *not* of individuals and individual variation. “The upshot is an inherent disposition in the social sciences to see individual identity in holistic terms as a function of the individual’s culture or society” (1996:53). But of course, even for a holist, membership of a group does not mean that everyone in that group is similar in all important respects, but only in those respects that are important to the questions that the researcher asks (Fay, 1996).

Explaining the students’ responses both as individual utterances and as expressions arising in a shared context requires the combination of holistic explanation with a focus on variation within each group. As sociocultural action the student texts are *not* reducible to theories about the individuals who wrote them. A holistic approach allows us to consider the students’ responses as arising in the totality of contexts of which they have experience and which constitute the range of actions available to them.

At the same time, the individuals in these contexts position themselves variously with regard to the texts that they encounter. As Kramsch (1993) explains, “Teachers and learners in educational systems are subjected to the ideology of the institutions, which itself responds to national and international imperatives. However [...] learners as well as teachers repeatedly use the system to promote their own local and personal meanings” (Kramsch, 1993:23). I am interested in what the students do with the cultural expressions that they encounter, both when they are very familiar with them and when they meet them for the first time. Thus I follow up an idea that Swidler introduces (see 4.2.1) when she asks what people do with the many cultural

repertoires to which they have access. Which ones do the students use to make sense of literature, which do they ignore, and why?

I now turn to how the individuals who make up the two interpretive communities were selected, and how they are described.

5.3 Selecting and describing respondents

5.3.1 Comparable groups

The students were recruited from two classes studying English, one in Eritrea and one in Norway. In discussing how to put together groups of respondents, Jensen notes that “given the notorious difficulty of gaining entry to certain social arenas, convenience in the sense of physical and social accessibility is a legitimate consideration” (Jensen, 2002:239). The Eritrean students were attending the Eritrean Institute of Technology (hereafter EIT; see 7.4.2 for an account of this institution) and were allocated to the project in co-operation with the acting Head of English. Students towards the end of their second year were selected on the grounds that they would probably be available for this research for another two years. They also constituted the largest cohort of students of English, since there is quite a high drop-out rate, apparently due to exam failure, at the ends of years 2 and 3. I therefore feared for the continuity of this group, and was anxious to collect their response to the literary text in as few sessions as possible. This fear of non-continuity was partly confirmed, but not only due to voluntary or enforced drop-out. Students also skipped class, especially after public holidays, or at the beginning of term. Furthermore, administrative routines at EIT were considerably less transparent and hence less predictable than those under which the research in Norway was carried out. These factors contributed to the composition of the Eritrean group varying from session to session.

Three graduates were employed as junior teaching staff, so-called ‘graduate assistants’, at EIT. They held degrees in English from the University of Asmara where they had achieved very good results. These graduate assistants answered the questionnaire and wrote a response to the same three literary texts that the Eritrean students responded to, a task that they undertook alongside their considerable workload. Their comments have been excluded from the body of this research, but I make occasional reference to them, since their educational status corresponds roughly to that of the two students in the Norwegian group who also had some experience of teaching English.

The Norwegian students in this study were attending a course in African literature as part of their studies in intermediate-level English at Hedmark University College (hereafter HUC; see 7.5.2 for an account of this institution). Having taken two of the three component courses in the

autumn term, the students went on to take a third course in African literature in the spring term. I was therefore able to inform them in advance about the aims of the project, and request their participation in it. Of the ten Norwegian students in this study only one had not previously been taught by me. Five of them I had previously taught for a month and four I had taught for a term.

Those students in each class who produced a full set of responses are included in the study, that is, those who completed the questionnaire and wrote a response to each of the three literary texts. These criteria were met by ten Norwegian and twelve Eritrean students out of a total of eighteen Norwegian and twenty-eight Eritrean students who attended and actively participated in at least one session. There were more students in the Eritrean than in the Norwegian classroom, and at the time of the response sessions they were all treated as potential respondents in this study. Whilst the composition of the Eritrean group varied considerably from session to session, the same students attended all the Norwegian sessions, though two or three were absent each time. This, as well as the larger class size in Eritrea and my inability to recognise the students by sight and by name, are factors that distinguish the research situation in Eritrea from that in Norway.

The two groups have been matched as far as possible inasmuch as they are all students of English at tertiary level, and most of them are in their twenties. They are not matched with regard to gender, since the Eritrean group contains far more men than women, whilst the Norwegian group had more women than men. When it comes to their professional expectations, there are within the Norwegian group some students who already have some teaching experience and some who intend to become teachers, whilst others accept that they may well become teachers by default, and some resist the idea of becoming teachers. For the Eritrean students their relationship to the teaching profession would be determined by government policy at the time of their graduation, but during the period when I interacted with them it seemed probable that on successful completion of their degree, many of them would be required to continue their national service as teachers at secondary schools.

5.3.2 *The categories of ethnicity and gender*

I wish here to raise the issue of how to characterise the students. They are ‘Eritrean’ and ‘Norwegian’, men and women. But to what use do I put these terms? Lincoln and Guba point out how such questions have implications for how we approach the people involved in our research, for “the *way* in which we know is most assuredly tied up with both *what* we know and our *relationships with our research participants*” (Lincoln & Guba, 2000:182, original italics). We find out about people, says Harvey Sacks, by asking questions using category sets (Sacks, Jefferson, & Schegloff, 1995:40). When we begin to get to know somebody, the questions we

want to answer, either by asking or by observing, are what Sacks calls ‘which questions’. They include gender, age, race, religion and perhaps occupation. These categories are inference rich, says Sacks, because a great deal of the knowledge that members of a society share is encoded in them. Gender and race, as opposed to age and social class, have the characteristic that “whatever category somebody applies to somebody else or to themselves, anybody else would apply that category” (Sacks, et al., 1995:45).

Sacks’s assumption that race is an objective category is strongly contested, but of interest here because of what I do *not* mean by ‘Eritrean’ and ‘Norwegian’. In this project race and ethnicity are not closed categories, but are open and socioculturally defined. In 4.2.2 we saw that Barth describes the constitution and maintenance of ethnicity and nationhood in terms of processes of exclusion. Hall writes that the term ethnicity “acknowledges the place of history, language and culture in the construction of subjectivity as well as the fact that all discourse is placed, positioned, situated, and all knowledge contextual” (Hall, 1996:169). Yet Hall argues also that we cannot reject the term ‘ethnicity’, because our ethnic identities are crucial to our understanding of who we are (1996:170). Rather, we must use ‘ethnicity’ for non-essentialist and non-hierarchical purposes.

Asking people systematically about their ethnicity is an intrusive question with private and political implications that makes it inappropriate in a study which aims to develop trust and authentic communication between the researcher and the researched. I have deliberately not asked the respondents for information about ethnicity or social background, but I do have incidental information. I know that the group of students in Norway includes someone who was adopted as a young child from another continent, someone who was born and went to school in another European country, and two students with one non-Norwegian parent. There is also a student with a Sami parent. I make occasional reference to this information. I lack incidental information about the Eritrean group, but have been told that many of them may be the sons of peasants. I believe that most of them are Tigrinya (see 8.2.1 for a fuller discussion of this point). Some may have been born and brought up in Ethiopia, speaking Amharic as well as Tigrinya, and thrown out with their families in 1999 during the Eritrea-Ethiopia border war, when virtually all Eritreans were expelled. Some of them may even have a non-Eritrean parent. But just to show the danger of making assumptions about the homogeneity of the group, I can mention one student, present in some of the sessions but excluded from this study because he was not present at all of them, who told me that he had grown up as the adopted son of a Norwegian family resident in Eritrea.

My approach, then, is to allocate the students to their group on the basis of their being ‘in Norway’ or ‘in Eritrea’, and in saying that they are ‘Norwegian’ or ‘Eritrean’, I mean this, and only this. I reject the epistemological and ethical absurdity of constructing a group of ‘pure Norwegians’ and ‘pure Eritreans’. As David Silverman puts it, “our ability to categorize quickly is properly treated as a research topic rather than a research resource” (Silverman, 2000:826). And of course there is also a very good didactical reason for not constructing research groups of homogenous ethnicity, even if that were possible, for it would not reflect the varied and complex ethnic backgrounds of students in most Norwegian and Eritrean classrooms. The complexities of identity that I partly unearth in the two groups are probably no more or less remarkable than those to be found in other student groups in both countries.

When writing about the students I use gendered pronouns for reasons of readability and accountability, which, in addition to the conventions of qualitative research, make this, all in all, the better option. I would have preferred gender-neutral pronouns¹⁶ for two reasons: firstly to protect the students’ identity, and secondly because, in Sacks’s terms, ‘man’ and ‘woman’ are inference-rich categories, and the inferences we make depend on our membership of a particular community, and vary within each community. An exploration of this aspect of representation is beyond the scope of the present thesis, but I mention the issue here since gendered pronouns enable a gendered reading, and one must try to steer away from gender-based inferences drawn from sociocultural contexts to which the respondents do not belong. Again the present study makes occasional reference to gender, but does not explore it systematically, given there were only two women in the Eritrean group and only three men in the Norwegian group.

5.4 Finding out about the respondents

5.4.1 *Why I didn’t interview*

In order to make sense of what the students wrote in response to the literary texts, it is necessary to see their response in the context of their earlier encounters with literature. In this section I consider issues relating to how such contextual information could be and was in fact gathered.

The questions I wanted to answer were: What experience do the students have of literature? How are they used to studying literature? Which texts do they like and dislike? What is the point of studying literature, in their opinion? And indeed, what for them *is* literature? Practical circumstances necessitated that I collected material from the respondents in both Eritrea and Norway at an early stage of the project. This requirement prompted a specified and transparent

¹⁶ In Swahili, for example, ‘*akisema*’ means both ‘he says’ and ‘she says’.

design from as early in the project as the research proposal. My first concern was to collect information about the students, and I had to decide how to go about this in a way that met the ethical and research standards of both Norway and Eritrea. I planned to carry out group interviews as well as a written questionnaire.

Interview holds a strong position internationally and also in Norway as a method in qualitative research in the social sciences. Zoltán Dörnyei argues against the use of questionnaires for exploratory research, or for the elicitation of long and detailed personal responses. He suggests that other data collection procedures, and interview in particular, are better suited to these purposes (Dörnyei, 2003:129-130). Two questions therefore arose:

- Is interview a suitable method in Eritrea?
- Should I use interview in Norway, although it might be unsuitable in Eritrea?

I look in some depth at the possibility of interviewing the students, either individually or in groups, to illustrate some of the methodological dilemmas that may arise in carrying out humanistic research in other countries. Interviews could have served two main functions. They could have mapped aspects of the sociocultural background of the students, as Dysthe (1993) does in her comparative study of literary reception in three classrooms in Norway and the USA, and they could have been used to explore with the students' their written responses to the literary texts, as do Smidt (1989), Hvistendahl (2000) and Brunt and Montgomerie (2000).

Despite the strong position of interview in recent research, it is only one of many ways of collecting material, and should not be chosen without good reason. "The open-ended interview apparently offers the opportunity for an authentic gaze into the soul of another", says Silverman (2000), but he questions the privileged position of interviews as the method of choice for qualitative research, and suggests that we should be aware of its shortcomings. Perhaps activities, or, in my case, stories, have multiple meanings for an interviewee, only one or some of which s/he deems appropriate to the interview situation. "The fashionable identification of qualitative method with an analysis of how people 'see things' ignores the importance of how people 'do things'" (Silverman, 2000:832). And what they are doing in the texts they write is presenting themselves, presenting their understanding of the text, representing their understanding of the institutional conditions of writing, and more.

Silverman distinguishes two ways of understanding interview as a qualitative tool. The realist approach sees it as giving access to the interviewee's authentic experience, enabling the researcher to develop an in-depth understanding of that person's experience. The narrative approach, by contrast, is concerned not with true accounts, but with how respondents narrate their experience, using the cultural repertoires at their disposition. We can approach the

students' written texts in the same two ways. It is perhaps easier to be aware of the way students construct themselves and their world through narrative in written texts, for in interview this is sometimes obscured by the peculiar status of the interview as a more authentic or 'realistic' communication.

Aside from these more general reservations, I came to see that interviewing students was not appropriate in Eritrea. I identified four issues, which I discuss in increasing order of seriousness:

- the students are soft-spoken
- limitations of time
- an educational praxis that promotes one right answer
- the possibility of the research endeavour being misconstrued

The first issue, and also one that Chefena Hailemariam (2002) encountered in his fieldwork in schools in Eritrea, was that most Eritrean students are soft-spoken. My own experience and informal conversations with the Indian and Eritrean staff at EIT suggests that many of the Eritrean students do not raise their voices unless they are asked to the front of the class to make a speech. The technical difficulty of getting a sound recording of group interviews that were audible enough to be accurately transcribed might have been considerable.

Secondly, there was the issue of limitations on my time. In order to interview students individually I would have had to find time when they were on campus and not otherwise occupied with lessons, exam preparation or non-academic duties. Carrying out these interviews would probably have covered a long period of time and would certainly have been very difficult to plan. H. Russell Bernard, in writing about the disadvantages of face-to-face interviews in anthropological research, describes something of the contexts within which I worked: "Personal interview surveys conducted by lone researchers over a long period of time run the risk of being overtaken by events. A war breaks out, a volcano erupts, or the government decides to cancel elections and imprison the opposition. It sounds dramatic, but these sorts of things are actually quite common across the world" (Bernard, 2002:243-244). In Eritrea, the events which I feared might overtake the project were war, civil unrest and travel restrictions that would prevent me getting from the capital to EIT.¹⁷

The third issue has to do with the education praxis in Eritrea. In his extensive field observation of primary classrooms across Eritrea, Hailemariam (2002) describes the typical lesson as being a teacher-dominated question-and-answer session. Here, as an example, is a

¹⁷ Other considerations also played a part, including the financial cost of staying on location for a longer period, and the personal cost of spending time away from family and other commitments.

sequence from an Arabic-language classroom with “a review exercise to secure feedback in the form of questions and answers, initiated by the teacher”.

- T How do the Central Highlands look like? Look like an overturned what...?
 P Look like an overturned dish.
 T Who can tell me what are the main flowing waters in South America? Who can tell me?
 P The Amazon?
 T Yes, the Amazon, which we said is the largest, what...?
 Ps The largest river in the world.
 T What does the largest mean?
 P Which carries much water.
 T Another river, what do we call the other one, anyone who can try? Did you forget that?
 P The River Bran.
 T Excellent Ahmed. Where do both rivers empty their water finally?
 Ps Teacher! Teacher!
 T Just raise your hands, don't shout!
 P In the Atlantic Ocean. (Hailemariam, 2002:195)

I believe that students whose school experience is largely based on this question and answer pattern might feel uncomfortable in a situation where they were asked open questions with no teacher feedback as to whether or not their answer was right. I concluded that asking students to take part in a recorded interview in which they shared information about their literary experience and expectations might not be culturally appropriate and would probably be less productive than asking them to write this information individually.

The fourth and most serious issue has to do with security and the possible difficulties that picking out individuals to participate in recorded discussions or interviews might entail. Madsen's narrative from a female high-school leaver in Eritrea, who left the country illegally and, for Madsen, unexpectedly, mid-way through a series of interviews about her social and educational situation (Madsen, 2006:222), is indicative to me that it would have been politically foolhardy to invite students to comment on their understanding of their educational situation (see also Hepner, 5.8.3). The sharing of information follows different patterns in Eritrea from in Norway, and I saw no way of organising a group interview without risking speculation as to what information participants would be asked to share. Although I had described the purpose of the group interviews in the project description submitted to EIT, and made clear my intention to record them, it seemed that the staff and the head of the English Department were not familiar with what I intended to do. The idea of literary reception as a field of study was seemingly unfamiliar, and research into how students create meaning in their encounters with literature would perhaps not have been readily understood.

Since recorded interviews, including those about literary texts, are a forum for the sharing of information, and their purpose can be misconstrued, I decided to use methods that were easily

observed and readily understood. During the administration of the questionnaire there was in fact a security agent present, although he did not identify himself as such and I only later realised who he was. Given my limited understanding of the way in which this research, and indeed research in general, would be understood in Eritrea, I was ethically bound to protect the respondents by emphasising transparent methods. The answer to my first question as to whether interview is a suitable method in Eritrea, is therefore ‘no’. However, in informal short conversations initiated by students I have learned and asked about issues that contribute small pieces to a picture of their social, cultural and educational context.

The second question I needed to answer was whether I should use interview in Norway, even though I deemed it unsuitable in Eritrea. My decision not to use interview was guided partly by the desirability of having comparable information in a comparable format. A further consideration was that five of the ten participants in the Norwegian group were not willing to be interviewed outside class time. By interviewing only the remaining five, I would have had a disproportionate amount of material from these students, and as my intention was to draw a picture of the Norwegian students as a group, it was important that the design of the research allowed each voice to be given equal weight. Furthermore, what these five potential interviewees said about their reading of the texts would not be their immediate response to them, but would of necessity be given some time after the first reading, that is, after a period in which they could have reread them and thought more about them. This would have given readings that were less readily comparable with those of either the Eritrean students or the other Norwegian students. A final factor was that the term in which I collected the material was extremely busy.

But there are also very good reasons for basing one’s research on written material, and here I would like to quote Kovala and Vainikkala, who in summarising the reasons why their research team opted to ask respondents to write essays express the advantages that I see in choosing written texts as material:

Apart from practical considerations, written answers could be used because, first of all, these educated readers could write, because that would yield more material, because the material would be more valid on account of its greater intimacy (writing being more private, with less social restrictions on ways of expression), and because the results would be more reliable as the relationship between researcher and interviewee (same or different sex, generation, etc.) would not exert such an influence as in oral interviews. (Kovala & Vainikkala, 2000:36)

5.4.2 *Questionnaire design*

In the light of the above considerations, I turned to designing a questionnaire. The development of the questionnaire followed the general advice offered by Dörnyei (2003). He argues that the unprecedented efficiency of questionnaires in terms of researcher time and effort allows the researcher to collect “a huge amount of information in less than an hour” (Dörnyei, 2003:9).

The versatility of questionnaires is also an advantage that has made them a constituent of most research projects in the behavioural and social sciences, he says (2003:10). Both time efficiency and versatility were important factors in my choice of method. Bernard lists three conditions that, when met, make questionnaires preferable to personal interviews, namely that “(1) you are dealing with literate respondents; (2) you are confident of getting a high response rate (at least 70%); and (3) the questions you want to ask do not require a face-to-face interview or the use of visual aids” (Bernard, 2002:250). Bernard also mentions that one can ask more complex questions, as well as batteries of otherwise boring questions, in self-administered questionnaires, as compared to a face-to-face interview situation (2002:244). And he also mentions that questionnaires are less reactive and intrusive than interviews (2002:243).

Of the disadvantages Dörnyei discusses, those that relate to an expectation of superficiality, lack of motivation and fatigue are perhaps more likely to manifest themselves amongst students in Norway, who are probably quite familiar with answering questionnaires and with being asked to express their opinions. I expected that the Eritrean respondents would be less familiar with the format of a questionnaire and with being asked about their experience and opinion, and therefore less quickly fatigued. On the other hand, I wrongly predicted that language might be more of a problem for Eritrean respondents, who would be asked to answer in their second or third language, whereas respondents in Norway would be able to answer in Norwegian. In fact none of them wrote in Norwegian, and both groups wrote in intelligible English. Another potential disadvantage mentioned by several writers (Bernard (2002), Dörnyei (2003), Jacobsen (2005)), is that students may give responses that they see as socially desirable. This bias may be expected from both countries, variously motivated but equally invalidating. It is, however, no more a disadvantage of questionnaires than of face-to-face interview.

The down-to-earth advice of Louis Cohen et al. also endorses a longer questionnaire with some open-ended questions: “the smaller the size of the sample, the less structured, more open and word-based the questionnaire may be. [...]. If a site-specific case study is required, then qualitative, less structured, word-based and open-ended questionnaires may be more appropriate as they can capture the specificity of a particular situation” (Cohen, Morrison, & Manion, 2000:247-248).

The following issues of questionnaire design required clarification:

- How long should the questionnaires be? A balance needed to be struck between the need for information, and the amount of time and patience I could reasonably expect of the respondents.

- How important is symmetry of design, i.e. to what extent should questionnaires for Norway and Eritrea include the same questions?
- Should the questionnaire be self-administered, or should I supervise the respondents as they answered the questions?
- When should the questionnaires be administered – initially, as a measure of the students’ point of departure, mid-way, so as to allow for an evaluative component that could revise the remaining interaction, or finally, as a measure of the students’ point of arrival, allowing them also to reflect on their experience as participants in the research?
- How should confidentiality and informed consent be ensured?¹⁸
- What level of English language competence could I assume?
- What should I give back to the respondents to recompense them for sharing their information and time?¹⁹
- What behaviour was appropriate to indicate my serious but friendly intention, and to distinguish my role of researcher from that of curriculum consultant in Eritrea and course teacher in Norway?

I devised a questionnaire that was itemised in three main areas of enquiry:

- educational and language background
- experience of literature (in and outside formal education)
- attitudes to literature

The first draft of the questionnaire was reviewed by five friends and colleagues, with various backgrounds, both academic and non-academic, whose suggestions for improvements were incorporated in the second draft. There were areas that would have been relevant to ask about that I did not ask about, such as the literacy of the families of the Eritrean students, or the educational background of the parents of the Norwegian students. Such questions might have been experienced as embarrassing or intrusive, and they might also have led to under- or over-reporting. (A semi-structured interview would have allowed me to pursue such topics, if it had seemed appropriate.)

5.4.3 *The Eritrean questionnaire in practice*

The questionnaire for Eritrea needed to be ‘ready-to-use’ on arrival to avoid delays that might arise in making copies in Eritrea. I needed therefore to pre-test it with respondents who held cultural and educational assumptions more similar to those of the Eritrean students than did the

¹⁸ This issue is discussed later in this chapter, see 5.6.6 and 5.8.1.

¹⁹ Amongst the incentives that I found appropriate, manageable and ethical were pens, pen friends, memory sticks (for the graduate assistants), collective language feedback and individual professional advice.

five colleagues and friends mentioned above. I identified one such person, a young Somali teacher who was training to be a second-language teacher at HUC. We met twice. This pre-testing proved informative, as I concluded at the time:

I thought it was rather a farfetched idea to work with ‘C’, since I hadn’t met him before today, and wasn’t sure whether my Somali-Eritrea equation was worth much. But I have learned a lot from talking with him. I think the fact that he is not Eritrean is almost a strength, because he is not offended or irritated by clumsy questions, whereas an Eritrean might perhaps feel – goodness me, she doesn’t know what she is doing, why is she doing research in my country? (my log of 16.10.200X)

The trainee teacher asked that I be with him whilst he answered the questionnaire, and this meant that we could clarify points as they cropped up. I decided therefore to talk the Eritrean students through the questionnaire, stopping before each main question. The pretesting also led to several alterations in wording and exemplification. The final version is five pages long, and can be found in Appendix 3.²⁰

In Eritrea, the three graduate assistants answered the questionnaire in an informal setting and provided a second pre-testing, identifying points that might need clarification. The questionnaire was presented to the second-year students in the last lesson of the day. This 45-minute session was arranged in collaboration with a faculty member, who predicted poor attendance on the basis of his own unpopularity (!) and the lateness of the session (5 p.m.). He explained that the students were marking time waiting for their exams, and ordinary teaching had stopped.

The sixteen students who attended were told about the ambitions of this research and their intended role in it. I emphasised that their responses would be anonymous, and that they were free to write what they liked, or not to write anything. They saw the humour in my cultural unfamiliarity with their silence, which apparently signified acquiescence. Four members of staff were present and contributed in various ways. Several of them criticised aspects of the questionnaire during the session. I tried to explain the reasoning behind the choices I had made, especially as I was dependent on their interest and collaboration to ensure access to the students. It made for an interesting but challenging session. It was an unforeseen advantage that the graduate assistant who was present could answer students’ queries, having himself answered the questionnaire.

A further twelve students who turned up at my next encounter with this class also completed

²⁰ EIT is referred to in the questionnaire as EITTE – the final ‘TE’ standing for ‘Teacher Education’. For an explanation of the two acronyms, see 7.4.2.

the questionnaire.²¹ None of them met the criteria for inclusion in this study. But although only twelve questionnaires are systematically analysed, the remaining questionnaires corroborate the general tendencies that I observed in them, and have contributed in this way to the portrayal of the Eritrean students as readers and writers in chapter 8.

5.4.4 *The Norwegian questionnaire in practice*

Due to my frequent and timetabled contact with the Norwegian respondents, and because I was wary of trying their patience at the beginning of the course, the questionnaire was administered in three parts (see Appendix 2):

- Writing and reading aloud a response to the question “What is literature?” formed part of the first lesson, where it served as a ‘warming-up’ activity.
- Part One was pre-tested with two students who were not studying English, and then answered in class in the second week of the course.
- Part Two included questions about the course in African literature and could not therefore be pre-tested, but it was submitted to three colleagues for their comments. It was then answered in class at the end of the course. Part Two also served as an evaluation of the course and of the respondents’ understanding of their role as research participants. This questionnaire was not anonymous, in that I could identify the students through their code numbers, and therefore the validity of their evaluation may be questioned. They did, however, give much the same general picture as did a mid-term evaluation of the course, in which students were ensured a greater degree of anonymity.

Altogether eighteen Norwegian respondents completed the questionnaire, and though only ten of these questionnaires are systematically reviewed in this research, the remaining questionnaires corroborate the general tendencies that I observed in them, and have contributed in this way to the portrayal of Norwegian students as readers and writers in chapter 8.

5.4.5 *Analysing the questionnaires*

On the same day that they were written, I read through the students’ answers in order to gain a first overview of their literary experience and priorities. Later, their answers were transcribed and a more systematic analysis undertaken with the help of the data analysis programme NVivo 8. The semantic differential scale used for rating how useful and enjoyable various text-based activities were perceived to be (Question 3 in Eritrea and 4 in Norway) was subject to a simple

²¹ These ‘new’ students did not make their presence known to me. This was also the case for later sessions – new students were present at each session, and they made me aware of their presence, if at all, at the end of the session.

quantitative analysis, on the basis of which I generated statements about where on the scale the two groups of students positioned themselves.

5.5 Choosing literary texts

5.5.1 Using literature in a qualitative study

In this study I am interested in how the students make sense of literature. Fiction is sometimes described metaphorically, for example as “condensed life” (Ibsen, 1990:144), or as “a distillation of lived relationships” (JanMohamed, 1983:266). From the perspective of cultural studies, literary texts are seen as a privileged representation of social reality (Lye, 1997), and are treated as social documents with special force, because they represent situated voices and social contexts with power and complexity. John Lye argues that literary texts contextualise social experience and that a text that uses the codes of the culture with precision and intentionality enables the student to grasp the use of these codes in a particular society.

A fictional text can show, where a non-fictional text describes, the working of culture in the way characters think, debate and make priorities, the workings of history as they affect individuals and families, the complexities of social situations, and the multiplicity of factors that direct individual lives (Munden, 2002). A characteristic feature claimed for literature in general is that it can give insight into the moral dilemmas that confront an individual or a society. In a fictional text we can observe the unfolding of a conflict more clearly than we can in our own lives. An omniscient narrator, such as we meet in many novels in the realist tradition, shows us a fuller picture than we can ever have of our own moral dilemmas. But also a limited first person narrator, such as we meet in “Anisino”, provides the reader with insight into, in this example, an individual’s experience of living in a mixed Christian/Islam community, and the prescriptions and codes that give rise to moral and emotional dilemmas.

Literature seeks legitimisation in the claim that as we follow the development of a character grappling with moral dilemmas, we acquire vicarious experience that increases our ability to cope with moral dilemmas in our own lives, and broadens our understanding and tolerance of other people’s choices. It is my conviction that, regardless of the authority or non-authority that readers ascribe to authors and their texts, readers put their value systems and personal experience to use in making sense of literary texts. Literature, it seems, engages readers, and exploring what they find allows the researcher a window, albeit an institutionalized and staged one, onto their culture in action.

5.5.2 *Which literary texts, and why*

There was a strong pragmatic reason for choosing Eritrean literature. The Norwegian students were ‘sitting ducks’, in the sense that once they had made a commitment to studying African literature and to this research project, they had to take the literature that was coming to them. The Eritrean students, however, were not sitting ducks, at least not on my pond, so I reasoned that their motivation was more likely to be assured if the literature that they were asked to respond to related to their syllabus, or, failing that, if it was at least pertinent to them simply by virtue of being Eritrean.

The selection of texts was also the result of a conspicuously pragmatic selection process, guided by a sequence of ‘a-criteria’: the literary texts needed to be *acknowledged, available, acceptable, appropriate* and *anglicised*. Firstly I looked at texts that were acknowledged by Eritreans as *being* Eritrean, and were furthermore acknowledged by them as worthy, or at least interesting. I then went looking for the texts online and in bookshops, since clearly the texts needed to be *available*. And having found the texts, I needed to be confident that the texts would be *acceptable* to the Eritrean authorities, which meant that I excluded any texts that explicitly queried the ongoing nation-building project. The texts also needed to be *appropriate*, in the sense that they would engage both the Eritrean and the Norwegian students sufficiently for them to be interested in giving a response to them. Another way in which they needed to be appropriate had to do with time. In Eritrea I assumed that I would have limited research time; in Norway I expected that the students would have only a limited interest in engaging with non-syllabus literature.²² For both these reasons appropriate texts needed to be short. I therefore selected two short texts, and incorporated one of them, as well as a third longer text, into the syllabus that the Norwegian students were following. Last of the ‘a-criteria’ was that the texts needed to be *anglicised*, i.e. they needed to be available in English.

A further consideration in selecting literary texts had to do with genre. In choosing three distinct genres, fable, short prose text and play, the material allows for a broader understanding of how students make sense of literature than had I chosen only poetry, for example. Poetry fulfils the a-criteria, and furthermore it has a long oral tradition. Whilst the prevalence of performed poetry in Eritrea suggested that it should be represented amongst the literary texts, it presents peculiar challenges in a comparative study where poems must be read in transcription

²² In fact the Norwegian students demonstrated considerable interest in the project. In the final evaluation of the course sixteen out of seventeen disagreed outright with the statement “I would have learned more about African Literature in this module if Juliet had not been using the students as research respondents”. One of several comments to the contrary was, “I actually think that this research has helped me to understand the texts better, because we did some extra work on the texts and we got more involved” (N3).

and translated, losing the song and the setting of their intended enactment. The rhythmic and phonic intricacies of Tigrinya poetry are also largely lost in translation (see 9.2.6). This was very apparent when I asked another class of students to respond to “We Have”,²³ probably Eritrea’s most well-known poem. The Eritrean students had misgivings as to the loss of context, semantic accuracy and beauty that the translation entailed. The Norwegian students in this study had little to say about the poem. For these reasons poetry is not included.

The three literary texts that are included, in the order in which the Norwegian students met them, are: “The Monkey and the Crocodile” (to be found in Appendix 4), “Anisino” (in Appendix 5) and *The Other War* (to be found in *Two Weeks in the Trenches* by Alemseged Tesfai and in *Modern African Drama*, edited by Plastow, 1999). These texts show increasing complexity, moving from the simple linear fable through a short personal narrative with human characters and two settings in time, to the play *The Other War*, with its complex action and characters.

The fable met all the a-criteria. It was appropriate because it was short – just 492 words, and I found it entertaining and the language relatively simple. I then looked for a short story for the same pragmatic reason that a short text was well-suited to the time available in the classroom, but also because on account of “its compressed form, there is much to read between the lines. [...] gaps, deletions and silences force the student to speculate and to be actively involved in the realization of the text” (Eikrem, 1999:40-41). The choice of Rahel Asgehedom’s “Anisino” allowed for the inclusion of a woman writer. This particular story made a striking impression when I first read it. It deals with the interrelation of friendship and religion, and I hoped that these concerns would make it interesting to the students, and a source for reflection on two central aspects of human existence.

Ann-Karin Korsvold writes of her classroom experience with a short story about the friendship between a young girl and boy. Her 15-16 year old Norwegian students read the story and she found that “reading this text was an important affective event for them. The friendship that is described with its *rise and fall* is something they are familiar with, and that they know from their own lives, and at the same time it is sufficiently new and unfamiliar in the story to make the whole thing attractive” (Korsvold, 2000:75, my translation). I thought it likely that “Anisino” could be “an affective event” for the students in this study. The story also has the quality of being “sufficiently new and unfamiliar” to both groups. For the Norwegian students the unfamiliarity lies in the setting and the relationship of two young people from two religions.

²³ from *We Invented the Wheel* (2002), in Charles Cantalupo’s translation

For the Eritrean students the newness lies in a familiar setting and situation being represented in a literary text.

As to the choice of *The Other War*, it is arguably the nation's most successful and most seen play, and the single literary text which has aroused most attention from non-Eritrean commentators. *The Other War* was mentioned by Eritrean academics as a key piece of national literature. I chose it for this reason, but also because the plot and characterisation are considerably more complex than the four other plays in English of which I am aware (see Appendix 13).

The three texts are briefly presented in relation to other works in the same genre in chapter 9, and discussed in more detail in the respective chapters that deal with how the students responded to them.

5.6 Eliciting response

5.6.1 Writing tasks

All the response sessions had two main components: the presentation and reading of a literary text, and a writing task relating to the text. The writing tasks had to fulfil several requirements. They needed to be the same for both groups, to produce comparable responses; I needed to be able to present them briefly and unambiguously; they needed to be straightforward to write, and to stimulate a substantial response; and they needed to be capable of being answered then and there, with only minimal guidance from the teacher and without classroom discussion to generate interest and ideas. The assignments were worded in simple English and were specific as to genre and content, both to elicit comparable responses, and to ensure that the Eritrean students could feel confident that they were answering appropriately. For the first text, "The Monkey and the Crocodile", I gave a choice of three assignments to increase the probability that the students would find something they could write about. Most students chose the most open of the three assignments, and therefore I decided on just one open-ended assignment for the other two literary texts. I took the advice not to ask potentially intimidating 'why' questions, but to ask open 'tell me' questions (Chambers, 1993). This was also the informal recommendation of two teachers at EIT, who on separate occasions advised me that questions of the type "What do you think about this story?" would encourage students to respond in writing.

Norwegian classroom-based studies have made use of oral and written assignments generated by the teacher in the course of classroom interaction. This option was not available to me. The Eritrean 'right-answer' praxis made it inadvisable to follow the advice that class or group conversations should precede the writing of individual responses (Skarðhamar, 2001), since the respondents might reproduce what they perceived to be the 'right answers' given in these

conversations. The students were required to give an immediate response, a setting which Richards actually sees as incompatible with a valuable response to literature, which, he holds, can seldom arise under “public and hurried conditions of reading” (Richards, 1929:318). However these conditions were well-suited to my purposes, where the stock responses that Richards dismisses were of as much potential interest as more carefully thought through reflections on the literary texts.

Anne Ryen (2007) has queried the value of quick-in, quick-out task-based research, which she sees as a Western methodology ill-suited to non-Western contexts. As an alternative she suggests that one should use ‘slow’ methods of research, with repeated formal and informal encounters over time with a few informants. These require an adaptation of Western methodology ethics, she says, as the private and the public seep into each other. I would counter that slow methods are best suited to individual case studies. Furthermore, they require a stable political situation where continuity and openness is possible.

5.6.2 *The writing task for “The Monkey and the Crocodile”*

For “The Monkey and the Crocodile” the writing task was given in two parts. First the students were asked “What is the message of this story?”. This question was intended to elicit a very short written text. The appropriateness of asking about the message was an assumption based on three sources: a general account of fables in Africa, a contemporary Eritrean source and an older Eritrean collection of stories. The first of these sources is Isadore Okpewho’s authoritative work on African oral literature, which categorises the large variety of tales in Africa in terms of their overriding interest or aim, saying that “in the fable the narrator basically aims to entertain by exposing the audience to the aesthetic delights of the tale and leaving them free to derive whatever *message* they see fit” (Okpewho, 1992:221, italics added). Okpewho assumes that there are messages to be derived, and that readers will be able to find them.

The contemporary Eritrean source was Asghedom’s booklet *Colorful Stories* (2003). The illustrated stories in this collection are intended for use in schools, and are therefore accompanied by two or three questions. For the fables in the collection, one of the questions is usually about the story’s message or lesson. For example the story called “Frog and Salamander” ends, “After that the salamander understood how lost time was never found again”, and one of the two questions that come after the story is, “What lesson does the salamander get at last?” (Asghedom, 2003:36).

An older source is the first written collection of forty Tigrinya fables and folktales – Ghebre-Medhin Dighnei’s *Apologhi ed Aneddotti* (“Fables and Folktales”) from 1902. All the nine fables in this collection include a moral instruction, expressed either directly or indirectly (G. Negash,

1999:91). These sources suggest that the notion that there is a moral, lesson or message to be learned from a fable is familiar in the tradition of African/Eritrea/Tigrinya oral literature, and that asking the respondents to identify it should provide a familiar and culturally appropriate first writing task to “The Monkey and the Crocodile”, at least for the Eritrean students.

As to the Norwegian students, I expected that there being a message or lesson would be familiar to those of them who had read or been told fables, and also for those who had not their participation on a course in African literature should have attuned them to the idea of relating to new literatures and to genres that they had not hitherto studied.

In the second part of the response session students chose one of three alternative writing tasks:

1. Your thoughts about the story
2. A different story with the same message.
3. A new story where the monkey is a school boy, the crocodile is a bad person, and the setting is a town.

I hoped that the specificity of the second task, in contrast to the general formulation of the first, would provide an opportunity for more creative writing. The idea of the third task was that Norwegian and Eritrean responses written to this model would facilitate a close comparison of the general and literary repertoires on which the storytellers drew.

I wrote the writing tasks on the board to make the classroom situation clearly different from an exam, where question papers are handed out. In this way I could also adjust the wording and if need be the task itself right up to the moment when I wrote it. Since I thought no Eritrean students had chosen task 3, this option was not made available to the Norwegian students.

5.6.3 The writing task for “Anisino”

The writing task for “Anisino” required students to complete three sentence fragments with the wording “This story is about...”.²⁴ The sentence fragments were printed on a sheet of A4 paper, which also served as a response sheet (see Appendix 6). The space available for the completion of each sentence fragment was thus limited, and in this way I hoped to reduce the chance of respondents writing a summary of the literary text instead of completing each sentence with what I have termed a ‘theme statement’. The writing task was introduced with the phrase, “Please write three sentences saying what, in your opinion, this story is about”. The respondents were invited to add comments with the wording, “If there is anything else you would like to add, please do”.

²⁴ I am indebted to Anne Karin Korsvold for this idea (Korsvold, 2000:77).

Although the writing task is relatively open, and was chosen for just that reason, it nonetheless constrains the response, for it rests on two interpretive assumptions. Firstly, it imposes the idea that a literary text is interestingly described by a theme statement. The assumption that theme is an aspect of literary texts, rather than a part of a specific literary repertoire, was part of the academic socialisation that I took with me on my travels. Secondly, by asking the respondents to complete three discrete sentences, the task assumes not only that the literary text *is* about something, but that it is in fact about at least three things, or at least that what it is about can be described in at least three ways. In other words, the wording of the writing task presupposes that texts have multiple meanings. These two assumptions prescribe an interpretive strategy that the respondents must use, and any discomfiture or constraint that it imposes on them can only find expression in their non-compliance or in the comments that they add. The ‘other comments’ option allowed students to state an opinion, but did not encourage them to use an alternative interpretive strategy or to establish a discursive position for themselves in relation to the story and the reader of their response

A second assumption that I make, although this assumption is not encoded in the wording of the writing task, is that no one set of meanings is definitive. I do not know if this assumption is shared by the respondents. It is therefore possible, despite the phrase “in your opinion”, that some respondents believed they were being asked to identify the three definitive meanings of the text. This again might have led them to have vetted the meanings they first found against some conception of the meanings that they believed they were expected to find.

5.6.4 The writing task for The Other War

The writing task for the play was an adaptation of a reading log, which is “your spontaneous reaction to the text while reading it” (Ibsen, 2000:67). Students listened to the dramatisation of the play while they followed the scripted text. At the end of each act they wrote a response. This had the advantage that students completed their response in class, and was based on my earlier experience in Norway that some students did not complete non-obligatory writing tasks out of class. There would also seem to be a collective energy about writing together in a classroom that some of the students are not able to generate when they organise reading and writing on their own.

The advantage of ensuring a written response from all students had to be weighed against the disadvantage of not allowing students to mull over the story in their own time. One concern was that interrupting the dramatisation after each act left the students less well positioned to comment on the play as a whole than had they listened to the play in its entirety before being asked to respond to it. However I hoped that by stopping after each act the students would

engage with the details and uncertainties that they found in the play. Like a reading log this had the advantage that it provides insight into the expectations and emotions that the drama raises as it moves forward. A more detailed presentation of the prompts used to elicit the students' response to each act is made in chapter 12.

5.6.5 *The actualities of eliciting response*

I took photocopies of the literary texts to Eritrea. This precluded the possibility of making late alterations. (See 12.3.4 for a discussion of this issue in relation to *The Other War*.) By carrying the papers with me whenever I was at EIT I hoped to be able to make use of possibilities for student interaction when they arose. Once classroom access was secured, I had either 45 or 90 minutes at my disposition. In Norway the response sessions were integrated into teaching sessions of 135 minutes.

How the students read was influenced by how the text was presented. In 2.2.1 I discuss ways of reading. Here it is enough to note that *The Other War* and "The Monkey and the Crocodile" were presented for synchronised and responsive reading, whilst "Anisino" was presented as a text to be read individually before completing a response sheet, an instruction that made storylining the most likely way of reading. The student texts are to be found in Appendices 7 to 12. Table 2 shows how many were collected at each session. I include all the students present, not only those who constitute the two groups analysed in this research.

Table 2: Overview of how many student texts were collected

Literary text	No. of student texts
"The Monkey and the Crocodile"	N: 15 E: 26
"Anisino"	N: 14 E: 20
<i>The Other War</i> Acts 1 – 5 Acts 1 – 3 Acts 4 and 5	N: 15 E: 18 E: 20

N stands for 'in Norway', E for 'in Eritrea'.

Each response session in Eritrea was held in a different classroom, in what were called temporary buildings. These buildings have a life expectancy of roughly twenty years, and were about three years old when I collected this data. The floors and ceilings were in need of some repair. Classroom furniture comprised seating for about sixty students. There were sets of fixed wooden benches, and two or three students sat at each bench. They often chose to sit in close bodily contact, the few girls sitting together towards the back or the side of the classroom. A sloping board was mounted in front of each bench, and on this exercise books were placed. All

the classrooms had large blackboards and chalk. Some classrooms had an electric socket. The classrooms were dusty, and there was not always a chair or table where I could put materials or my laptop. More amusing than annoying were the pigeons that stomped about between the ceiling and the roof. The classrooms themselves had a pleasant temperature, but walking across the extensive campus from one block of classrooms or offices to another in the heat, especially in the afternoon, was time-consuming and a little tiring. When I ‘borrowed’ a lesson from a teacher, that teacher was present during the response session and the students were punctual, and expected punctuality of me. When I organised sessions with the students when they would not otherwise have had teaching, there was no teacher present, and the students were less punctual.

I learned that it was necessary to take a roll call at each session. I had thought that I need not spend precious time doing so, but that I could work out who had been present from the coded numbers on the texts that the students handed in. Since not all the texts *were* handed in, this proved a poor strategy. One should always have a system for registering who is present, independent of the material collected.

In Norway I was familiar with the system for allocating classrooms and the way that information about students and timetables was disseminated. These organisational aspects were particularly straightforward as the respondents were students that I was teaching anyway. The teaching and response sessions were all held in the same classroom, which could seat about twenty students. Each student sat at a separate desk, and these desks could be moved about. For our sessions they were pushed together to form three sides of a rectangle. I sat, stood or moved about in the rectangle, or moved outside it to allow students to discuss or write in peace. The classroom was well-lit and had a pleasant temperature, despite temperatures below freezing outside. In addition to a blackboard and chalk, there was an overhead projector, a video projector attached to the ceiling, a screen on which computer and overhead images could be projected, and a permanent computer with loud speakers, from which the teacher could access the Internet or her own work station. Within the time frame there was considerable flexibility as to when lessons started and ended. No other teacher was present at any point. Students in the Norwegian group were very punctual.

5.6.6 Challenges to parallel design

During the early stages of this project I hoped to carry out the research as similarly as possible in Eritrea and Norway. As I went along, however, I discovered that it was necessary to drop some elements and adapt others. First and foremost was the realisation that the primacy of achieving trust and authentic communication in qualitative research in general, and in this

research in particular, required a flexibility that was incompatible with a strict adherence to parallel methods. I will give three examples, starting with the issue of ensuring anonymity.

Ensuring anonymity was seen as a formal and relatively uninteresting aspect of my research by the students in Norway. Despite the open atmosphere in the classroom and the students' perception of their responses as innocuous, I continued to insist on the use of a code number rather than names, and the Norwegian students came to perceive this as a somewhat amusing aspect of their participation in the research, with which they readily connived. In Eritrea many of the students checked their names off on the list of names and code numbers, treating it like a register. This list I had undertaken to show no one, but the students expected to have access to it at the beginning of the response sessions. Although I persisted in using code numbers, in compliance with the requirements of the Norwegian Social Science Data Services (hereafter NSD), it was not well suited to the understanding of identity and anonymity that I perceived to pertain at EIT. The idea of anonymity might have carried unwelcome overtones of having something to hide, and insisting on concealing the list could have had the effect of distancing the students from a familiar classroom setting, rather than, as was intended, securing conditions under which they could give a fearless response. The students have since been randomly re-allocated new numbers so that all students are presented here with a different number to that which they had during the response sessions.

Another situation where there was a need for different procedures in the two groups arose in giving explanations. An insistence on giving both groups identically-worded information would have run counter to the more pressing need to show sensitivity to the institutional setting and the expectations and abilities of the respondents. In the response session to "The Monkey and the Crocodile" some of the students in Eritrea did not understand what they were expected to write, even though I had explained the assignment in what I thought was a clear and simple way. In this situation it was important to give an explanation that was relevant and interesting to the students, and to record what I had said from memory after the session. Had I written down then and there exactly what was asked and what I had replied, the researcher-student communication would have become slow, constrained and too dissimilar from everyday classroom interaction. There would have been little point in repeating this extra information, verbatim or not, to the other group, where it would have been redundant and probably inappropriate.

A third example concerns the length of time the students used to respond to the texts. Some students in Norway used all the time allocated, others were finished well within it, and yet others continued to write after the lesson had finished. The amount of time spent on the assignments varied considerably between the Norwegian students, especially for "The Monkey

and the Crocodile”, where some wrote for a couple of minutes, one for twenty minutes, and others asked to complete their texts out of class. In Eritrea, on the other hand, my access to the students was much more ad hoc, and the sessions, once initiated, were strictly run. My attempts at planning the sessions collaboratively with the students were marked by my unfamiliarity with their way of ‘doing things’, but the students were concerned that the sessions should start *and end* precisely. Within the time allocated some wrote more than others, but in general the students in Eritrea filled the allocated time with intense writing activity. All in all, the students in Norway spent slightly less time and wrote slightly shorter texts than did the students in Eritrea. This has, at least in part, to do with distinct academic socialisations, and with how the assignments were understood, and is discussed in more detail in 8.5.1.

These three examples about anonymity, explanations and how much time was spent writing, illustrate that although symmetry of design was important at the strategic and conceptualising stage of the project, the realities of working in Eritrea and Norway led to increasing asymmetry as the research progressed.

5.6.7 *Other written material*

After the Norwegian students had themselves responded to *The Other War*, the responses of the three graduate assistants in Eritrea to this text were published in a discussion forum in Fronter, an online learning management system used by all students at HUC. I prompted the discussion with the question, “When you compare how the Eritrean graduates understand the play with your own understanding of the play, do you notice any differences?”. This document was opened by the three men and four of the women in the Norwegian group. Three students contributed and their comments form part of the research material.²⁵

For the Norwegian students a home essay, worth 40% of the final grade, was a requirement for successful completion of the course in African literature. One of the two topics which students could choose between was “Compare and contrast how the texts “Girls at War”²⁶ and *The Other War* present the effects of war on the civilian population”. Nine of the ten students chose this topic. I make occasional reference to these essays as part of the students’ response to *The Other War*.

²⁵ That so few responded was unexpected, especially as a memory pen had been promised to the best contribution. However it may partly be attributable to my having promised a reward to the *best* response. More students would probably have added comments if I had promised a memory pen to a randomly selected comment, rather than to the best one. For some students, reading the comments made by their clever peers may have led them to deem their own responses too unremarkable to be worth posting.

²⁶ From Chinua Achebe’s (1972) *Girls at War and other stories*.

5.7 Making sense of the student texts

Analysing the students' response to literature involves a two-tiered decoding. First an author *encodes* their understanding of the world by writing a literary text. Then students decode the literary text, and finally the researcher decodes the students' understanding of the author's encoding. In analysing the material I put the approaches presented in 5.2 into practice. The students 'read', 'interpreted' or 'made sense of' the literary texts, and these terms are usually used interchangeably, though I sometimes make particular use of the implications of work and process involved in 'making sense' of a text. I make sense of *their* texts in much the same way that they make sense of the literary texts. Just like the students I put my culture and contexts to work, with the literary repertoire and the interpretive strategies available to me. At the same time, the meanings I attribute to the student texts are limited by their texts, and in my view this is a powerful delimitation of interpretive possibilities. In so saying I disagree with Smidt, who emphasises the reader-interpreter over the text as the primary source of analysis when he says that "the person researching literature is governed by his or her interpretive strategies, not primarily by the 'object' to be investigated, in the same way that a scientific paradigm prescribes what a scientist can 'find'" (Smidt, 1989:20).

When I first reviewed the student texts, I brought to it my understanding of what reading is, but I attempted to bracket what *cultural* knowledge of Eritrea and Norway I already had. Despite the ambition to read the student texts with as open and 'de-theorised' a mind as possible, the presuppositions we bring to every new textual encounter are necessary for understanding to happen at all. In chapter 2 I described literature as a socially constructed category. This has implications for my analysis, in that I focus on how ideology encoded in the literary text is decoded in the student texts. This presupposition shapes the other questions that I bring to the texts, and includes questions about the extent to which conventions were shared by author and student reader, and the relationship of the students to *their* intended reader. It was indeed my ambition to look for all instances of theme, interpretive strategies and discursal positions that there were to find, and then to develop categories with which to describe the material. Beyond this theoretical tool kit, I tried to see what the students said and how they said it without looking for anything in particular and certainly without having a particular hypothesis in mind. For an observer who starts out with limited insight into a particular context, each utterance contributes to an understanding of that context, thereby erasing the sharp distinction between context and response that the structure of this thesis might seem to suggest.

In order to organise and make sense of the material, I generated categories by reading and re-reading the student texts, returning to them repeatedly over a period of many weeks. The

process involved continually revising the identifying features of the categories, as well as the most apposite name for them. One consideration was to have as few categories as could successfully account for the material, both in terms of its themes, the interpretive strategies that the students made use of, and the discursual positions that they assumed. Another concern was to be aware of the risk that categories might elevate small variations between individuals into systematic variation between the groups. The process could have gone on indefinitely, and the present categorization must be understood as one of indefinitely many possibilities that could allow for a coherent and plausible presentation of the material.

Extracts from the student texts are used to illustrate these categories, and to show the individual variation between the students. I sometimes consider first the Eritrean and then the Norwegian responses, at other times I mix and closely compare the two. The extent to which the two groups are mixed and compared is guided by the ambition of making a coherent and readable presentation, and one which identifies similarities as well as dissimilarities between the two groups.

The student texts are analyzed at many levels, moving between the microscopic – examining the detail of little things – and the telescopic – making far away things apparent. At the linguistic level I look at particular words and phrases and how words or phrases function in their immediate co-text. At a discursive level I look at how pronouns and other linguistic features are used to position students in relation to their reader, how words and phrases are employed to express certainty and uncertainty, what information students provide to orientate their reader, and how they express their role as hosts, owners or visitors. At an interpretive level I look at the messages, themes and ideas that the students identify. These different levels mean that the analysis moves from linguistic detail to national preoccupations and back again. The level of analysis is determined by which feature of the student texts I seek to explain, and the totality of the analysis constitutes my understanding of how the students respond to literature.

I cite the texts as the students wrote them, and where possible retain their layout, correcting obvious spelling errors but retaining punctuation. An individual response can sometimes be partially accounted for by what that respondent has reported of their literary preferences and experience. More often the student texts are described in relation to some aspect of the group's common contexts. Whilst I regard the student texts as expressions of their membership in socially and culturally determined interpretive communities, I also analyse them as reports on individual reading events. My double focus, then, is to see their response as both a collective and an individual expression of the culture and contexts in which they arise.

Because each student is conceptualized as participating in one of two interpretive communities, I have categorised and then sometimes counted what they say. This is because the concept of an interpretive community rests on the assumption that people respond by selecting from a range of strategies available to a particular interpretive community. To demonstrate the explanatory force of these strategies for the communities, they must be named and then, to some extent, counted, for otherwise this study would not be about two groups, but only about twenty-two individuals. It is suggestive of the existence of two differing interpretive communities, when all of the twelve Eritrean students make use of an interpretive strategy that no Norwegian students use (see 12.5.7). For that matter, it is strongly suggestive of values that are held in common by both groups when a category occurs with similar frequency in each group, as can be seen for example in Table 15.

In generalising from the individual student texts to the two sets of contexts to which they belong, there must be a strong proviso, namely the extent to which the students do in fact belong to these contexts. In the Eritrean case, most of the students in this study are Tigrinya, and though I several times raise the issue of the relation of Tigrinya to Eritrean contexts, the issue deserves further and systematic research. For the Norwegian case, one must remember that although, as discussed in 6.3, Norway is not a nation constructed from distinct ethnic groups to the same extent as is Eritrea, the group in this study is nonetheless diverse, including people from rural areas and from towns, and several people who have moved to Norway early in life, for very different reasons. Patrick Chabal argues that generalisations are not in themselves right or wrong, they are “merely another level of analysis of local empirical reality cast in a useful comparative framework” (Chabal, 2009:22).²⁷ Generalisations are most useful when they are seen as working assumptions, he says, and they should be evaluated on the basis of how much sense they make locally, not by absolute standards of external validity. When it comes to studies of reception, the editors of the largest published comparative study, Kovala and Vainikkala, argue that “the particularity of a qualitative study does not mean that one must remain on the level of the individual cases. By contextualising the readings it is possible to see how the particular and the general interact – how the general, so to say, is produced in particular ways” (Kovala & Vainikkala, 2000:19). They make use of metaphors of ‘seeing’ and ‘looking’ to explain the ‘insights’ that a reception study can provide:

²⁷ Chabal is a Portuguese-born Africanist who has been fiercely criticised for generalising about Africa. See for example *Critical African Studies* 2 (2009) which is devoted to debating his latest book *Africa: The Politics of Suffering and Smiling* (2009).

Readings make up a space where, without forgetting one or the other, it is possible to look towards the particular and the individual or towards the general and the collective. (Kovala & Vainikkala, 2000:20)

This observation relates to a fundamental aspect of the analysis, and one which Ivanič touches on when she argues that none of us speaks just for ourselves, and none of us is original. All of us, individually, contribute to an ongoing recreation of the context from which we speak:

A single instance of language draws on conventions which embody particular values, beliefs and practices in the context of culture. The single instance of language use thereby minutely contributes to reinforcing those values, beliefs and practices, and opposing others (Ivanič, 1998:43)

In the present case each single instance of language makes more than a minute contribution to my understanding of the values and beliefs of the students who made them, and the interpretive communities they represent.

5.8 Ethical issues

5.8.1 Consent

I requested permission to carry out a pilot study for this research in Eritrea, and I requested permission to ask the Eritrean students to be participants in it. The vice-chancellor of the EIT, Ghebrebrhan Ogubazghi, made it clear that asking students for their written consent was not appropriate, because it might arouse unnecessary anxiety. He also presented the view that Eritrea has far more pressing issues than the formalising of individual consent in uncontroversial research.²⁸ Rather, he would give consent on behalf of the students, if the project proposal was found acceptable by him and his colleagues. I therefore presented the same proposal at the same time to the EIT and to the University of Oslo. It was deemed to meet the requirements of both institutions.

Just as I found in Eritrea, Åsa Wedin (2004) experienced that “the proper and expected way for a researcher to introduce a study and to get research permission in Tanzania is a top-down one” (Wedin, 2004:21). She comments on the issue of individual consent in her own study in rural Tanzania, where she found that the ethical guidelines for Swedish research were difficult to implement. People in hierarchically organised societies, she says, even if explicitly asked, do not have a real choice, because someone of minor status would be expected to agree to participate if someone of higher status, such as a teacher or a researcher, asked them to. Anne Ryen notes a similar inappropriateness to written consent in her fieldwork in Tanzania, where forms requesting written consent were seen as bureaucratisation and an expression of distrust

²⁸ He wondered why the international research community should be so concerned about informed and voluntary consent, and so unconcerned at the ongoing violation of the Eritrean-Ethiopian border.

(Ryen, 2007). Another problem Wedin raises, and this applies also to the students in Norway, is that the requirement of informed consent presupposes that those in the target group know enough to make an independent assessment of the implications of their involvement, something which is not usually the case.

A different attitude to consent prevailed in relation to the respondents in Norway. For them I was both researcher and teacher (supervisor/lecturer). Correspondingly, for me they were both students of African literature and respondents in my research. In recruiting participants to educational research in Norway, especially projects that have not been initiated by schools themselves, researchers often make use of personal networks and their previous workplaces to recruit respondents. Much Norwegian educational research therefore involves teacher-researcher familiarity and issues of obligation. When one's own students become research participants, voluntary consent must be emphasised and debated. It is the responsibility of the researcher to make explicit the parameters of the research situation where the researcher is seen to have several roles in relation to her informants (Kalleberg, 2006:20). This I did at the outset of the course with a letter of informed consent that was approved by the NSD (see Appendix 1). I also posted this information, as well as the project proposal, in Fronter, to which all the students had access. I encouraged the students to be critical of our roles throughout the course and to summarise their experience in a written evaluation. To reduce any influence that the students' participation or non-participation in the research might have on my ability to evaluate their written work objectively, an external examiner was appointed.

The letter of informed consent made clear that participation in the research project would require them to read non-syllabus texts. Attendance in class was not obligatory, and the submission of written student texts was at all times voluntary. Whilst I requested their participation, I also emphasised that students would in no way be discriminated against should they choose not to participate. Although this was an honest statement of intention on my part, one may question whether I could avoid looking with particular favour at students who made a positive contribution, and whether the students felt that they had a real choice about participating. Fine et al. found, as I did, that some of their respondents signed the form with apparent nonchalance and that this "probably reflected their general attitude towards procedural matters" (M. Fine, Weis, L., Weseem, & Wong, 2000:127). Their experience of gaining informants' consent led them to suggest that such forms in effect reinforce the power imbalance in the research situation, because although their stated intention is to protect the respondents, what they actually do is to free the researcher of liability and give the researcher control over the material and what happens to it. The consent form forced them to face up to the illusions of

reciprocity and friendship in their relationship with their informants, they said, and it served this function also in my research. In my case, all the Norwegian students agreed to participate.

Consent and anonymity were absolute requirements in Norway, and I have respected these requirements in coding and recoding all the students. I am aware of the lack of anonymity entailed by identifying the institution at which they were students, and the use of gendered pronouns. To increase anonymity, at the cost of reduced research accountability, I have eliminated all references to dates for fieldwork or personal communication that could link this study to a particular cohort.

5.8.2 *My roles and responsibilities*

Eritrea is small, it is new, and its government seeks to dominate the narrative of its country by not allowing resident foreign journalists, and by dictating what in-country journalists may write and say. For these and other reasons there is relatively little information to be had about Eritrea, and what information there is comes with a stronger agenda than much information about Norway, although it may not be always apparent what that agenda is. I bear in mind Madsen's forewarning that my work in Eritrea would only brush the surface of what was really going on (pc 18.05.2005). My understanding of Norway, on the other hand, is much fuller, since I have lived in the country for many years, and worked in education for most of them. Here the challenge is to reflect on and systematize my knowledge and to make a coherent selection amongst the many narratives of Norway that are available.

As consultant for the collaboration between HUC and the EIT I had the role of contributing to the development of a curriculum for teacher education, with a special focus on English. It was this role that made it possible for me to access students in Eritrea and carry out a research project. I foresaw, and did indeed encounter, situations where the distinction between these roles was blurred. Was I researcher or curriculum advisor when I talked with workshop participants about their experience as educators and their understanding of literature and its role in schools? For the duration of the collaborative project I maintained an ongoing discussion of these and other related issues with my colleagues in Norway.

Most of the teaching in the Department of English at EIT was in the hands of contracted staff from India, some of whom sought my comments and advice. This was not straightforward as the terms of the institutional collaboration required HUC staff to support *Eritrean* faculty members. My research, however, required the establishment and development of good relations with the Indian teaching staff, with a view both to understanding the students' institutional context and to securing access to their classes. In relating to colleagues in various roles – as partners in curriculum development, as informants or as classroom door openers, there is also a

more general ethical issue to do with instrumentality. One risks that one's relationship to colleagues and also to students, apparently reciprocal and friendly, is motivated by the aim of furthering one's research goals, and, in the longer term, one's own career.

My role was more straightforward in the Norwegian institutional context. Although I did not teach or talk about the three literary texts in this study, I both taught and talked about other texts, so the Norwegian students were familiar with the more general literary and social conventions and expectations that I and their co-students brought to the reading and study of texts. Our interaction was framed by the social and academic culture of the English Department at HUC, and I had considerable insight into the educational context of the majority of the students, since with one exception they had attended secondary schools in Norway, and had their tertiary education at HUC.

There are also epistemological and ethical issues relating to language. Primarily epistemological is the concern that I do not speak the lingua franca of Eritrea and the campus. As a non-Tigrinya-speaker I could communicate only with people who had completed secondary school, and in the case of many of these people, our conversations were less full than had we shared a language more completely. A second issue is primarily ethical, or perhaps I should say didactic, for it involves the imbalance in English competence between myself, as native speaker, and the respondents in both groups. This imbalance accentuates the power relation in the researcher-researched situations that I set up. Not only did the students have to express their opinions about the literary texts, whilst I withheld mine, but they had to do so in a language which I knew better than they did.

Inasmuch as it is the ethical responsibility of the researcher to represent his/her research findings accurately (Kalleberg, 2006:35), I returned to the Norwegian students with queries about their answers to the questionnaire or the texts they had written, so that they had the chance to correct misunderstandings. However I was not able to discuss my analysis with them, as they went their different ways after the course was completed. In Eritrea I returned to the students with an initial analysis of their response to "The Monkey and the Crocodile". The students were attentive and seemed to enjoy the PowerPoint presentation, but I realised on reflection that it was more designed to impress them and to underline the disparity between the resources at their and my disposal than to draw them into a fruitful conversation about their response. In sum this means that I only partially meet the requirement that participants in qualitative research should be given "several opportunities to challenge any prejudices which researchers may bring with them" (Bridges, 2003:141). The student voices were elicited within

the classroom and then broadcast outside that classroom, and I as the broadcaster had a special responsibility of respect and representation to those who had given me permission to do this.

5.8.3 Conditions for research in Eritrea

Research in Norway must be done in compliance with the ethical codes prescribed by the National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities, and the confidentiality of informants must be ensured in compliance with guidelines from the NSD. Things are not organized in the same way in Eritrea. I therefore spend some time explaining what doing humanistic research in Eritrea entails, and the ethical issues that it throws up. At the time of writing there are stringent restrictions that make it difficult for Eritrean academics to go abroad for further studies, to attend international conferences or to participate in programmes of academic mobility. Eritrean academics who have gone abroad without permission are frequently denied readmission.

In Eritrea the administrative capacity of the Department of English was overstretched, so that good intentions about allocating time and resources to support this research were not easily realised. The departmental administration and staff were, however, helpful in finding immediate solutions to immediate needs. A serious problem was that the non-academic administration was not in regular communication with the academic staff, and had the capacity to overrule them. My impression was that exact dates for when term started and ended were set at short notice at the discrimination of the non-academic administration. This made long-term planning of classroom encounters untenable. Instead I resorted to ad hoc solutions that involved negotiation, and the exchange of professional services for the chance to gain access to the students.

Given that Eritrean tertiary education is an interface between civilian academic codes and co-extensive political and military practices, and the relative dominance of the latter, access to the students over time was not something that I could take for granted. One factor was the continual uncertainty of whether the country would go to war, an eventuality that led Matzke to abort her field research in 1998-2000 (Matzke, 2003:22). At a quite different level of seriousness, but nonetheless of concern to me, was uncertainty as to whether I would be given an entry visa each time I applied. Other teachers and researchers, whose work, like mine, had been given official clearance, experienced being followed, being reported on, and being called in by security agents to account for their activities. When Hepner interviewed people in Eritrea in 2001, she reported worrying all the time about whether she was implicating those who agreed to talk to her:

Although I cooperated in providing information about my research design and major questions, I refused to reveal to authorities the identities of private citizens I had interviewed or relate the

content of our discussions as per the terms of informed consent procedures. Authorities were unfamiliar with and highly suspicious of these procedures. I stopped holding interviews or meeting individuals in public places for fear of being followed. (Hepner, 2009:228)

Looking back she writes that “inquiry and discussion are potentially dangerous pursuits for both the researcher and the researched”. When Kibreab (2009) researched his most recent book, he found Eritrea to be a country of rumours and speculation. Amongst the problems he encountered were the dearth of data, and what data there was being accessible only through personal contacts in ministries, departments and regional administrations.²⁹ This is particularly serious because “the fact that there is no freedom of speech, press and association means that there are no alternative sources of information in the country” (2009:10).

Since independence research has been tightly controlled in the service of the national interest (Dorman, 2005:206). Dorman explains the background for the intervention of the government in research in the following terms:

Challenges to the quasi-official nationalism are easily interpreted as challenging the existence of the state itself and the government that created that state. This is why critics of the current government are facetiously labeled as pro-Ethiopian or traitors. The penetration of state and nation-building projects into every sector of Eritrean life means that all social research is deeply politicised. Despite attempts to constrain them, journalists and researchers have become key players in the contested process of conceptualising Eritrean nationhood. Research thus both buttresses and challenges official discourses, even where it is not framed in terms of nationalist discourses. (2005:204)

The journalists to whom Dorman refers are presumably those outside the country, as there are no independent journalists working in-country (Tronvoll, 2009). What made my research acceptable, I believe, is that an investigation into how students understand literary texts is so far removed from the research concerns of the government that it is, in their view, without practical significance and therefore not worth bothering about. Zemenfes Tsige, Director of Research and Human Resources Development, is quoted as saying, “We want our research to be problem-driven and solution-guided. We are not being driven by curiosity; but by problems, the ultimate theme being finding solutions” (Kibrom, 2005:3). The ambitions of my research were unfamiliar to both students and teachers at EIT. In the field of literature studies, quantifiable results would, I believe, have been deemed preferable to a qualitative study.³⁰ And in a

²⁹ Furthermore, most communication was by telephone. This observation, along with my own experience with curriculum reform at EIT, suggests that insofar as they exist, documents have more importance for foreign relations than as tools of administration and government. The permission I was given to carry out research was given as spoken communication only.

³⁰ Janesick says that it is part of the responsibility and the ‘social location’ of qualitative researchers to make their audiences and partners aware of the seriousness of qualitative research and the substantial literature and discussion on qualitative research that exist (Janesick, 2000:389).

hierarchy of usefulness it is also possible that critical analysis of literary texts would be recognised as more valuable than the study of how students respond to them.³¹

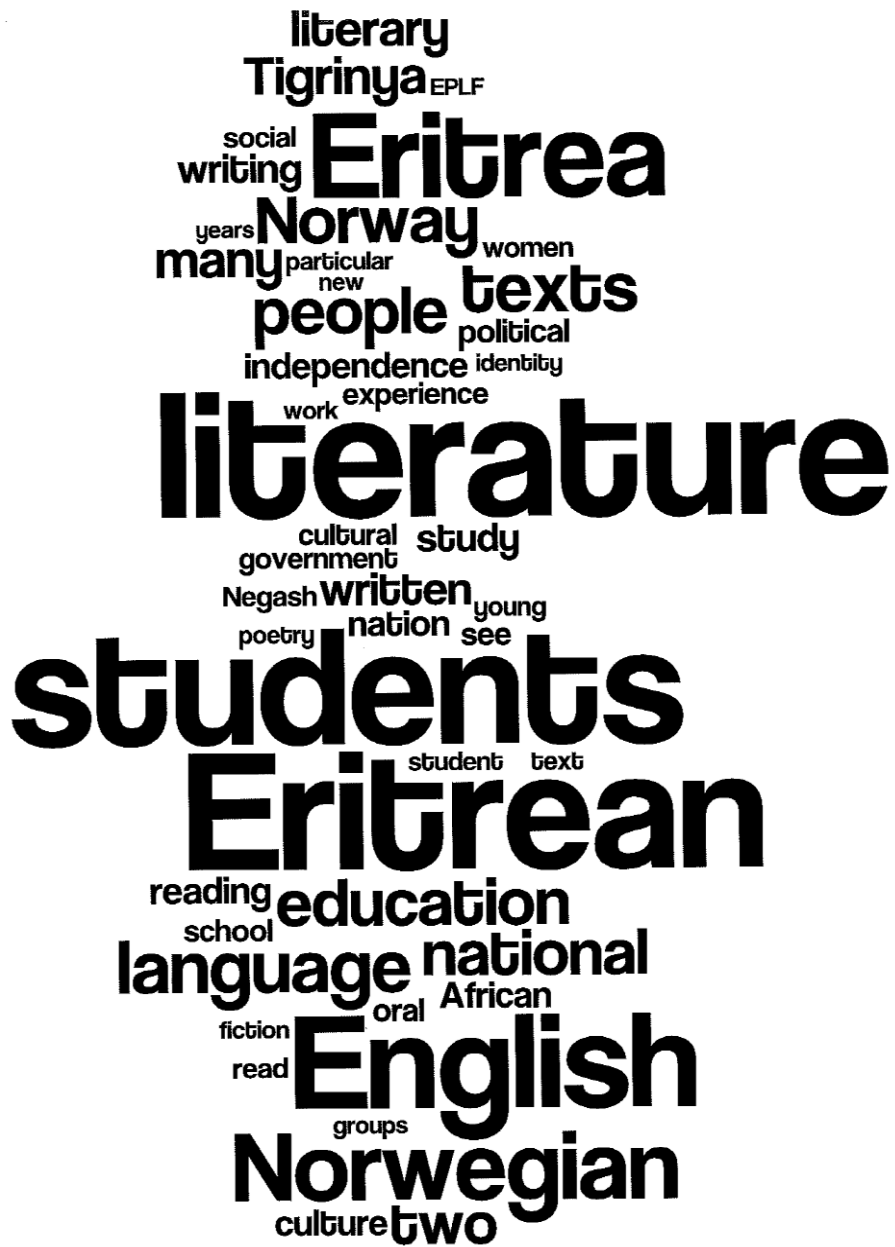
The Norwegian national guidelines for research emphasise that one must strive to understand and show respect for local traditions and established patterns of authority (2006:24). This advice is not useful when local traditions are in conflict with established patterns of authority. I was twice stopped by soldiers on guard at the campus gates, and on both occasions access was swiftly negotiated through the intervention of EIT staff. Within the campus my experience was that I could carry out my research freely.³² I was told that any suspicion of research censorship was unwarranted and alien to the spirit of EIT. Whilst this is the ambition of many of the academic staff, I understand that there are people at all Eritrean institutions of secondary and tertiary education who are assigned to report on the activities of staff and students. This is an important premise for understanding both the conditions for research and the context in which the students wrote their texts.

Whilst working in Eritrea I took the approach that it was the task of the Norwegian and British embassies to relate to the ‘established patterns of authority’, in the form of the Eritrean government. I respected the local ‘traditions’ as they found expression in the civilian administration of EIT. This is, however, a position with which I was not comfortable. In such a centralized and controlled society, EIT is not autonomous, but an institutionalization of government policy. Smidt has visited Eritrea several times over a period of many years. He predicted that I would be confronted with a serious ethical dilemma when I came to discuss my research findings, as some possible explanations might not be well-received in Eritrea (pc). But to draw the conclusion, which he indeed does not, that one should not research a field where such circumspection is required, is too defensive a position. It would in fact mean that one could not research the role or reception of literature in many countries in the world. And as Bernard says, “There is no value-free science. Everything that interests you as a potential research focus comes fully equipped with risks to you and to the people you study” (Bernard, 2002:73).

³¹ Ghirmai Negash reports that an Eritrean commentator was sceptical of the value of writing about what readers in Asmara thought of an Eritrean novel (G. Negash, 2009: 13).

³² I was reminded of Peter Hessler’s (2002) experience as a Peace Corps teacher of English literature at an institution of teacher education in China. Whilst his life outside the classroom was subject to arbitrary intervention from the authorities, he found that he could teach in whatever way he deemed best once within the classroom.

Part Two: Context



6 National identities and social practices

6.1 Introductions

6.1.1 *An overview*

This chapter sets out to describe how national identity is constructed in Norway and Eritrea and to describe some of the social practices in the embedding contexts of the two groups of students. The other two sections in this introduction provide a very brief presentation of the people of the two countries, and their religious and economic situation. In the chapter as a whole I write somewhat more about Eritrea than about Norway. In section 6.2 I pay special attention to Eritrea's recent history and the ongoing nation-building project, and how it is received, topics that also underpin two of the literary texts. Section 6.3.1 gives a thumbnail sketch of Norway's history and then concentrates on central values that inform Norwegian identity. Questions of culture and identity are considered at some length because they are central to how the students make sense of the literary texts. Some of the issues raised may be supranational, in that they also describe conditions that prevail in the Horn of Africa or in Scandinavia, or even more generally, in Africa and in Europe, but in this chapter they have importance as aspects of Eritrean and Norwegian national identity.

The *social* aspects of the two nations that are presented in section 6.4 are chosen for their relevance to the literary texts. They include friendship, the position of the individual in and outside the family and the situation for women. In order to understand the relationship of the political and social contexts to the individuals in this study, I conclude in 6.5 with a reflection on how identity is constituted in relation to the political and media context of the two countries.

6.1.2 *Introduction to the people of Eritrea*

Recent estimates of Eritrea's population vary between 3.2 and 4.8 million.³³ About 80 % of this population has agriculture or livestock as its main source of income (Bureau of African Affairs, 2009). The composition of this population is complex, as it includes a Tigrinya and Tigré majority and smaller ethnic groups. Both the Tigrinya and other ethnic groups are intersected by international borders.³⁴ Map 1 shows the location of Eritrea in the Horn of Africa.

³³ Population figures have political and economic significance, for the lower the population estimate, the higher the percentage of the population served by the health and education services. This may be why the Eritrea Education for All report (2000) estimated the population at 2.7 million in 1997, whilst informants in the Ministry of Education believed it to be not more than 2 million (Bjørndal, 2002:146).

³⁴ The highland border divides the Tigrinya-speaking people, there being about 1.7 million in Eritrea and about twice that number in Ethiopia (Tronvoll, 1999:1051).



Map 1: Eritrea, showing the capital Asmara and neighbouring countries

The displays at the National Museum in Asmara show how a person's ethnic identity is apparent in their dress and dwellings, for between the groups there are great differences in lifestyle and social organisation. With many individual exceptions, ethnic groups live predominantly in a particular part of Eritrea. People belong to very old Christian or Muslim societies, and today roughly half the population is Christian and half Muslim. Most Tigrinya are Orthodox Christians, whilst some are Catholic and some Protestant. The Tigré are predominantly Muslim. Religious pluralism is apparent in the contiguity of the places of worship for various religions and denominations.

David Pool explains that the major divide between Eritreans is based on three coinciding factors – religion, language and forms of production, so that in the lowlands there are predominantly agro-pastoralist and nomadic Muslims, and in the highlands there are Tigrinya Christian farmers (D. Pool, 2001:11). The country is poor and more than half of the population is dependent on food aid. Its current position on the UNDP ranking for human development is very low, at 165th place, but Eritrea has made conspicuous progress in some areas, particularly the provision of health infrastructure. The national economy is dependent on remittances from Eritreans abroad, and the tertiary education system is said to be financed by soft loans from the IMF. Pool notes that differences between the ethnic groups are dramatic in relation to important social indicators such as participation in primary education.

6.1.3 Introduction to the people of Norway

Map 2 shows Norway, the town of Hamar and the location of Norway in Scandinavia.



Map 2: Norway, showing Hamar and neighbouring countries

Around 4.6 million people live in Norway, much the same figure as the most expansive estimates of the Eritrean population. About 75% of the population is employed in the service sector, with public services in welfare, health, education and administration being the largest sector (Statistisk sentralbyrå, 2009). In 1950 Norway was amongst the most ethnically homogeneous countries in Europe, but it has become increasingly multicultural. The proportion of non-European immigrants has multiplied in the last decades, so that, for example, 30% of those now living in the capital are immigrants.³⁵ Protestantism is the state religion, to which 90% of the population belongs, but most of the population is secular in their lifestyle and few attend church regularly. Anders Bäckström points out that the argument that the strong welfare state meant that the individual could concentrate on making money and leave welfare to the state, rather than to God, has been superseded by newer developments (Bäckström, 2007). Religion, he says, has gained renewed importance in the Nordic countries. Both immigration, predominantly Muslim in recent years, and a closer association with globalization through participation in the European enterprise, mean that the process of secularization has not continued, and people in the Nordic countries have an increasing awareness of religion as a central factor in their societies.

³⁵ In the Norwegian definition, the children of first generation immigrants are also counted as immigrants.

Norway is rich in state-owned or state-taxed oil. This wealth, combined with a strong social democratic tradition, results in Norway's consistently high performance on the UN human development ranking for health, education and female equality.

6.2 Eritrea's national identity

6.2.1 *Recent Eritrean history*

Whether Eritrea existed before the colonial project is a debated question. But today's Eritrea presents itself as a nation defined by its own recent history. When Italy joined the scramble for Africa most colonial powers had already 'bagged' a bit of Africa. Italy established a fragile colony in Eritrea in 1890. Not until Mussolini turned his attention to Eritrea in the 1930s, intending to make it a second Italy and a showcase for fascism, did most Eritreans become fully aware of the colonial project.

In World War 2 the Allied forces' first significant victory against the Axis powers was to take the Eritrean city of Keren from the Italians in 1941. A few days later Italy was forced to hand over the whole colony to British caretakers – the British Military Administration (BMA). This is how the transfer from Italian to British colonisers is viewed by an Eritrean commentator:

For Eritreans, it was in reality the closing of [a] faceless colonial chapter and the opening of an uglier new one. They were victims not only of the oppressive measures of their conquerors but also of the cross-fire of the colonial powers vying for the control of this strategically located land. Those cross-fires which they never desired were costing them great human and material losses. (Narnet Team, sa)

This history-telling, not least the reference to 'colonial chapters', indicates that a national narrative template for Eritrea might be:

1. Eritrea is occupied by a foreign power.
2. The foreign power treats Eritrea as a means to achieve its own ambitions.
3. A new foreign power contends for possession of Eritrea, which leads to
4. A period of increased violence and much suffering for the people of Eritrea.
5. The new foreign power occupies Eritrea.

Let us continue the historical narrative with this template in mind. In 1941 British caretakership replaced the Fascist nation-building project. The British were to stay in Eritrea for ten years, promoting education, but neglecting the country's economic development and exporting a large part of the industrial infrastructure to other British colonies. At the end of this period macro-political considerations swayed an indecisive UN commission to resolve that Eritrea be federated to Ethiopia. During the ensuing period of federation the autonomy of the Eritrean

government was continually reduced, until Ethiopia under its Emperor Haile Selassie formally annexed the country in 1960. In the following year, 1961, began what was to become known as the Armed Struggle. It was to last for 30 years. First in the form of skirmishes, later as well-organized guerrilla warfare, the Armed Struggle had to overcome serious internal dissension before the EPLF – the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front – gained ascendancy over the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), and the Struggle then gained momentum. In 1974 the Emperor in Ethiopia was ousted in a bloody coup, led by a group of low-ranking army officers. By 1977 Marxists led by Mengistu Haile Mariam had murdered their way to the leadership, and set out to subdue the Eritrean ‘rebels’. Nevertheless in 1978 Eritrean victory seemed to be at hand, as Eritrean ‘freedom fighters’ had surrounded Asmara. But a huge Soviet-backed Ethiopian air force bombarded the EPLF positions so fiercely that they were forced to withdraw into the harsh Sahel mountains. From here they re-organized their campaign. The years leading up to this Strategic Withdrawal, as the EPLF term it, and the twelve years that followed before victory was achieved, are *the* central subject of recent Eritrean literature. During this period the civilian population of Eritrea experienced widespread and random brutality at Mengistu’s instigation.

After de facto independence was achieved in 1991, a referendum that was deemed free and fair demonstrated enormous popular enthusiasm for the national project, and Eritrea officially celebrated its independence on May 24, 1993. The official picture of Eritrea is consistently drawn in relation to this past – Eritrea is described as an emergent nation that has won independence against all the odds. Since it is beholden to no other nation for its independence, it is beholden to no other nation for its continued survival. The Eritrean Embassy in Sweden presents the country’s history in these terms:

Eritrea is one of the newest and most promising nations in Africa. Eritrea recently fought and won one of the longest wars in the world. Following thirty years of bitter armed struggle, Eritrea gained total national independence and became self-governing in 1991 in a stunning defeat of the occupying Ethiopian forces which also helped liberate Ethiopia from the Soviet-backed Ethiopian Regime, Mengistu’s Derg, the last in a series of forceful hindrances (10-years of British occupation, coerced federation with Ethiopia, and the subsequent 30-years of forceful annexation by Ethiopia) to its legitimate quest for de-colonization. (Embassy of the state of Eritrea in Stockholm, 2004)

A more comprehensive account of Eritrea’s development from independence to today’s situation must acknowledge that civil society had to be rebuilt virtually from scratch, that the infrastructure and economy were at rock-bottom levels, and that the country had been devastated by years of drought. In 1994 the military EPLF became the civil PFDJ (People’s Front for Democracy and Justice). The first five years after independence were watched with approbation

by Eritrea's many admirers around the world, who saw in Eritrea's tenacity, self-reliance and proclaimed egalitarianism the hope of an African renaissance. This hope was doused when in 1998 a conflict on the Eritrean-Ethiopian border escalated into a two year war that cost 100,000 lives. Justin Hill, who lived in Eritrea in the period leading up to the war, noted the enthusiasm with which old fighters returned to the camaraderie and black-and-white values of the front. Young people, he was told, were keen to fight the Ethiopians in order to gain the respect and the jobs that only a fighter is given in Eritrean society. "War fit them like an old uniform", he observed (Hill, 2002:200). For Hill and many other foreigners this war seemed wanton and wasteful. Eritrea fell from grace, and in the eyes of Western media it has since been neglected and even scorned and rejected.

It is the aftermath of the 1998-2000 war that is used by the Eritrean government to explain the economic stagnation and curbing of civil liberties that now characterises Eritrea.³⁶ In a recent report on the human rights situation in Eritrea, Tronvoll sees the extreme repression of all civil rights as a function not of the war but of an extreme totalitarianism:

By the end of 2001, all dissenting voices demanding democratic reform in Eritrea were quelled; either arrested, driven into exile, or cowed into silence. The nascent Eritrean civil society and independent press were shut down; their spokespersons and journalists and editors arrested. Thenceforth, no opposition or alternative voices have been allowed to be heard inside the country. Today, it is forbidden in Eritrea for any group of more than seven people to assemble without approval by the government. (2009:13)

A commonplace observation among non-Eritrean and transnational Eritrean commentators is that the situation has gone from bad to worse. However there are still in-country academics who apparently justify and commend the political leadership of the president and the policies and practices of the PFDJ.

We can see that the national narrative template is used to explain the way that the British took over from the Italians, how the UN-decreed federation with Ethiopia took over from them, how Imperial Ethiopia took over from the federation, how the Derg took over from Imperial Ethiopia, and finally, how the EPLF took over from the Derg. The question then is whether the civic remodelling of the EPLF as the PFDJ represents a break with the narrative template or has become a new instantiation of it.

³⁶ The breakdown of relations with Ethiopia led to the loss of Eritrea's most important trading partner. The Eritrean government blames the unwillingness of the international community to enforce the UN's demarcation of the border for the fact that Eritrea keeps 300,000 people in military service. The UN peacekeeping mission that patrolled the zone between the two countries withdrew in 2008, and the Eritrean government encouraged its departure.

6.2.2 *Eritrean nationhood*

We can discuss Eritrean nationhood in Gellner's terms and ask what pattern describes the marriage of nation-state and culture in Eritrea. Bereketeab argues that Gellner's focus on a common pre-existent culture is quite inappropriate for Eritrea, and proposes instead that territorial integration, along with the integration of political, legal, social and economic institutions and shared historical experience, constitute a common culture which then provides the basis for civic nationhood (Bereketeab, 2000). This civic culture co-exists with distinct sub-national ethnic cultures. Boundary delineation and territorial integration are necessary premises for a nation; they are "the beginnings from which everything moves" (2000:106). The social organisation of difference, to redeploy Barth's phrase (see 4.2.2), is particularly marked where resources are acutely scarce and institutions are perilously weak, a combination we find in several regions of Africa, not least in the Horn of Africa:

It is arguably in the nature of nationalism to distinguish insiders from outsiders, but because this is occurring against the backdrop of acute economic distress and state reconstruction, the process is especially fraught in Africa. Putting it crudely, the stakes are much higher. There is scarcely a country on the continent where the state of the nation and the boundaries of inclusion/exclusion have not been debated in recent times, and in many instances violent conflict has ensued. (Dorman, Hammett, & Nugent, 2007:4)

In Eritrea, violent boundary conflicts have their ideological grounding in one of two competing narratives. On the one hand there is the position that Eritrea had already existed as a part of Ethiopia long before it was colonised by the Italians. On the other hand there is the position that Eritrea is a recent political construct and that there was no coherent nation before Italian colonisation made it necessary to establish boundaries demarcating it from neighbouring countries (Berhe, 2004). In this view present-day Ethiopia, like Eritrea, is a colonial construct (Bereketeab, 2000:295). We find both views vigorously held. Berhe calls these two narratives the independence narrative, in which Eritrea is and always has been distinct from Ethiopia, and the unity narrative (which is also a narrative of the Ethiopian state), in which Eritrea is and always has been a part of Ethiopia. For the unity narrative the idea of a distinct Eritrean nationhood is a recent and untenable political falsification (Berhe, 2004:73).³⁷

Michael Fessehayee, a frequent contributor to the ongoing Internet debate about Eritrean nationhood, exemplifies an ecstatic independence narrative position. He believes that the

³⁷ This Ethiopian unity narrative, which had been very powerful on the world stage in the post World War 2 decades, was challenged by the well-respected historians Basil Davidson and Dan Connell (Dorman, 2005:206). In retrospect Dorman sees them as 'guerrilla groupies', because they contributed to the academic legitimisation of an Eritrean nationalist history, by buying so heavily into the independence narrative. Both Davidson and Connell have now said "Enough". They do not dismiss the independence narrative, but they are critical of the political direction post-independence Eritrea has taken.

distinguishing qualities of Eritrea and its people are God-given, conceiving the nation as “the expression of a primordial identity” (Oliphant, 2004:15).

There was (is) one common denominator written in their DNA that made the Eritreans to be one, act one, and move as one towards one destination – to a free and sovereign Eritrea they call home. That cementing factor, which goes to centuries back, was their unadulterated and unabridged love of country and people. Driven by this cementing factor; with an unyielding steadfastness, unending patience, and “Hatsin A’re” persistence, they headed to the only place they knew as their God/Allah given fortress – the Eritrean wilderness. (Fessehaye, 2007)

Tesfai presents a more moderate essentialist position, but one that supports the independence narrative. He bases Eritrean identity in history, and recognises and recovers the previously unwritten *Eritrean* story of Eritrea. That this has been overlooked, most critically in 1952 when the UN determined that Eritrea should be confederated with Ethiopia, is, he says, because

Eritreans at that time did not have a written history that was handed over by their ancestors or that was written by them to reflect their own true identity and their aspirations. Therefore in my opinion, Eritreans became the victims of an unfair decision because in addition to international pressure and evil plots of foreign actors, their argument was weak.

However, unlike their argument, their history has never been weak. Since the Eritrean history is a history of struggle to determine their identity, it is a powerful history built on outstanding events. (Tesfai, 2006, translated from Tigrinya by Nazareth Amlesom Kifle)

A relativist position is held by many Western and some transnational Eritrean historians – Smith Simonsen (2007), Wrong (2005), Bereketeab (2000), G. Negash (1997), Tronvoll (1999), T. Negash (1997) and others – who present the Eritrean nation as a recent construct. Tekeste Negash, for example, argues that a distinct Eritrean national identity developed first in the 1930s, in the last phase of Italian colonisation. Bereketeab contends that the making of Eritrea was fundamentally the result of the actions of the colonial powers and the nationalist movements. He confronts the essentialist position: “Pre-colonial societies with no common history, culture or state-like organisation were initially integrated under Italian colonialism in what came to be known as the Colony of Eritrea” (Bereketeab, 2000:17). Tronvoll explains that the EPLF dates Eritrean identity to the advent of Italian colonialism, and “thus established their own relevant past” (Tronvoll, 1999:1054).

Any account of national identity must be dominated by the EPLF/PFDJ and its nation-building project, for as Dorman explains:

It is difficult to convey how deeply the ethos of the liberation struggle and the EPLF appears to have penetrated Eritrean society [...]. It is constitutive of Eritrean identity and citizenship, as well as of nationhood. (Dorman, 2005:205)

There are many commentators on the nation-building project, and their understanding depends on where their political sympathies and academic allegiances lie, and how the nation-building project affects their lives. I try to do brief justice to a range of standpoints, without drawing an

overly complex picture of this highly contested issue. One place to start is with the issue of land, which symbolizes local or regional citizenship in many African societies. The ability to possess land, or the right to use it, is proof of belonging. Claims to land are usually expressed as the rights of first-comers or conquerors, and this means that history “is taken very seriously indeed” (Dorman, et al., 2007:16). This generalization is true for Eritrea, according to the Eritrean historian Asmeret Berhe (2004). Let us first look briefly at the importance of land in the construction of Eritrean identity. His apparently straightforward claim that ethnicity and land are central to a discussion of Eritrean nationhood illustrates the need for caution in taking any one voice as authoritative or objective. In raising the land issue to the same level of importance as ethnicity, Berhe brings to the fore the long history of land disputes which are critical in *Tigrinya* history.

National identity, he says, is closely based on people’s relationship with the land and the experiences that are shared in relation to it. People use this relationship to put a distance between themselves and those they recognize as having no or invalid claims to the land” (Berhe, 2004:77). Historic territory is crucial to Eritrean identity, but “tales of ordeal then serve to revitalize a sense of identity that depends not only on ownership and control of land but also on surviving through the agony” (2004:73). To put it another way: Berhe claims that Eritreans see themselves both as first-comers and as liberators, and both roles give them the inalienable right to call themselves Eritreans and to claim the land as theirs.³⁸

Let us now consider Berhe’s other focus: ethnicity. It is worth some attention, as two of the literary texts in this study draw heavily on this aspect of nationhood. Thomas Hylland Eriksen describes a tension in many African states that also pertains to Eritrea. For if the nation is a mosaic of ethnic groups, the project of nation-building is undermined through a focus on ethnic difference. But if nation-building downplays or ignores difference and encourages or enforces unity, civil unrest and even secessionism may be the result (T. H. Eriksen, 1993:116-117).

Two of the most striking ways in which ethnic and religious pluralism is made visible are the close proximity of churches and mosques in the capital city and the live shows and television performances of songs and dances from each of the ethnic groups. The strategic importance of music, dance and song in the building of a national identity is evidenced by the dominant position these activities still have on Eri-TV, the state-run Eritrean TV channel. More recent discontent with the government means that these performances do not serve the nation-

³⁸ Since 1995 a new land tenure strategy has transferred land rights to the state, giving individuals usufructory rights and diminishing the collective authority of the villages.

building agenda as effectively as that they did before 1998. For, as Plastow says, “theatre, music and song can only in the long run benefit the side which has mass support” (1998:111).

The EPLF, as we have seen, espoused the idea that a national culture must build on the voluntary integration of all ethnicities into a national identity, and they used a cultural prescription identical to that which the Guinean revolutionary and theorist Amilcar Cabral, who led his own country to independence, has written about. African Marxist movements struggling for national independence should, he says, value and make use of cultural expression:

For culture to play the important role which falls to it in the framework of development of the liberation movement, the movement must be able to conserve the positive cultural values of every well-defined social group, of every category, and to achieve the *confluence* of these values into the stream of struggle, giving them a new dimension – the *national dimension*. (Cabral, 2007:490)

But whilst it is essential to conserve each group’s cultural values, says Cabral, the building of an independent nation must not be uncritical. One must weed out regressive, reactionary and weak cultural expressions “with subtlety but strictness” in favour of those that can contribute to the building of a strong nation. Cabral’s prescriptions succinctly describe the rationale for the combination of cultural and educational strategies that the EPLF employed, and which many informants voiced when Matzke interviewed them about their fighter identities as ‘cultural comrades’ shooting ‘cultural bullets’ (Matzke, 2003:159). The many shows put on by the cultural troupes, of which performances of Agitprop plays were often a part (see 9.2.4), can be understood as exemplifications of Cabral’s prescription as to how culture can be used to provide a new, shared, national dimension to disparate ethnic groups.

The promotion of a national culture is laid down in the unratified National Constitution of 1997: “The State shall be responsible for creating and promoting conditions conducive for developing a national culture capable of expressing national identity, unity and progress of the Eritrean people” (The Constitution of Eritrea, Article 9, sub. 1, cited in Matzke, 2003:15). Supra-ethnic Eritrean identity is expressed symbolically through the flag and the image of the president, and corporeally through national service, which involves all men over eighteen and all unmarried women. When it comes to *transcending* ethnicity, there is an official silence about the implications of religious and ethnic difference. And whilst religious diversity is politically condoned, religious adherents who dispute the sovereignty of the state – evangelical Christians, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Islamists – are systematically and harshly repressed. Bettina Conrad describes this policy as it manifested itself amongst exiled Eritreans, where officially “awareness of ethnic origins, religious differences was denounced as divisive and ‘bad’” (Conrad, 2006:9). She notes that unofficially such differences are still important, the choice of

whom one can marry being a case in point.

Pool emphasises how strongly the EPLF built on an understanding of class as the overarching social contradiction, downplaying the role of ethnicity and religion (D. Pool, 2001:40). This over-arching identity became “a form of social control, providing alternative communities to those of family and ethnicity, and demonizing religion and tribe” (2001:89). The need to overrule ethnic loyalty with national loyalty is seen by the Eritrean government as the “paramount guideline to which all work and policies should be aligned” (Tronvoll, 1999:1045), and the identity of the nationalist movement is “near indistinguishable from that of the state” (Dorman, 2005:207).

Eritrea’s supra-ethnic nationalism [...] is by no means constructed out of formal or neutral symbols, it is historically grounded in the ethos of the liberation war [...] It is further embedded in numerous contemporary state projects – the army, education, tourism, local government structures and the all-encompassing demand of ‘national development.’ (2005:217)³⁹

Hepner details the way that nationhood was linked to the two liberation movements, the ELF and the EPLF, and how the competing identities that they offered still form people’s understanding of what it means to be Eritrean, both within and outside the country (Hepner 2009:62). The victorious EPLF positioned, and still positions, itself in opposition to the ethno-regional and kin-based pluralist model of the ELF. The EPLF’s nationalism was more clearly articulated, claiming to be a “secular, African, anti-colonial, class-based movement with rural roots that opposed all imperialisms and sectarianism” (Hepner, 2009:45). Dorman makes the same point when she says that “understandings of nationhood and obligation shaped during the war have profoundly shaped loyalties to the state and the nation” (2007:20). She explains that nationalist identity becomes “meaningful to people through their participation and socialisation in institutions, organizations and ideologies” and that there is acute political disagreement about how nationalism should be realized. In the next section I look at how this disagreement is manifested.

6.2.3 *Attitudes to the nation-building project*

What do Eritreans think about the relative importance of ethnic and nationalist feelings?

Negash describes Eritrean society today as being “at a crossroads of tradition and modernity, as a result of the combined effects of increased local literacy, globalization, and cultural transformation campaigns instigated by the liberation movement during the armed struggle

³⁹ When it comes to formal nationality, Eritrea does not recognize the renunciation of Eritrean citizenship, and people with dual nationality are treated as Eritrean citizens when they enter the country (“Eritrea: Country specific information,” 2009).

(1961-1991) and after independence” (Chait & Negash, 2007:248). An undated survey carried out amongst students at the University of Asmara identified the following as component values of Eritrean national identity: ethical behaviour, belief in critical public speech, perseverance or steadfastness, an emphasis on the community over the individual and a commitment to self-reliance (Hoyle, unpublished, referred to in Dorman, 2005:208).⁴⁰ Young people in cities in multi-ethnic African states are exposed to a mosaic of culture. Conrad argues that the concept of a transnational second generation should include not only young people in the diaspora but also their cohort in Eritrea (Conrad, 2006:23). Conrad explains the influence that ‘the massive presence’ of transnational Eritreans in Asmara has on urban youth culture in Eritrea:

The encounters accelerate changes in the patterns of consumption [...] Wanting to adopt the exiles’ more liberal lifestyle aggravates generation, social and gender conflicts. [...] Even mere survival is precarious. As the apparently well-off diaspora Eritreans seem to prove that you can ‘make it’ abroad, migration seems the best coping strategy (Conrad, 2006:23)

On the other hand, the way these young people relate to the mosaic of cultural practices to which the city exposes them can be constrained in ways that also make it appropriate to speak of them as participating in a ‘prenational’ culture. For although urban settings can contribute to the dissolution of family structures and traditional authority, families do still wield authority and uphold traditional values. In such cases, choices of lifestyle and partner are constrained and tend to reproduce an ethnicity built on inter-ethnic distinctions that do not tolerate inter-ethnic marriage. Prenational and transethnic values are played out in the lives of young people in the literary text “Anisino”, to which the students in this study responded.

Hailemariam refers to some scholars who hold that ethnic feelings count for more than nationalist feelings, and to others who maintain the opposite. There are also those, Tesfai amongst them, who view Eritrean identity as a “dynamic phenomenon in a constant process of construction” (Hailemariam, 2002:72). The political historian Tekeste Negash, who himself favours union with Ethiopia and sees the state of Eritrea as a Tigrinya project, says that “notwithstanding the EPLF’s rhetoric on the unifying impact of the 30 year war of liberation, Eritrea appears to be deeply divided” (T. Negash, 1997:174). Conrad reports from Germany that a question about their country of origin “prompts diaspora Eritreans of all ages to embark on a lengthy (and always very similar) account of their country’s history. Structure, vocabulary and vantage point of these narratives identify them unmistakably as products of the EPLF’s nation-building efforts” (Conrad, 2006:10).

There are two possible explanations for the non-communication of ethnic difference. One is

⁴⁰ The student population from which Hoyle drew these generalisations was probably both an educational elite and predominantly Tigrinya.

that Conrad's informants may have been, like those in this study, predominantly Tigrinya. Since they are advantaged in public employment and policy-making processes, they undercommunicate the importance of ethnicity. Ahmed Raji shows that the ratio of Tigrinya to non-Tigrinya in the public sphere at central and even at regional level, is roughly 10:1, whilst "the ratio in the larger population is supposed to be 1:1" (Raji, 2009). He found this same pattern in the Ministry of Education, although the Minister himself was not Tigrinya. The other explanation, as Conrad herself indicates, is the conformity induced by the PFDJ, which has been consistently promoted since the 1970s. In his first encounters with the EPLF in the mid-70s Connell noted "an unsettling level of rhetorical uniformity about nearly everything" (Connell, 1997:42). He observed that the formal principle that was followed was democratic centralism, which had as its ideal that after broad discussions, decisions were taken and then every member publicly supported these decisions. "Ambiguity was not a part of the political culture. (...) and it was often frustrating to receive answers that sounded more like textbook recitations than thoughtful opinions." However Connell also observed considerable open debate during the first post-war years, an openness that ended definitively with the government crackdown on all dissident voices in 2001. The current in-country rhetorical uniformity has not been democratically achieved.

Amongst researchers who have worked or done fieldwork in Eritrea there are competing, but predominantly pessimistic representations of the EPLF and the human rights situation.⁴¹ But do people in Eritrea, and especially young people and students, contest the dominant national narrative, despite the rhetorical conformity? Do they regard at least the early hope for a free and egalitarian Eritrea as well-founded, do they *still* see it as well-founded, or do they see the EPLF as an authoritarian organisation that could never have delivered on its promise of democracy?

The nation-building project encompasses young people through the National Union for Eritrean Youth and Students (NUEYS), which is closely linked to the ruling party, and is apparently the only group working with young people in Eritrea. It has a focus on both social

⁴¹ Some researchers have adduced evidence that the EPLF was always a repressive authoritarian organization (T. Negash (1997), Tronvoll (1999), Wrong (2005), others that it was arguably no more authoritarian than it needed to be in order to organize an army of liberation, but that it failed to make the transition to a democratic civil society (Connell (1997), Pool (2001), Kibreab (2009), Hepner (2009)). A voice of unusual authority is that of Bereket Habte Selassie who chaired the constitutional committee of Eritrea from 1994-1997. By 2007, with the constitution still unratified, he promises that the second volume of his autobiography will be an "*obituary to our martyrs and a painful reminder of what we have lost and why we have lost our way*" (Selassie, 2007:350, original italics). Pool finds that right from the start of the independent nation the EPLF was opposed to civil organizations that were not directly under their control (D. Pool, 2001:184), and Kibreab (2009) documents in detail how the dream of Eritrea was deferred from independence. By contrast, less experienced observers could still in 2002 respond with enthusiasm to documents such as the 1994 National Charter for Education, which states that "Eritrean leaders view a *democratic* government, an *active* civil society and an *independent* and *reliable* mass media as the pillars of democracy" (cited in Bjørndal, 2002:153, original italics)

reform, for example with regard to female genital cutting, and the maintenance of nationalist fervour. All school-based groups, including the Scouts, are subsumed into their structures (Dorman, 2004:5). Geertz once wrote that

Pluralist liberal societies encourage critical self-reflection in which taken-for-granted ideas and ways of living are subject to scrutiny; they even institutionalize such scrutiny in newspapers, universities, theatres, and so on. Other societies (often more isolated, more authoritarian, more hierarchical, and more settled) do not promote such scrutiny – indeed, sometimes positively discourage it. *But even in them critical reflection goes on.* (Geertz, 1973:33, italics added)

The question of whether young people *within* Eritrea are critically reflective about the state of the nation, and whether the post-independence generation are still willing to sacrifice their lives for the Eritrean nation, are here answered anecdotally, although Dorman believes there are widespread but fragmentary and elusive alternatives to the “myths of Eritrean exceptionalism” (Dorman, 2005:218). These ‘myths’, as I understand them, include the ideas that the nation won its independence against all odds, and that the victory was won by Muslims and Christians eating and fighting side by side.⁴² Although Dorman claims that the state narrative of Eritrean exceptionalism is contested through the Internet (2005:218), I observe that whilst the Internet provides a forum for intense, polarised and sometimes abusive debates, things can only be posted or safely read from outside Eritrea. A UN report that describes Eritrea as “one of the most closed countries in terms of news” estimates that less than 2% of the population has Internet access. In Asmara and Massawa access is available at Internet cafés that are under electronic and human surveillance (UNHCR, 2009).

Dorman sees a limited resistance both in the University students’ protest about the summer work programme in 2001, a protest that led to the detention of the student leader and contributed to the closing of the University; and in the soldiers who desert from the Eritrean army. One very important aspect of Eritrean society that many people, especially young people, now see as a heavy economic and existential burden is national service. They must work for the government for an indefinite period, and are paid a pittance. Introduced in 1994, its original purpose was “to connect young people to the older, liberation-war generation, and to develop cross-cultural understanding by integrating the different ethnic groups and religions” (Dorman, 2005:210). Dorman argues that “Eritrea’s ability to allocate workers, to generate compliance with regulations, and to restrict exit visas, must position it among the strongest states in Africa” (2004:12). However in 2004 it was her impression that young people were increasingly seeking to exercise free speech and choice. This she saw neither as an expression of resistance to

⁴² Other components of the ‘myths’ emphasise that Eritrea started out with no foreign debt, has very little crime, very little visible corruption, and refuses to accept the terms of foreign banks or international aid agencies.

military and national service, nor as their unwillingness to commemorate the new nation state and those who died to achieve it. Rather it showed that young people were unwilling to be “simply foot-soldiers in the development of the nation” (2004:14). Unwillingness to participate on these terms can only be covertly expressed, and within the country it is likely that those who are dissatisfied say nothing at all, for they are dreaming of or preparing for leaving the country, a purpose that is best served by keeping one’s mouth shut.

6.3 Norway’s national identity

6.3.1 History

The first written record of a place where ‘Norwegians’ live dates back to the 890s, but already prior to that there were Vikings, expansionist raiders and traders, whom many Norwegians today acknowledge as their ancestors. Thus the nation state of Norway can lay claim to at least 1300 years of ethnic continuity. For several hundred years after the Viking period parts of today’s Norway were variously separate from or united with Denmark or Sweden. A more than four-hundred year union with Denmark in 1380 was replaced by a freer union with Sweden in 1814. Although 1814 marks the beginning of the constitutional state of Norway, it was by a peaceable act of secession from Sweden in 1905 that Norway achieved full independence. Prior and subsequent to this secession, literature and the visual arts made a significant contribution to the nation-building endeavour (see for example Bø, 2006 and Engen, 2006). 1945, the year Norway was liberated from Nazi occupation, is also an important marker in the historical narrative.

6.3.2 Political system and discourse

On the home page of the Royal Norwegian Embassy in Eritrea, the nation is presented in the following terms:

Norway is a constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary democratic system of governance. Democratic because the source of political power and legitimacy according to the Constitution lies with the people, in that all citizens are able to participate in the Storting (Norwegian national assembly), county and municipal councils. [...]

The participation of the people in the political sphere takes place both through direct elections and through their membership of organizations. The average Norwegian is a member of four organizations and approximately 70% of the adult population is a member of at least one organization. Such organizations are able to exert influence on the authorities by means of formal and informal contacts with the public administration. [...] Election turnout is usually in the vicinity of 80%. (Royal Norwegian Embassy in Eritrea, s.a.)

The official discourse emphasises that democracy is not only formally ensured in the Constitution of 1814, but actually ensured through a high election turnout and through a well-

developed civilian society.⁴³ The objectivity of the official discourse, as compared to the partisanship of the corresponding Eritrean official discourse, should not be taken to show that nationalist feeling does not run high in Norway. At the National Day celebration on 17th May, Norwegians of all ages parade in all of Norway's 430 municipalities. Images of immigrant children wearing Norwegian national dress and waving Norwegian flags are popular in the extensive media coverage of the celebrations. The Norwegian national anthem is as militaristic and nationalist as most:

Yes, we love this country/as it rises forth,
rugged and weathered, above the sea,/With those thousand homes.
And as our fathers' struggle has raised it/from distress to victory,
even we, when it is demanded,/for its peace will encamp (...)⁴⁴

An international study of civic education carried out with 14-year old Norwegian pupils in 1999 showed that though they believed that one should participate in elections, they were not themselves much interested in the idea of being party-politically active. However they valued non-formal participant citizenship, and above all campaigns for human rights, very highly (Stray, 2009:99-100). These pupils would be of an age with many of the Norwegian students in this study. It is indeed participant citizenship which constitutes the political experience of most young people in today's Norway. In 2002 a report carried out by NOVA, the Norwegian research institution dealing with social issues and the welfare state, found what they saw as a strange anomaly with regards to young people's perception of politics. Whilst nearly seven out of ten young people had participated in at least one political activity in the previous year, only one in four of them claimed to be interested in politics (Lidén & Ødegård, 2002:7). The researchers considered this discrepancy between what they, the researchers, meant by politics and the actual and perceived interest in politics of the young people in their study, and concluded that young people are primarily interested in social politics and political activism, which young people themselves do not define as politics at all. Conventional forms of political activity and more conventional political issues (such as national self-determination) are of much less widespread interest (2002:44).

6.3.3 *Norwegian culture*

There is a consensus amongst both scholars and the general public in Eritrea that the fight for independence from Ethiopia is the defining factor in Eritrea's national identity, and that it also

⁴³ In *Fredsnasjonens hemmeligheter* (The Secrets of a Peace-keeping Nation, 2009) Erling Borgen scrutinizes this acclaimed tolerance and raises serious questions about democratic processes in Norway.

⁴⁴ Translation from <http://www.nationalanthems.info/no.txt>, retrieved 19.05.2009.

has enormous implications for the lives of individual Eritreans. No such consensus exists as to what constitute the defining factors in Norway's national identity, or in the lives of individual Norwegians. In an article entitled "A Norwegian culture? Yes. One Norwegian culture? No", Knut Kjeldstadli argues that the idea of a national culture has analytical force. At the same time he makes it clear that to say that something is typical for Norway is not to say that this something is found over the whole territorial area of the state of Norway, nor that it is typical only of Norway (Kjeldstadli, 2006:32).

What is specific to a nation is seldom the uniqueness of each element. In a small nation like Norway very many cultural elements are imports, anyway. But the 'condensing' of the elements can be unique. National characteristics develop historically through the frequency with which the elements occur, how they are expressed and how they are combined. (2006:32, my translation)

Writing about Sweden, Ulla Lundgren (2002) argues that the idea of a particular culture coincident with national boundaries has lost much of its analytical force, especially for young people. She refers to Sjögren (2001), who describes ethnically complex environments in Sweden where young people have "a mosaic of cultural references". For these young people, the cultural references of one nation do not determine how they make sense of their lives. Sjögren calls them 'postnational' youth, because they make sense of the world by negotiating many cultural practices (Sjögren 2001, 67 in Lundgren, 2002:31). Sweden and Norway are similar in many cultural and developmental aspects, and his observation may therefore be of relevance to some of the Norwegian students in this study, although they do not have the mosaic urban background that would qualify them straightforwardly for Sjögren's category. Rather, his argumentation can serve as an extra warning against a perception of cultural norms as stable and reproductive. In the following brief presentation I focus particularly on what characterises the culture of *young* Norwegians, since most of the respondents in this study are in their twenties. Obviously this presentation is short and partial and one of innumerable possible collages.⁴⁵

Lars Laird Eriksen is more dogmatic than Lundgren and Sjögren, for he says that the idea of Norway as a community of shared values is a rhetorical myth. Rather than arguing for values that distinguish 'Norwegians' from other groups, he says that one should see Norway as a community of disagreement, where opinions are held by individuals, not by groups, and where individuals contribute to a collaborative democratic process (L. L. Eriksen, 2008:136). His observation is, as I see it, more totalising in its denial of "a community of shared values" than the more cautious postulate that there *are* several central values that are shared by many people

⁴⁵ I refer to sociological studies, but what I have selected has been influenced by informal conversations with twenty friends and colleagues, carried out between 12.12.2008 and 02.01.2009, to whom I put the question, "What do people with no prior knowledge of Norway need to know in order to understand Norway?". Without exception this question was deemed complex and challenging.

in Norway. When I now go on to present a central Norwegian value, I acknowledge that Norway is not an integrated encultured nation. But I also assume, with Kjeldstadli, that some cultural characteristics are more likely to be encountered in Norway than in most other places, that these characteristics are part of the context in which the students read, and that they can therefore contribute to an understanding of how students make sense of literature. It *is* possible to talk of a Norwegian culture, and one of its central values is *likhet*. The rest of this section will be devoted to a presentation of this concept.

Likhet includes the idea of similarity and of equality. If we start with *likhet* as ‘similarity’, Kjeldstadli (2006) reminds us that there has always been plurality within the Norwegian population, and gender and region have been key factors in this plurality. Other distinctions have received emphasis at different times, especially the town-country distinction and distinctions drawn between the working and the capital-owning classes. In the mid-twentieth century there was a period of relative unity and non-plurality, where the ideal of *likhet* was upheld. The ideal that people should have similar attitudes and values has been explored by Gullestad, and is discussed in relation to friendship in section 6.4.2.

We can explore the other sense of *likhet* – equality – by looking at the picture of Norway that Andreas Aase has drawn:

Norway has been considered as a country where egalitarian values have had greater success than elsewhere. This means that Norwegians have been receptive to trends emphasizing factors such as codetermination, integration and economic equalisation. Visitors to Norway are often surprised by the relatively small differences in income between rich and poor, the generous grants supplied by the state to students and families with children, and the extent to which children with special needs have been integrated in our schools, which are just a few examples. (Aase, 2005:13-14)

The extent to which equality is still a central characteristic of Norwegian society is debated. Pål Repstad summarises the cultural ideal of *likhet* in Norway by saying that there is considerable equality when it comes to opportunity, rather less when it comes to redistribution and treatment, and that actual social and economic differences are in fact considerable, though less so than in most other countries (Repstad, 2005:34).

Marie Louise Seeberg conflates the two senses of *likhet*, for she sees the ideal of equality as the implicit ideology of the Norwegian state school. It is, she claims, understood as sameness, which she found “constitutive of and constituted through, everyday life in school” (Seeberg, 2003:184). This ideal, she claims, is maintained by under-communicating difference and by avoiding people about whom one knows little and who are perceived as ‘too different’. Countering such views, Kjeldstadli argues that the ideal of *likhet* has become unfairly associated with uniformity, with ordinariness and petty envy (Kjeldstadli, 2006:39). It is often

unfavourably contrasted with quality, talent and variety, factors that interact in complex ways with the requirements of the economic market. Thus, according to Kjeldstadli, the youngest generation experiences a less egalitarian and less uniform society than their parents' generation. In a similar vein, Eriksen describes the ideological basis of contemporary Norway in terms of the global ambitions of neo-liberalism. Neo-liberalism, he says, sets itself up in opposition to a strong national welfare system, which is seen as a hindrance to the dynamism and flexibility of a deregulated system. Neo-liberalism has become so successful that it dominates not only the economy, but also non-economic spheres such as education and health (T. H. Eriksen, 2004:170-172, see also Rinne, 2009). The only strong contestants for the hegemony of neo-liberalism, he says, are ideologies of identity, of belonging, which offer security and predictability, where a sense of community is more important than individual freedom.

Swidler argues that values such as family loyalty and sacrifice for the group are what she calls the 'default option' for some cultures (Swidler, 2001:212), what people fall back on in times of trouble. Which cultural ideas are the default option varies from family to family and from culture to culture, but Americans, she says, fall back on the idea that action is coordinated by the free choices of individuals. Could this be true for people in Norway too?

6.4 Social practices

6.4.1 Women and family in Eritrea

The role of friends and family, in particular as they relate to women, is in various ways central to the three literary texts in this study. To understand how the students responded to these texts it is therefore appropriate to say a few words about these issues.

On the whole Eritrean society may be described as conservative and traditional with regard to the hierarchical organisation of family and gender, a claim that is supported in Amrit Wilson's *The Challenge Road* (1991) and in Lyda Favali and Roy Pateman's *Blood, Land and Sex: Legal and Political Pluralism in Eritrea* (2003), both of which provide closely reported ethnographic material about the position of women in different ethnic groups. Hannah Pool's (2005) account of her journey back to the Tigrinya family from which she was adopted provides insight into the importance of family for the Tigrinya, and its patriarchal organisation. Tesfa Gebremedhin (2002) writes about everyday life in the private sphere, and notes that in rural Eritrea the tradition where women are taught to defer to men in virtually all areas of life is still upheld. They are taught by their mothers not to move away from the homestead, not to look directly at a man, not to walk in front of a man or boy and even to eat less. He paints a desultory picture:

because of her long experience of servitude, her ability to create, lead, and innovate has been seriously curtailed. She is trained to sacrifice her freedom to be accepted and to live with her

husband, crushed by her domestic drudgery. She is expected to be treated as a sex object and a reproductive machine to earn respect of those around her and to keep her position as a wife and housekeeper. (Gebremedhin, 2002:58)

An Eritrean student – he is not otherwise represented in this study – forcefully illustrates the expectation of subservience to one’s husband that Gebremedhin describes, in his comments on the character Astier in the play *The Other War*. Marital subservience should, according to this student, be coupled with subservience to the needs of the nation:

... why she was not happy because she love her self [more] than her marriage. She did not want to be under him this thing shows that some Eritreans want to live their live [rather] than their countrys live what I mean is that every man love his loved country and serve for their country and give first value to their country on the time when their country want to. [...] Astier was a character which love her self [more] than her country because of her behaviour at last her own husband Assefa did not believe her and leave her. She was a louser of all people.

During his sojourns in Eritrea Connell observed that “in most of rural Eritrea, marriage was a form of servitude in which women had no fixed rights, little pleasure and few avenues of escape” (Connell, 1997:131-132). According to Connell, most marriages in the rural areas were arranged when a girl was born and consummated when she was ten to twelve years of age. He recalls a speaker at an early rally in Keren as saying, “Our husbands consider us as the dishes and other kitchen goods. We are nothing to them. Now, let us women stand up and carry arms to liberate our country and ourselves” (1997:128-129). Her words, he reports, met sustained applause. Recognizing the oppressed position of women, the EPLF made the restructuring of marriage customs one of their top priorities. Article 1 of the EPLF Marriage Laws states:

The feudal marriage norm based on the supremacy of men over women, haphazard and coercive arrangements, and which does not safeguard the welfare of children shall be banned. The new democratic marriage law based on the free choice of both partners, monogamy, the equal rights of both sexes and the legal guarantees of the interests of women and children shall be implemented. (cited in Wilson, 1991:185)

Article 3 of the same law reads:

Marriage must be based on the absolute will of the two partners. Neither partner should use any form of pressure. Nor should any third party interfere in the matter.

The EPLF were aware of the importance of moving forward slowly and thoroughly, rather than imposing new laws that would not be respected by the majority of people. Dramatising the situation of women was one way of raising awareness (see also chapter 12). There are many accounts of the EPLF’s progressive policies and practices with regard to women (see for example Wilson (1991), Connell (1997), Gottesman (1998), Matzke (2003) and Tesfai (2006)), and several studies of the considerable difficulties faced by Eritrean women fighters returning to a civilian Eritrean society where traditional gender roles had, it seems, only been put on hold.

The students in this study have lived for the most part *after* independence. Young people, who have grown up in the post-war period, must reconcile the legal position of women as equal citizens and their heroic status in public discourse, literature included, as fighters and as mothers who sacrificed their children, with the persistence of more conservative societal attitudes. It is worth noting here that attitudes in Asmara may be more liberal than in the rural areas, one reason being the relative economic independence of married women. Amongst the male Eritrean teaching staff at EIT I encountered the opinion that a university-educated woman is virtually unmarriageable. The idea that Western education alienates girls from their natural vocation within the family is also widespread (Gebremedhin, 2000). It is therefore only to be expected that there is a very considerable underrepresentation of women in institutions of secondary and tertiary education. As Abraham Tecele at the Ministry of Education said, “Eritreans are not *quite* ready to send their girls to schools” (Bjørndal, 2002:180).

6.4.2 *Young people, women, family and friends in Norway*

When it comes to the role of the individual, and women in particular, within and beyond the family, a significant Norwegian source is 640 autobiographies collected in 1989. It has, amongst other things, allowed researchers to contrast young people’s life experience with that of earlier generations. Work by Reidar Almås (1997) and more recent work by Gullestad (2006) based on these autobiographies suggest that they are still an interesting and relevant source of insight into Norwegian culture. Almås identifies the reduced importance of the Protestant work ethic from generation to generation as the most marked tendency in the material. From being the main motif in people’s lives for both men and women, it had become a secondary motif of uncertain value for young people. For them “work is a means to consumption, pleasure and self-development, not a material necessity” (Almås, 1997:91, my translation). Class allegiance and social distinctions are not a primary concern for this generation, and earlier distinctions between town and country are also much less marked. They are “a herd of individualists”, more different from one another than earlier generations, a generation with many choices, but for whom economic marginality and social exclusion are a threat, and whose main project is to find out who they wish to be (1997:92). For this generation decisions and choice are made individually, and this, combined with increasing demands and expectations and a serious need for recognition from other people, leads to existential difficulties for some young people. “For the youngest generation, *finding oneself* is the most problematic issue for both men and women” (1997:91, my translation).

Gullestad rejects the commonplace description of young people in terms of the dissolution of norms, in particular the norms of ‘obedience’ and ‘discipline’. She argues that these norms have

been replaced by ideals of creativity and expressivity in a pluralistic society. And these new norms are differently transmitted. Today's ideal, says Gullestad, is that parents should transmit the ability to find and develop oneself, rather than that they transmit particular ideas and values, and this transformed priority is neatly expressed in the following discontinuity: "Instead of individuals being resources for families, families are becoming resources out of which individuals construct their selves" (Gullestad, 2006:87-88).

Åse Bratterud and Kari Emilsen (2002) compare the contemporary Norwegian family with earlier family patterns, and note the very high percentage of mothers in paid employment. This means that women are no longer dependent on men economically, and also that men have come to take a large share in parenting. Bratterud and Emilsen also talk of how reproduction in Norway is now to a large extent a question of choice about whether one wants to have children, and if one does, with whom and when (Bratterud & Emilsen, 2002:31). Heterosexual marriage is no longer the only morally and legally sanctioned form of cohabitation, and many people choose to live together rather than to marry. About half of the children born in Norway have parents who live together, but are not married (2002:33). More than 40% of all marriages end in divorce, so families have become much less stable units. They have also become smaller. Sølvi Sogner and Hilde Sandvik refer to statistics that show that the average Norwegian household has 2.3 people, and that 38% of all households are made up of just one person (Sogner & Sandvik, 2003:15). They see new family structures as demonstrating the individualised diversity of contemporary society, where people pick and choose from the characteristics of the traditional family to suit their own requirements. And yet despite all these variations and the relative instability of family units over time, most children live with both of their parents, and Sogner and Sandvik hold that the family continues to be the most central institution for providing welfare and emotional support.

That friendship is important for Norwegians finds support in the findings from a survey carried out in 1983 by a Norwegian institution that carries out country-wide surveys – *Norsk Gallup Institutt* – in which 96% of the respondents said that good friends were a crucial factor for them to feel happy. Only 'a good home' was marginally more important (Alstad, 1993:496). In a more recent large Norwegian survey – *Likestilling og livskvalitet* (Equity and quality of life) – a significant correlation was found between the number of close friends a person has and their quality of life. This survey also identified "clear signs" that the notion of friendship between men has become less problematic in the last twenty to thirty years, and that significantly more men now say that they have close friends (Holter, Svare, Egeland, & Arbeidsforskningsinstituttet, 2008:233-234). Gullestad has observed that Norwegians avoid conflicts in personal

relationships (Gullestad, 1992:99), and that an important strategy for avoiding conflict was the selection of friends on the basis of similarity or sameness. Gullestad explains that in social interaction Norwegians tend to emphasise what they have in common and downplay difference. This culturally determined strategy works up to a point, but when differences are felt to be unmanageable, the interaction falls apart (1992:193). In Gullestad's view, Norwegians have a problematic approach to how they deal with difference. "In everyday contexts people will, for instance, often justify breaking up or not establishing a friendship by saying that "we are too different" (1992:185). Gullestad explains that it is often differences in social class and in unstated social codes that can lead to the non-establishment or breakdown of friendship.

6.5 Concluding remarks

In this chapter I have presented the culture and context where the material of this study was collected, with a special focus on national identities and social practices. I have claimed that it is possible to talk of *a* Norwegian culture. There are important cultural and social practices that many Norwegians share, but at the same time one must be aware of alternative models, for example postnational processes in which individual identity is constructed from a mosaic of cultures (Sjögren, 2001). In Kjelstadli's formulation we can ask if there is *an* Eritrean culture, for in a country with many subnational groups there is clearly not just *one* Eritrean culture. Here again I have answered in the positive, but seen this culture as civically constituted. The Eritrean nation is constructed around an independence narrative which glorifies the struggle for independence from Ethiopia and the huge human sacrifices willingly made by the freedom fighters and unwillingly incurred by the civilian population.

Norwegian students are free to travel within and outside the country. They also have unlimited access to digitalised texts and realities. Neither of these freedoms is available to students in Eritrea. All in all the contemporary reality of the two countries, as I see it, is that there is more individual choice and political stability in Norway than in Eritrea, and far more economic and material resources. Subjective identities built around religious adherence and loyalty to the nation and to one's family lead Eritrean and Norwegian students to different perceptions of their significance as agents and thinkers in the world. Both in ethnically complex environments where choice is severely constrained by social, economic and political factors, and in societies where individuals perceive themselves as making free choices about lifestyle and partners, national identity and social culture are indispensable concepts for understanding how meaning is created, circulated, renegotiated and contested.

With media diversification and the technological expansion of the contemporaneous world beyond national borders, one may reasonably ask whether technology enables and maintains

membership in a larger imaginary community. Although the Eritrean students access global communications in a far more limited and supervised way than do the Norwegian students, they may perceive themselves as participating both in a national community *and* in a transnational or international community. However, whilst a student in a Norway can choose from an enormous range of cultural repertoires from which to construct a meaningful existence – everything from personal fitness and shopping to anti-racism, a student in a totalitarian state can choose from fewer and more strongly enforced cultural repertoires. It is, however, beyond the scope of this study to explore these possibilities further.

I end this chapter with a word of caution about attempting to draw a parallel between Norwegian nation-building in the late nineteenth century and contemporary nation-building in Eritrea. Though the two processes both sought and seek to build a unique national identity and use cultural expressions to that end, the means and the mood of the two processes are very different: national romantic, individualistic and peaceable on the one hand, militant, centralised and socialist on the other. Combined with differences of history, time and space, this means, in my view, that the processes of nation-building in Eritrea and Norway are so different as to make extensive comparison and transference unwarranted. Similarly dissimilar are the marriages of nation and culture in Norway and Eritrea, which fall into two general patterns. For, as Tronvoll observes:

a recently liberated territory is in strong need of producing primordialistic national symbols and myths to legitimate self-rule and independence from the former colonial state. In the mature and well-established nation-states of Europe, however, we rather see the emergence of national symbols which reflects multiculturalism. (Tronvoll, 1999:1053)

7 The educational contexts

7.1 Introduction

7.1.1 *An overview*

The responses of the two groups in this study arose in specific educational and institutional contexts. In order to gain a coherent picture of these contexts, section 7.2 describes the position of home language (L1) and English in schools and the larger debate about language in the two nations. In section 7.3 I consider literacy and schooling in Eritrea and Norway. I look at how the school systems are structured, but also at what goes on in the classroom, and the ideologies that underpin the two educational systems. Then, starting with Eritrea in section 7.4 and moving on to Norway in section 7.5, I look at higher education, including issues of enrolment and motivation. I briefly consider the teaching profession and teacher education, since both groups were attending institutions of teacher education. A sketch of teacher education also throws light on the schooling that the students themselves experienced as pupils. In these sections I look in some detail at the two institutions from which the students were recruited. Since all the students were studying English, I describe the way the English study programmes were built up at the two institutions, and the way that the English curriculum was taught in the classroom.

This sketch is obviously one of many possible, and necessarily brief, as a more thorough presentation is beyond the scope of this study. These are general accounts, and there may well be important aspects of individual students' earlier education of which I am not aware. When it comes to the institutions of tertiary education which the students were attending, and the courses in English which they followed, the account has increased specificity and can with more confidence be claimed to describe the contexts of the students in this study.

There are to my knowledge two longer studies that deal with post-independence Eritrean schools (Hailemariam, 2002 and Asfaha, 2009), and both concentrate on the challenges of multilingualism. Other accounts of education in Eritrea, like accounts of the country's history and politics, are almost invariably stamped by the writer's support or rejection of the EPLF/PFDJ, both when it comes to describing the school system and higher education, and when accounting for or predicting their success or failure. It is therefore crucial to note who is talking, and 'where they are coming from'. In Norway it is often said that education is an aspect of society on which everybody is an expert by virtue of having themselves been pupils and often parents of pupils. But there is also a considerable research-based literature about Norwegian education, although it too is sometimes partisan, to which I make selective reference.

One last but important point is to recognise that the relationship of the embedding educational context to the emergent context of the student texts is not as linear as in the previous chapter. Whilst a nationalist response can be attributed to characteristics of a national identity, it is unlikely that a particular aspect of a student text can be confidently related to the complex national educational context, although it may and should be possible to relate some aspects of the student texts to the more specific academic literacies of their respective institutions.

7.2 Language

7.2.1 *In Eritrea*

Language is a complex issue in Eritrea, as in any multilingual nation. Eritrea is in fact one of only three African countries (the other two being Ethiopia and Somalia) that do not have a colonial language as one of their official languages (Bamgbose, 1999).⁴⁶ Tigrinya is an Ethio-Semitic language (Demoz, 1995:21),⁴⁷ and in Eritrea it is the first language of half the population, and a lingua franca for many more. Written in the Ge'ez syllabary, each of its 249 signs is a consonant bearing a vowel signature. Tigré speakers make up a further estimated 30 per cent of the population. Tigré and Tigrinya are related languages, and mutually understandable. Between them the two groups make up 90% of the *urban* population (Hailemariam, 2002:77). Seven other ethnic groups, each with a distinct language, make up the rest of the population.

Tigrinya and Arabic were demoted from official to local languages by the Ethiopian government in 1962, a major contributory factor to the escalation of the independence movement in Eritrea (Demoz, 1995:17-18). The question of which languages would replace the Ethiopian language Amharic after independence was keenly debated both prior to and after independence. In fact, says Negash, it is an issue that for decades “has preoccupied Eritrean leaders, political activists, social scientists and the public in general” (G. Negash, 1999:53). The conclusion finally arrived at was that Eritrea would have no official languages, but strive for the equal treatment and development of all nine national languages. The final draft of the country's constitution states that the equality of all Eritrean languages is guaranteed (Abraha, 2002b). It was argued that the adoption of Tigrinya as official language would alienate parts of the predominantly Muslim non-Tigrinya population. For this and other historical reasons, Arabic and English were chosen as special status languages in addition to Tigrinya. The choice of

⁴⁶ “African Language Development and Language Planning”. *Social Dynamics*. 25 (1). This reference is taken from Negash 2005:8.

⁴⁷ The Tigrinya linguist Nazareth Amlesom Kifle prefers the term ‘Abyssinian-Semitic’.

Arabic, the language of the Q'uran, though the first language of only 5% of the population, carried a strong message of political and religious inclusion. Arabic remains a language of official ceremonies, national gatherings and government declarations (Hailemariam, 2002:78). In practice, however, Tigrinya is the main language of the central administration and the national media. It was the language of the Armed Struggle, and it therefore gained a symbolic significance through its association with the success of the national liberation movement (Hailemariam, 2002:77-78).

What, then, of English? The Kenyan novelist and dramatist Ngugi wa Thiong'o has drawn a picture of English as an omnivorous colonial language, a picture that is sometimes upheld in Africanist debate. But it is important to bear in mind that English in Eritrea has a different colonial history to English in Kenya and other earlier British colonies. In Kenya, "English became more than a language: it was *the* language, and all the others had to bow before it in deference" (Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 1994:438). In Eritrea, on the other hand, Italian, English and Amharic successively replaced each other as colonial and school languages. Whilst Kenyans who were schooled before independence have bitter memories of the stamping out of their own languages in favour of English, in Eritrea it is Amharic rather than English that is perceived as the language before which all others "had to bow". However, as Hailemariam explains:

English is the medium of instruction from middle and secondary school up to the university level. It also serves as the language of international communication and business. Unlike the situation in many other African nations, it does not serve as a gatekeeper to filter upward movement in the political domain. But it is the language of the educated elite. (Hailemariam, 2002:78)

The Eritrean government has put considerable effort into the implementation of a language policy that allows children to receive their first years of education in their home language. The current choice of English as school language from year six, with all the difficulties that this choice entails, is politically motivated, the argument being that to choose Tigrinya, the language of the largest ethnic group, would disadvantage speakers of the smaller Eritrean languages.

Hailemariam sees English as the language best suited to instilling a sense of shared nationhood. Yet at the same time, inasmuch as very few people can communicate in English, he sees it as a compromise that allows for the "equal distribution of disability" (2002:18). A more positive view is taken by Zemheret Yohannes, Head of Research and Documentation for the PFDJ, a previous member of the ELF, who has for several decades been a central contributor to the nation-building project:

The Eritrean experiment is an attempt to strike a viable and judicious balance between the fundamental rights of language groups for cultural and linguistic self-affirmation, on the one

hand, and the demands of living within a nation-state in an increasing globalizing world on the other. (cited in Dorman, 2005:209)

A national survey in 2002 assessed reading skills in English, and found consistently poor reading proficiency. It concluded that primary education was not providing children with the skills they needed when their language of education became English in grade 6 (Asfaha, 2009:22). Asfaha's own study reproduces this finding, and he notes that there is not enough teaching time for the children to gain the required language proficiency in English, and that most of the teachers were not themselves sufficiently proficient in English (2009:102). He also found that Latin script was less visible in public spaces in Eritrea than were texts in Ge'ez and Arabic script (2009:122).

The falling standards of English at high school and in higher education are a cause of government concern. At a conference convened by the Ministry of Information, Sara Oqbay, then Head of the Department of English at University of Asmara, gave the following answer to the question, "Why are our students not confident enough to speak in English?"

They don't have the confidence because they have never been exposed to it when they were young. In elementary school, if the teacher is the master of the situation, if we don't give the child the opportunities to speak, when he grows up, he grows up with the belief that he is not good enough to speak [...] The teacher is the master of the situation and they are afraid of the teacher. Finally, they end up missing opportunities just because they cannot speak. So I think, making our classes learners [sic] centered is one of the ways we can build confidence in our students. When they come here to this university, we give them group work and tell them to speak. It is very sad to see 18-19 years old person shaking in front of his peers. But if you create the culture of debating, group work and class presentation starting from the early age, we can make a difference. (Goitom, 2006)

Oqbay is making the point that an authoritarian classroom style does not allow pupils to develop either the personal confidence or the language skills necessary for full participation in academic education, or indeed in other civic processes. She also expresses a concern that teachers of other subjects should be aware that when they teach *in* English, they are also teaching English itself. She calls on them to reduce translation and the rote memorization of linguistically unmanageable texts in favour of lessons taught in simplified English which the pupils can more easily make sense of. Martha Wright (2001), who spent six months in elementary schools in Ghinda, Eritrea, saw that choral repetition and extensive memorization could serve important educational and organizational purposes in a language learning classroom with many children and no textbooks. She also observed that many other educational practices, including group work, were actually in use, once she put her negative expectations aside and stopped looking for the exact corollaries of American classroom practice. Wright's conclusion is that "state of someone else's art methodology does not serve any purpose, if it is so inapt and

inadequately supplied that the practitioners are, ultimately, disempowered by the very thing that they were led to believe would liberate them” (Wright, 2001:76).

Whether improved language learning can be achieved by radical change, or by developing the teaching methods that are already established, Schmied’s summary of the situation for many post-independent African countries may well be pertinent for the Eritrean case:

Whereas after independence many African nations embarked on ambitious modernization programmes, today they are so absorbed in day-to-day problems that they have neither the energy nor the means to attempt fundamental changes in the sociolinguistic situation. (Schmied, 1991:19)

7.2.2 *In Norway*

Norwegian is the national language of Norway, and more than 90% of all pupils have Norwegian as their home language (St. melding nr. 23, 2007-2008:8). Norwegian belongs to the Germanic branch of the Indo-European languages, and is mutually understandable with Swedish and Danish. It shares many grammatical features and vocabulary items with English and German. Sámi, which is used by about 25,000 Norwegians, is an official regional written language (Hvistendahl, 2009).

The language of education in state-run primary and secondary education is Norwegian (or Sámi) but English is taught as a foreign language from the first year. At tertiary level most teaching is in Norwegian, although many textbooks are in English. Norwegian students are exposed to English through the media, where most DVDs and TV series from the USA, Australia and the UK are subtitled, not dubbed. This exposure to spoken English, which for most young people accounts for more hours a week than formal English instruction, makes a significant contribution to Norwegian students’ familiarity with and confidence in the English language. When Norwegian pupils who scored highly in a European survey in 2002 were asked where they had learned their English, they suggested that it was learned as much outside school as in school (St. melding nr. 23, 2007-2008:57). This is also the opinion expressed in the Council of Europe Report, which says that “even if some lack of competence is considered to exist among the teaching profession, this can be compensated in part by the permanent presence of English in society” (*Language education policy profile: Norway, 2003-2004:17*). The report also found that Norwegian pupils at lower secondary level performed well in English, especially with regard to reading comprehension and oral skills, and that pupils liked English and thought it important.

National tests at primary level in 2007 showed relatively large local variation, but insignificant differences between boys and girls. However, pupils go on to perform less well in secondary school, where their development in English stagnates, despite their own often

positive self-assessment (St. melding nr. 23, 2007-2008:58). Glenn Ole Hellekjær finds it likely that many sectors of Norwegian society lack the English language competence they need (Hellekjær, 2007:50). One may suppose that the students in this study will enter a labour market where English proficiency will be in increasing demand (Simensen, 2008:4), and that this contributes to their motivation for the study of English.

In 1998 Anne-Line Graedler described Norway as a speech community where almost everyone comes into contact with the English language, passively or actively, on a fairly regular basis (Graedler, 1998:20). However, whilst she notes the importance of English as a source of lexical influence, she is wary of overemphasising its linguistic importance for there is no question, she says, “that Norwegian is the majority language in Norway [...] The domains where English may be used instead of Norwegian are still few and highly specialized, and English cannot even be called a minority language in Norway in any ordinary sense of the word” (1998:47). This position has, in her opinion, continued validity, although the domains are probably expanding, for example in academia (pc 11.01.10).

In its 2010 report the Norwegian Language Board regards the dominance of English as a lingua franca as a challenge to all other languages, and it is therefore pleased to note that more than 80% of the population in Norway say that they want to protect the Norwegian language (Breivik, et al., 2010:10). In late 2007 they commissioned a report which showed that despite a positive attitude to Norwegian, half of the informants sometimes found English easier to use than Norwegian. Especially people under 40, and those with less formal education, were positive to English in domains such as advertising (2010:15). In fact as many as 40% of those between the ages of 15 and 25 said that English is a better language than Norwegian (as against 20% in the population as a whole).⁴⁸ When it comes to using English in their everyday lives, there are significant differences between city and country, and between men and women, with young men in Oslo being the group that reports using English most. It is, however, indisputably the case that the number of students who write their Master’s theses in English is many times what it was twenty years ago, and most doctoral theses are now written in English. A trend in the other direction – “a really happy piece of news”, according to the report (2010:11) – is that more artists now sing in Norwegian, and that most people think it is ‘cooler’ to sing in Norwegian. Given the importance of music in young people’s lives – my impression is that most young people listen to music most of the time when they move in public spaces and also when they are at home – this is a significant part of the Norwegian students’ language context.

⁴⁸ But, as the writers of the 2010 report point out, it is not clear what exactly they mean by this answer.

7.3 Literacy and school

7.3.1 In Eritrea

In *To Fight and to Learn* (1998) Leo Gottesman describes two educational systems in pre-colonial Eritrea. On the one hand there was traditional education, which was a means to an end, not an end in itself. It was work-oriented, emphasizing social responsibility, political participation, and spiritual and moral values. It typically combined physical training and manual activity with character building and intellectual training. Formal education co-existed with this traditional education, and was for many centuries dominated by religious institutions. Education today is still influenced by the traditional teachings of religious texts, which emphasize recitation and memorisation (Asfaha, 2009:74). The following quotation is taken by Gottesman from an EPLF document.⁴⁹

Pre-colonial education in Eritrea was essentially religious and totally dominated by the Orthodox Christian Churches and the Islamic Mosques. These churches and mosques [...] tried to divide the people on religious and tribal lines. Superstition became so dominant that even the rudiments of scientific outlook were lacking. This really hampered the people's ability to be equipped with even the elementary know-how that could be useful in an improvement of their living conditions. Furthermore, a fatalistic attitude towards their conditions of oppression, which they were constantly told was pre-ordained by the supernatural, was a great obstacle to any organised struggle that they could have waged against the bonds of ignorance and oppression. (Gottesman, 1998:68-69)

Wright describes this as part of a 'pedagogical heritage' upon which today's Eritrean teachers draw, "in addition to several recent generations of hideous colonial oppression exercised in part through the educational system" (Wright, 2001:62).

What, then, of post-colonial education? Ingunn Bjørndal spoke to many people about education, and did so under the auspices of the Ministry of Education, which is largely staffed by ex-fighters. She talked with what she terms 'EPLF educators', and found that "all my informants emphasised that awareness raising for the purpose of *changing mental models* and empowering people to improve their lives and develop Eritrea was the main purpose and goal of EPLF education" (Bjørndal, 2002:36, original italics).⁵⁰

As a young nation, the general scarcity of statistics and data in Eritrea is an impediment to sound development planning (A. Kidane, Sigvaldsen, & Snorrason, 2007:9), and one must recognise that statistics about prestigious issues such as literacy and educational achievement are somewhat unreliable. When UNESCO identified thirty-five countries with adult illiteracy rates over 50% for participation in the Literacy Initiative for Empowerment campaign in 2005,

⁴⁹ "Social Transformation in Eritrea I: Education Prior to the Liberation Struggle," *Adulis* 1, no. 8 (1984):6

⁵⁰ Gottesman, also an EPLF supporter, was consultant to Bjørndal's thesis, and this link, which includes shared attitudes and probably some of the same informants, is of course not incidental at all, but typical of research in Eritrea, my own included.

Eritrea was amongst only five about which they did not present statistical information (UNESCO, 2007:39). Asfaha (2009) refers to a literacy rate of 50%. According to the government youth literacy is reported to have increased from 61% to 72% in the period 1991-2004. A report written by the Ministry of Education gives an adult literacy rate of 57% (UNESCO, 2008), and emphasises the great improvement since independence. However, as with other education indicators, there are very large regional disparities, and significantly more women than men are illiterate, although the gender gap is closing. Illiteracy, said the UNESCO representative, is a condition of great concern to the people and government, and one to which considerable financial and personnel resources are allocated. He characterised the country as having:

- High illiteracy rate and low standard of living
- Illiterate environment especially in the rural areas
- Low participation and achievement of girls in school
- Limited resources in all areas (2008:3)

The Eritrean government is proud of its achievements in education, and especially of the fact that school enrolment has more than tripled since independence (Eritrea Profile:2). The students in this survey, who were mostly born in the eighties, have had far greater access to formal education than their parents' generation. All the same, 54% of primary school-aged children are not in school, and only 38% of those who enrol complete a full primary education. Girls are enrolled less, and drop out more (Madsen, 2006:221).

Justin Hill, a British Peace Corps volunteer who wrote of his experience as a teacher in a Keren school, described exhausted teachers, severe overcrowding, disciplinary problems and intermittent violence between pupils and between staff and pupils.

[Teachers] blamed the students' poor discipline on a number of things: some said it was the history of revolting against the old rulers; others that the economy was so devastated that there were no jobs for people with an education. Many agreed it was because the way to prosperity in Eritrea didn't lie in education, but in whether you'd been a fighter with the EPLF – or not. (Hill, 2002:87)

Disconcerting though this picture is, one must bear in mind that there are considerable differences between schools (Balslev, pc). Hill's experience was based on one school, and though two Danish educationalists have also reported violence in schools (Madsen, 2006; Balslev, 2006), I do not know if this was the school situation for the students in this research.⁵¹

⁵¹ A decision in 2007 to take over-age pupils out of the classroom may be understood as an attempt to make the disciplinary situation more manageable for both teachers and co-pupils.

7.3.2 *In Norway*

According to the standards of the International Adult Literacy Survey of 1994-1998, about a third of the adult population in Norway has insufficient literacy skills to meet the more advanced functional requirements of Norwegian society. The extent to which this is perceived as a problem depends on the stage people are at in their working lives, and what sort of work they do, or want to do (Gabrielsen, 2005). It certainly makes full participation in secondary education problematic.⁵² Being described as functionally illiterate is stigmatic in a society which is as text-based as Norwegian society (2005).

All children in Norway are obliged by law to attend ten years of schooling, starting in their sixth year of life, and 98% of them attend state-run schools. Currently over 90 per cent of both girls and boys go on to upper secondary school to take either pre-college or vocational training. One in four do not complete upper secondary education, a cause for considerable concern in the educational debate.

Norwegian teachers are typically generalists (*Language education policy profile: Norway, 2003-2004:12*). Only since 2009 have teachers in lower secondary school been required to be specially trained in key subjects in order to be employed to teach them. Having reviewed recent classroom research in Norway, Janicke Stray (2009) concludes that teacher-pupil relations are friendly and that most pupils are happy at school, but that there is considerable noise and unrest in the classroom and that this, combined with the pupils being responsible for their own learning, are factors that have led to very varied academic performance (Stray, 2009:112). Telhaug (2008) sees the fact that the Norwegian education system at all levels is subject to frequent reforms, combined with a liberal understanding of pupil autonomy, as a major factor in the uncertainty demonstrated by many teachers when it comes to what and how they should teach. European testing has stimulated an interest in improving the relatively poor performance of Norwegian pupils in L1, mathematics and science. Despite concerns about educational achievement and standards of teaching and classroom management, an OECD report in 2006 concluded that Norway has “in essence, a successful and highly equitable system” (Telhaug, 2008:96).

Alfred Oftedal Telhaug points out what is overlooked in such a positive conclusion. Looking back, he describes earlier ideals of Norwegian schools as being solidarity, inclusion and process, rather than competition, individual achievement and memorisation (2008:98). Despite the perception that ‘education for citizenship’ is fundamental to education in Norway (*Language*

⁵² The 12% of the population with the weakest reading skills are typically over forty-five years old and without regular employment, so they are not directly represented in the present study.

education policy profile: Norway, 2003-2004:28), today's situation is more ideologically complex, he says. Telhaug summarises the relationship of education to other aspects of national welfare and to changing perceptions of what serves the nation:

No one dares deny that our competitive advantage [on the world market] depends on our education system, and that it must be of good quality when it comes to skills and knowledge. So this means that we see a move away from the strong emphasis on shared national values, on togetherness and equal opportunities that we had in the first decades after the war [WWII], towards a post-national society where the community of the nation is downplayed and cognitive competence, along with creativity and individual responsibility, are the main focus. (Telhaug, 2008:99, my translation)

Telhaug describes, from his self-acclaimed culturally conservative vantage point, the ideological expectations which the Norwegian students in this study met in their own schooling, and which they will be expected to relate to if they re-enter schools as teachers.

7.4 Higher education in Eritrea

7.4.1 The national context

There is abundant evidence for a general pattern in which gaining access to higher education correlates with a family's social and occupational background (see McLean (1995) and Hansen and Mastekaasa (2005)). This pattern, however, would not seem to apply to the Eritrean case. A partial explanation is that "the link between familial educational background and student achievement is weaker where educational provision has expanded rapidly and thus relatively few students have well-educated parents" (McLean, 1995:149).

The University of Asmara has been the country's only university. There are no independent histories of it, but in her presentation of the interaction between the state and the university in Ethiopia in the period 1952-2005, Randi Rønning Balsvik generalizes about the role of universities in African states, describing "a diminishing belief in the importance of higher education" (Balsvik, 2007:9). Apart from the strangled economic situation of many African nations, Eritrea included, another factor in the state's preference for control rather than for academic freedom has to do with the role that students have played in voicing dissatisfaction with their governments, and their repeated demands for democratic and non-corrupt public processes. Their demand for a public voice, says Balsvik, is perceived by most African governments "as untenable and threatening". In particular she demonstrates the significant role that students at Addis Ababa University have played in voicing discontent and promoting alternative forms of governance: "Since the universities are key state institutions, conditions for free expression even within the university campuses are highly dependent on the actions and reactions of the regimes in power" (2007:2).

Ethiopia is no incidental example in the present context, since the University of Asmara had a close relationship with it for three decades prior to Eritrea's independence. Hence, though Balsvik's generalisation that "independent thinking and expression have not been encouraged within African universities" is too sweeping to account for the 53 countries and hundreds of tertiary level institutions on the African continent, it does have particular pertinence for the Eritrean case. The University of Asmara had a bilateral agreement with the University in Addis, and its status was largely determined by the changing policies of the Ethiopian government. In the 1970s it just "limped along", but it flowered in the 1980s, although only 9% of the students were Eritrean. Balsvik reports that prior to independence there had been a brutal suppression of free thought and student organisations at the University of Addis Ababa. Similarly at the University of Asmara most faculties were closed in 1989 ("University of Asmara: A Brief History," 2005). After independence the new provisional government re-opened the University, with the expectation that, as the new nation's only university, it would have a key role to play in development.

The official narrative is that primary education was given priority in the first decade of independence. With "The National Educational Policy of 2003" the government turned to address the shortcomings of the tertiary level educational systems that Eritrea inherited at independence. One shortcoming was that only between 10% and 15% of those who completed secondary education had access to university education. The need to provide more graduates than the University had the capacity to produce, not least secondary school teachers, is the reason given for the closure of the University and its replacement by EIT.⁵³ The government did not inform the University Senate of its plans, but used the national press to argue that the 'relocation' of the University to a village fourteen miles outside the capital, and its renaissance as the Eritrean Institute of Technology, were motivated by the need for increased capacity. After the establishment of EIT and the opening of other new decentralised colleges, the student population doubled in a period of just four years, and access to tertiary education for those who complete secondary education increased to about 45% (Eritrea Profile:1).

Opponents of the closure of the university, on the other hand, saw it as motivated by ideologies of control, and bemoaned the impoverishment of infrastructure and of academic standards that it would entail. Some Eritreans in the transnational community argue that the government's motivation for developing EIT and other new colleges of tertiary education cannot have been only to increase student enrolment, as in that case the university would not have been

⁵³ Teachers for primary school are trained at a separate institute, which participated in a Danish-led reform process. It was put on hold for several years, but by 2008 was again educating primary teachers.

left empty and its staff salaried but idle.

A survey carried out in 2001 of 646 students at the Faculty of Education at the University of Asmara enabled Madsen to describe student perceptions of schools and teacher education. Madsen's research has particular value as it provides an insight into how students viewed their studies and the teaching profession. She reports that students deemed the teaching profession unpopular for many reasons: the salary, which during national service is far below subsistence level (and here the very high salaries paid to expatriate teachers provoked considerable resentment); the huge workload, with two full shifts a day, which also means that teachers have no time to earn more money in a second job; the lack of discipline, which can lead to pupil behaviour that is violent and threatening; and the fear that one will be sent to a school in a remote region, far from one's family. Some students also claim, writes Madsen, that many teachers at school seem to be so exhausted that they are not able to teach (2001:29). "Many of the students see their dreams and plans of settling down, getting married and raising a family to be threatened if they enter the teaching profession. Many of them have a dream of getting a job outside the government – and many have a dream to leave the country. There is, however, a very clear trend throughout that the students have a strong sense of responsibility and devotedness towards their nation and their family" (2001:28). Repeatedly, Madsen is struck by the willingness *in principle* of the students to contribute to the building of the Eritrean nation through education, despite their distrust of the prevailing situation (2001:39).⁵⁴ Yet she reports that student criticism of teacher *education* covered almost every aspect of the faculty, and illustrated this point by citing a student who wrote:

Actually, to be frank. It is very difficult for us to see what is the point in the courses we are taking. We do not know about the goals, the objectives or the content – we do not know anything about what we are being taught – except what the teachers teaches [sic]. We just learn the courses according to the teaching. That's all. Nobody cares about that. It is as if the faculty does not care about what a teacher is like. (Madsen, 2001:37)

This kind of outspoken criticism from the student body is no longer forthcoming. In the same year that Madsen carried out her field research thousands of students were detained, and the central government took full control of tertiary education. Musa Naib, Director of the Department of General Education, saw a solution to the crisis in the teaching profession in terms of attitudinal change. National responsibility, he said, is more than material motivation.

⁵⁴ In fact there is a massive 'brain drain' of young Eritreans with higher education, an example of which is that two of the five graduate assistants who taught English at EIT (amongst the brightest of the graduates from the University of Asmara) left illegally for the US in the course of my fieldwork. In 2008 Eritreans were the second largest group applying to Norway for political asylum.

The spirit of “I am doing a national work, I am engaged in nation-building, in man-making; mine is a noble profession” needed to be inculcated.⁵⁵ Since 2003 the school leaving exam, previously taken after year 11, has been postponed to the end of the twelfth school year. All students spend this extra year in the arid mountains of Sahel, at a place referred to as ‘Sawa’, where their schooling is combined with, or possibly constitutes, military training. Parents do not have access to their children during this period. I understand that unsuccessful school leavers are sent straight into national service, those who perform somewhat better stay on in the Sahel region for vocational training, and high achievers are sent for higher education.⁵⁶

Young people may, however, have an indirect motivation for higher education. A school leaver in 2001 said that she dared not collect her exam results because unsuccessful students were sent straight from the exam office to the camps (Madsen, 2006). Only those who successfully completed the exam got an ID-card. In 2001 Eritrea was at war with Ethiopia and according to this informant all school leavers without an ID-card were in mortal danger: “when you are inside the school you live and if you are outside the school you may be killed. It has always been like that as long as I can remember. I cannot go outside any more ...” (2006:222).

When the university stopped enrolling new students in 2003 and was effectively supplanted by the EIT and later by other decentralised institutions of tertiary education, in-country academic publishing withered. The last issue of the University Journal of Eritrean Studies was published in February 2005, and the last University Newsletter was posted in the same month. It makes no mention of the disembowelling of the University.

7.4.2 *The Eritrean Institute of Technology – EIT*

The Eritrean Institute of Technology is often referred to by its initials – EIT, or as ‘Mai Nefhi’ (variously spelt), the name of the village where it is situated. The new institution, with its much larger intake of students than had the University of Asmara, required the recruitment of large numbers of teaching staff from India. Most return to India after completing a two-year contract.

Previously an extra TE was sometimes added to the acronym EIT, standing for Teacher Education. The instability of the institution’s name reflects something of its ad hoc constitution, and in particular the national quandary about how to organise teacher education. During HUC’s

⁵⁵ Musa H. Naib: The rapid transformation of education in Eritrea. Paper presented at the workshop “Curriculum development at the College of Education, EIT & TE: A Generative Workshop”. Asmara, 25.02.2006.

⁵⁶ Film coverage of the graduation ceremony for school leavers at Sawa, shown on Eri-TV and streamed to Sweden’s Öpna Kanal on 1st December 2008, frequently pictured the young women students who conspicuously filled the front row. The footage thus sets out to demonstrate the government’s commitment to girls’ education. I noted also that although English is the language of high school education, the graduation ceremony, which included speeches, the handing out of awards to high-achieving students, and a comic musical sketch, were all performed in Tigrinya.

collaboration with the institution the name EITTE was often used. The two names reflect whether education is a vocation (EITTE), or an aspect of all students' training (EIT). EIT became the established name as the institution tended towards the second alternative. At the time when the research material was collected, all of the students at EIT, including those in this study, were expected to teach for some years after completing their degrees, regardless of their field of specialisation. Students for whom a long-term career in education was envisaged took extra courses in pedagogy.



Picture 1: Student campus accommodation at the Eritrean Institute of Technology

EIT is a residential institution, and all the 10,000 or so students live on campus. Unauthorised visitors have no access, and it is hard to get a full picture of what is actually going on. Typically those on campus tell a different story or no story at all, from those outside the campus, where speculation flourishes. In an article with the polemical title “An Entire Generation Denied Higher Education? Are we going to stay silent?” Resoum Kidane writes of the colleges that replaced the University of Asmara:

These colleges were established without proper planning and none of them have any international accreditation. As the Eritrean Ambassador in the USA explained at a public meeting on 29th of October 2006, the government is indifferent as to whether these college have accreditation or not. The government's sole concern is to establish colleges which will produce graduates loyal to the government. Hence, these colleges are administered by military personnel or members of PFDJ. An example of this is the Mai Nefi College, led by Colonel Ezira. The administration of the college is based on a military structure. Students are organized in military groups and guarded by military personnel. They are also not allowed to choose what subjects they can study. (R. Kidane, 30/11/06)

I was told that the non-academic administration make rules at short notice when exams are to be held and what the pass mark is to be, depending on the need to retain or reduce student manpower. The students do not know, and do not have a say in, how their manpower and

qualifications will be used. It is said that students are heavily penalised for leaving the campus without permission, yet I have seen that many staff and students do not attend classes in the first and second weeks of term, and that students take several days off in association with national holidays.

Government policy for higher education gives priority to science and technology, and this priority is reflected in there being far more students and staff in the Departments of Engineering and Science than in the Department of Social Sciences, which includes English. For most students engineering and pure sciences were seen as the more prestigious subjects, and these seemed to attract the students who had performed best at secondary school. Pandey and Moorad explain that “in third world countries, the reliance on science and technology has remained undiminished because these are held mainly responsible for the developments and economic superiority of the Western world to be emulated” (Pandey & Moorad, 2003:162). Therefore, they argue, higher education is often set up to give priority to curricular models that are designed with science and technology, rather than with the humanities, in mind.

At workshops on curriculum development I encountered both an entrenched essentialist perspective on curriculum content, and a rhetoric that promoted a revised curriculum designed to serve the immediate and long-term needs of the nation. Neither of these two positions seemed to be in discursive interaction with the praxis of the Indian staff who taught without a written curriculum, nor did the staff have ready access to documents outlining government policy on education. The structure of the courses at EIT was much the same as that of the University that it replaced, and the only form of formal evaluation is summative exams. The freshman year for all students was made up of what were called ‘catch-up’ courses in English, maths and general science. The English Department was responsible for providing English courses to all of these freshmen. The need for a ‘catch-up’ year in English can in part be explained in Tecle Emehatsion’s research on English study skills amongst students at the University of Asmara. He found that the University entrance examinations for all subjects, including English, were made up of multiple choice questions (Emehatsion, 2004:15). This means that many genres, including composition and essays, are unfamiliar to the students. Emehatsion concluded that, “Nearly all the students are unfamiliar with almost all the types of writing. Their poor language background becomes the stumbling block to academic writing” (2004:15).⁵⁷

All subjects, with the possible exception of a tiny department of Eritrean studies, are taught

⁵⁷ Oqbay, who has been co-responsible for writing several of the recent university entrance exams in English, says that they do also include a short essay, but that this complicates the evaluation process and makes it extremely time-consuming.

in English. Most of the Indian staff were unused to teaching English to students who had not mastered the language, and they expressed frustration at the students' language proficiency. The Eritrean students were in turn frustrated by the inability of some of the Indian teachers to help them improve their spoken and especially their written English. The definitive closure of the University of Asmara in 2007 led to the enforced relocation of the Eritrean teaching staff who had worked there, and they often replaced Indian staff as departmental heads. Graduate assistants (see 5.3.1) marked exams, kept records and ran tutorials, in which, they explained, they went through what the Indian teachers had taught, and provided a forum for practice and individual guidance. Their workload was oppressive, especially as many of them had extra teaching jobs in the evenings, in order to make ends meet.

7.4.3 *English studies at EIT*

Of the two thousand or so students who complete the freshman year, 25 to 30 students go on to take three more years of English courses, to satisfy the requirements for a Bachelor's degree. Component courses are typically completed in one term, with two or three hours of tuition a week for each course. I am unclear as to whether students choose to study English, or are allocated to the subject. It was said that students who are allocated or start with English can sometimes transfer to other subjects. Yet it seems that for some English was a positive choice, even though it was said to be a difficult subject, top marks being extremely hard to get.

The academic socialisation of the Eritrean students was complicated by their being taught mostly by academics from many parts of the Indian subcontinent, as well as by Eritrean teachers trained in Eritrea, South Africa and the USA. The lack of a common understanding of Eritrean curriculum requirements, combined with the lack of a research library and very limited electronic resources, meant that courses in English were patchworks of each teacher's personal library and experience. The functional curriculum for English literature, as I observed it, reflected the Indian academic tradition of teacher-centred analysis, where "all interpretation continues to come directly from above" (Lindfors, 1995:9). Based on a large-scale survey in India, Lindfors makes the claim that:

the great majority of English programs at Indian universities remain steadfastly anglo-centric, elevating British literature above all others and tolerating little substantive deviation from the type of curriculum that existed during the colonial times [...]. Unlike their counterparts in Anglophone Africa, most university English departments in India have not undergone a major curricular revolution. (Lindfors, 1995:78-79)⁵⁸

⁵⁸ But those Indian academics who do engage with African literature, says Lindfors, can bring a perspective that shares a post-colonial experience and cross-cultural perspective (1995:84).

There were sets of some of the literary texts, apparently, and students could also copy texts at their own expense, but to do so they had to leave the campus and travel 22 kilometres into town. When asked how they had studied the texts, some students said that they had read the primary texts, others that they had only been told about them. There is so much prestige involved in reading primary texts that this activity may well be over-reported. From my own observations and casual conversations with the staff, it seems that students did not on the whole read primary texts. Instead the teacher presented a short biography of the author, a synopsis and an ‘interpretation’, all of which were written on the board and copied by the students. The dominant learning practices were lectures and silent review of lecture notes or textbooks.⁵⁹

7.5 Higher education in Norway

7.5.1 *The national context*

All secondary school students who have successfully completed their schooling, regardless of the grades that they have achieved, have the opportunity of taking higher education in Norway, although many courses have higher entrance requirements than the minimum pass mark. This reflects the enormous expansion in the provision of secondary and tertiary education in Norway in the last sixty years. Tuition is free, but living expenses and study materials must be paid for by the student. A state system of grants and loans is intended to ensure that all students have economic access to higher education, regardless of family income. In 2005 about 40% of Norwegians in the relevant age group completed some form of tertiary education, and over 70% can expect to enter a tertiary education programme at some point in their lives. The apparent discrepancy between these figures has to do with the fact that many people work, have children or travel abroad for several years before entering higher education.⁶⁰

Risto Rinne observes that there is a world-wide tendency for governments to defend the existence of universities on pragmatic and utilitarian grounds. His characterisation of universities as “peculiar bottom-heavy organisations with weak organisational governance” fits Norwegian tertiary education considerably better than it fits Eritrean tertiary education. Characteristic of all five Scandinavian countries, he says, with reference to Arild Tjeldvoll’s (1998) work, is that the objective of social justice and the ideal of creating a democratic society has been promoted through social and educational policies. Rinne notes that the university institution is not one common and undivided field of education, and inequality is still clearly

⁵⁹ A response session on an Eritrean poem that I held with a class of fourth-year English students demonstrated their facility with group work, although their teacher believed that they had had no previous experience of it in a classroom context.

⁶⁰ Risto Rinne: The changing faces of higher education and inclusion and exclusion: Nordic tunes. Paper presented at the conference “Exclusion and inclusion in higher education”, Rhodes University, ZA, 08.12.09.

evident as different fields have higher or lower status. Marianne Nordli Hansen and Arne Mastekaasa (2005) have examined issues relating to the fact that the education sector is still a site of social reproduction despite 'equal access' to higher education.⁶¹ They conclude that social stratification in society in general is reproduced in the educational system, although they see a certain tendency to increasing social equity in university colleges which offer shorter courses, or qualify students for less prestigious professions. Women are particularly overrepresented in university colleges, where they make up 64% of the student population. HUC is in these terms a lower status institution, despite high levels of student satisfaction, since it has relatively low intake criteria and does not offer the most prestigious professional and academic courses.

Higher education in Norway is influenced by a market-oriented economy, with the result that courses that recruit many students are ensured a continued existence, whereas courses that recruit poorly are unprofitable and risk being cancelled. Another cause of unpredictability is that teacher education has been subject to frequent reform. The curriculum that was in operation at the time of this research was introduced in 2003, and is to be superseded by a new curriculum in 2010. Tertiary educational institutions in Norway are answerable to the central Department of Education and Research. In practice there is a considerable degree of local autonomy, and a certain reform fatigue. Individual priorities and departmental traditions are in more or less dynamic interaction with national curricula, and the rate and extent of educational change, at least at the level of the functional curriculum, is not as great as central policy prescribes.

7.5.2 Hedmark University College – HUC

The Norwegian students were enrolled at *Høgskolen i Hedmark* (HUC). This institution was established in 1994 when four colleges in Hedmark County in eastern Norway were amalgamated into one university college in a nation-wide reform of tertiary education. It became one of twenty-four university colleges in Norway, and there are now also seven universities. Students can, if they wish, combine a year or two at a university college with a few years at a university. In 2008 HUC had about 4,200 students and about 500 staff. The largest of the four constituent colleges is in the town of Hamar, 120 kilometres north of the capital, Oslo, and the students in this study were based at the Hamar campus. It has existed as a centre for higher education since 1879, when a 'Seminarium' for teachers was established. Teacher education is still the single most important activity at the Hamar campus, now renamed the

⁶¹ This overall tendency is found in many industrialised societies. For a discussion of why social reproduction is so resilient, see Hansen and Mastekaasa, 2005:80-82.

Faculty of Teacher Education and Natural Science. Despite the range of courses offered, it is still popularly referred to as '*Lærerskolen*' (literally 'the teacher-school').

With the exception of the English department, nearly all the academic staff are Norwegian, and have earned their qualifications in Norway, and most are permanently employed. The language of instruction for most courses is Norwegian. The administrative system is relatively transparent, and representatives elected from the staff and students have access to forums that allow them some influence. The college has a well-stocked and efficient library with extensive opening hours, and there are many online computers to which students have free access.



Picture 2: The grounds of Hedmark University College, Campus Hamar

The study programmes at HUC are made up of courses, each usually completed in one term, and they can be combined to make up either a general teaching qualification or a Bachelor's degree. Students with a Bachelor's degree can take a postgraduate certificate in education to qualify as teachers. Normally students take courses worth 60 European credits (ECTS) in a year and complete a Bachelor's degree in three years. Whilst some students are part-time, attending only a few courses and combining their studies with paid employment or child care, it is not unusual for full-time students to take considerably more than 60 credits a year, suggesting that the prescribed workload for a full-time student is less than it would be for a full-time student in many other countries. Students must fulfil obligatory course requirements, but are not usually obliged to attend classes. The extent to which they in fact do so varies from subject to subject and from course to course, depending, amongst other things, on the individual student's

learning style and on how useful they find the classes. The dominant learning forums on campus are lectures and out of class group work, whose purpose is often to answer obligatory collective or individual assignments.

7.5.3 *English studies at HUC*

At the time of this research a one-year foundation course in English could be chosen as part of teacher education, as part of a Bachelor in Culture and Language or as an independent course. Some of those who take English are already teachers of other subjects who wish to qualify in English. The foundation course lasted for one academic year and was built up of six courses, each course being worth ten ECTS. The courses covered language, literature, American and British studies and teaching methods. The academic literacy of the Norwegian students studying English is complicated by staff who were academically socialised in Britain, the Republic of Ireland and the USA, as well as Norway.

I describe the literature courses in a little more detail, as they constitute an important part of the experience of literature in English that the students brought to their study of the Eritrean literary texts. The two literature courses, each worth 10 ECTS, provided an introductory overview of literature written in English, with four lessons of teaching a week. The eclectic reading list has in recent years ranged from Shakespeare to Harry Potter, and included approximately the same number of British and American, and male and female writers. A long-standing African inclusion was Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. About six novels, eight short stories, a couple of plays and fifteen to twenty poems made up the syllabus for each course. The scope and content of the foundation courses builds on a tradition that HUC shares with the Norwegian universities, where canonical status is the most important criterion for the selection of texts, and HUC has concentrated on twentieth century canonical works. Besides their canonical status, works were chosen for the appeal that they have to students, and to this end students were asked at the end of each year to suggest which works should be retained and which should be removed from the reading list. A third criterion was that the works should allow for ethical reflection, for example on issues and themes that relate to the challenges of teaching. Students were given a term plan and expected to have read the primary texts in advance of class.

According to the teacher who was mainly responsible for these courses, the overreaching aim was to encourage and develop a lifelong interest in literature. An ideal lesson was a collective journey towards a new understanding of the literary text (Gro Asland, pc 11.12.2008). She drew on the idea that every reader brings a unique combination of experience and personality to their reading, and that these readings constitute 'student texts' that interact with the 'teacher text' to

create a new 'class text'. This has the consequence that "all participants will emerge with a broader repertoire for appreciating literature and also with a more personal and autonomous 'voice' in the target language" (Ibsen, 1990:29).

Some students, including the ten in this study, took a further 30 ECTS of English, made up of three courses. I taught one of these courses, 'Contemporary African Literature'. As in the foundation course, students were required to read the literary texts in advance of the lessons. They participated in a range of activities, some teacher-centred, including lectures and power-point presentations, but most student-centred, including plenary discussions, quizzes, short written response exercises and, most frequently, group discussions. Students who took this course were formally evaluated on the basis of a home assignment and a written exam.

The next chapter reports on the earlier experience and expectations of literature of both groups of students.

8 The students as readers and writers

8.1 An overview

This chapter describes the students as readers of literature and as writers of academic and other texts, with a special focus on the challenges they meet as writers of English. It makes occasional reference to sociological and educational studies in Eritrea and Norway, but is primarily based on the questionnaires that the students completed. The purpose of presenting the students as readers is to suggest the context from which they read the particular literary texts in this study, a context that is made up, amongst other factors, of their earlier experience of literature, their understanding of what literature is and what functions it serves.

Section 8.2 introduces the students, their demographic identity and the languages which they report themselves as speaking. In section 8.3 I present the Eritrean students as readers, and in section 8.4 I present the Norwegian students as readers. In these two sections I focus on what the students wrote about their earlier encounters with literature, what literature they liked and disliked, how they defined literature, which language and literature activities they found useful and enjoyable and why they did or did not regard the reading of fiction as a useful activity.

Section 8.5 deals with the students as writers of response texts in their two educational contexts. It is important to bear in mind that speaking and writing in a foreign language is “making do with a limited amount of someone else’s words” (Kramsch, 1983:246). The extent to which English is someone else’s words differs in Norway and in Eritrea. Another aspect of the students as writers has to do with the fact that the assignments required them to give an individual response and to express their own opinion. Section 8.5.1 explores what the two groups may understand by ‘expressing one’s opinion’, and the extent to which students have experience of writing an individual response to material presented in an educational context. Section 8.5.2 deals with the challenges involved in writing in and making sense of the distinct learner Englishes that are typical of Tigrinya and Norwegian L1 speakers.

8.2 Introducing the students

8.2.1 The Eritrean students

I was told that most of the Eritrean students of English came from families where formal schooling had not played an important role until recently. They were Eritrean citizens, and their studies were a moratorium from, or possibly a part of, their national service. The group was made up of ten men and two women, a distribution which is similar to the overall gender distribution at EIT, where rather less than 20% of the students are women. Eight of the students were between twenty-two and twenty-seven years old, two were younger and two were slightly

older. For a comparison of the age distribution of the two groups, see Table 3.

Eritrea is divided into nine regions, but ten of the students in this study are from just two of them: Makael (5) and Debub (5). In these two highland regions most of the people are Tigrinya. Of the other two students, one had attended secondary school at Keren, the second biggest city in Eritrea, and one had been schooled in the Sudan. I did not ask respondents to name the ethnic group to which they belonged, for reasons discussed in 5.3.2. However, in a survey carried out at the Department of Education at the University of Asmara in 2001, 97% of the students were Tigrinya (Madsen, 2001:7). Even though the national policy is to give equal opportunities to all ethnic groups in higher education, and EIT has a far bigger student intake than the University of Asmara had, it is a fair assumption that most of the respondents in the present study were Tigrinya.

Eleven of the twelve students reported that they spoke fluent Tigrinya. Nine said that Tigrinya was the only language they spoke (apart from English). Five of those who spoke only Tigrinya (and English) further identified the language as “my mother tongue” or “mother language”, perhaps to mark a distinction between their own linguistic background and that of students who speak Tigrinya, but not as their home language. Of the three students who spoke another language in addition to Tigrinya and English, one spoke Tigré. Another was the student who had been educated in the Sudan. He had seemingly spent time with Eritreans from different ethnic groups, since he reported competence in “Arabic, Tigrinya, Tigré, Kunama, Amharic and some other”. One student said he was fluent in Amharic and didn’t mention Tigrinya. This may have been an oversight, for it is hard to imagine that one could get by on the campus or in the district where this student went to school, without using Tigrinya. But by stating ‘Amharic’ this student may have been distancing himself from Tigrinya, or resisting its dominant role, especially as he reported “nearly always” speaking English outside the classroom. Madsen found that students who came from a more international environment such as the one in Addis Ababa (where Amharic is spoken) are much more critical about education and the situation in Eritrea in general (Madsen, 2001:3).

In general I suspect that the respondents exaggerated the extent to which they speak English outside the classroom. Six indicated that they usually did so and two indicated that they nearly always did so. Only one student said that he used English ‘very seldom’, an answer which better tallies with my impression of the pattern of language use on campus. The apparent over-reporting of English use may have been because it was unclear what was meant by ‘outside the classroom’; or perhaps it is seen as desirable to speak more English than one in fact does. A

further possibility is that the questionnaire, despite assurances to the contrary, was seen as some sort of test, where speaking English ‘usually’ was perceived to be the right answer.

8.2.2 *The Norwegian students*

The students in Norway were Norwegian citizens, one of whom was a first generation immigrant. Five of the ten had attended upper secondary school in the southern part of Hedmark County, four had attended upper secondary school in four other counties, and one came to Norway at the end of their schooling in a non-Scandinavian European country. Their tertiary level studies in English came at different stages of their lives, some coming straight to college from school, others returning to college after a few years without formal education, and two returning after a longer period. All of them had of their own volition chosen to study English. Three were in their last year of teacher education, five were taking English as part of a Bachelor’s degree, one was a qualified teacher and one took English simply “because I love the language and wanted to learn more” (pc 09.12.200X).

There were three men and seven women in the Norwegian group, a distribution which reflects the overall gender distribution on the campus, where about 70% of the students are women. Seven of the students were between twenty-two and twenty-seven years old, one was younger and two were somewhat older. So whilst the gender distribution is very different to that in the Eritrean group, the age distribution is very similar, as Table 3 shows.

Table 3: Comparing the two groups by age distribution

	21 or less	22-24	25-27	28 or more
Eritrean	2	5	3	2
Norwegian	1	3	4	2

When asked which language they spoke fluently apart from English, eight of the ten students in this study said they spoke only Norwegian. In fact two said ‘none’, as though not recognising that it was appropriate to mention their home language, and two said that they ‘just’ or ‘only’ spoke Norwegian. Of those who reported speaking more than English and Norwegian, one spoke Sámi and the other spoke a European language. As to frequency of use outside the classroom, five of the ten students reported using English occasionally or very seldom, two used English sometimes, whilst three, one of whom had a British parent, reported that they usually spoke English. I surmise that English has high status in both groups and that the students in Eritrea have less exposure to English than do the Norwegian students.

8.3 The Eritrean students as readers

8.3.1 *Experience of literature*

Around the time when many of the students in this study would themselves have been at elementary school, Martha Wagar Wright spoke to a group of elementary school teachers in Eritrea. They reported that most of the students' parents were illiterate and had never attended school (Wright, 2001:69). The children worked a lot at home, and they typically had no print media in their home environments. The teachers of English had themselves never had textbooks nor any English books in their homes (2001:70). I assume that some, if not most, of the students in this study had little opportunity for out-of-class reading, since decentralised libraries have developed greatly only since about 2005, and schools have very little reading material. Several of the Eritrean respondents reported that poetry was their literary world until they encountered written literature as students of English at EIT. E2 wrote, "Before I joined to literature. I had nothing knowledge about it. I understood literature as the only way of poem writing". Another student is himself an aspiring poet, for he wrote, "From my early childhood, I have an interest in literature. In my mother tongue, I compose poems and try, though not perfect, songs and sings before audience" (E1). In addition, the students were probably familiar with a rich and living tradition of proverbs and local storytelling.⁶² The taught curriculum in Eritrean schools does not include the study of literature, although booklets ('readers') with folk tales and other stories were produced and distributed by the government to improve reading skills.

When asked what they read outside the curriculum, the Eritrean students were encouraged to include performances they had seen and books that they had read in any language. By making this category broad I hoped to encompass the full range of literary encounters which the students had experienced. The students took the wording of the questionnaire: "Can you give examples of..." as a challenge, two answering "Yes I can", and several pointing out that what they referred to was just a small part of what they had experienced. In addition to some written literature from Africa and the West, most of the titles mentioned by more than one student were performed rather than read. Most frequently mentioned were mainstream American films and Eritrean plays. Several of the students mentioned an Eritrean TV serialisation showing at the time, which was based on a Tigrinya folk story about an unwilling bride.

8.3.2 *Defining 'literature'*

The students were asked what they thought of when they saw the word 'literature' and how they would *define* the term, although, as one of the graduate assistants pointed out, these are not the

⁶² The wording of the questionnaire did not explicitly encourage the reporting of oral genres, unfortunately.

same question. The Eritrean students typically expressed themselves enthusiastically about the importance of literature. Some found it hard to define, and instead provided an image to show how valuable they felt literature to be. E3 illustrates these components – enthusiasm, the difficulty of definition and an image expressing value – in his response:

When I see the word ‘literature’ what I think is that the role that I should play not only as a student of it but also as a boy who is gifted to share its resources I am not in a position to define it for its definition is not as simple as that I can define. But I can say literature is life by itself.
(E3)

The most frequent metaphor that the students used when they were asked what they associated with the word ‘literature’ was to say, like E3, that literature is life itself. However there are other more specific images:

Well when I see the word ‘literature’ I feel like it’s the only key to a house full of words, ideas imaginations ... which no other subject can do. With literature you can go everywhere visit every-body, even the dead, just by sitting in your house and writing. I think this defines the term.
(E4)

Another student, E8, apparently associates ‘literature’ with the sensory beauty that Tigrinya speakers expect of poetry, when he says, “I think that literature is like something by which I taste beauty, and get impressed by it”. Amongst those students who did define literature, the diversity of the ways in which they answered suggests that they were thinking their way to a definition, rather than retrieving one that they had previously heard. Here is an example:

The first thing that comes to my mind when I think of literature just now is all the writings, plays ‘fictional and non fictional’ all together that was contributed and still is by the great people of our country and all the centuries back. And personally I define the word literature as a way of or a gap that is open for all to express one’s own feelings and emotions and experiences in life and the ways you see like in different angles. (E7)

8.3.3 *Enjoyable and useful activities*

Students were asked to rate eight activities relating to their experience of fiction and of studying English.⁶³ The idea here was to gain an impression of how useful and how enjoyable the students felt these activities to be. Six was the highest score, 1 the lowest. Students tended to rate at the top end of the scale, giving the score ‘6’ to more than two thirds of the activities, both as regards to how enjoyable and how useful they were. Only 10% of the ratings chose the scores of 2, 3 and 4. Otherwise there was a tendency amongst some students to rate some activities as not enjoyable at all, with a score of 1. The mean scores are presented in Table 4.

⁶³ I used the term ‘fiction’ rather than ‘literature’ since this latter term is so variously understood. In the context of this questionnaire, the term did seem to direct the students’ attention towards fictional literature and away from factual genres, as I had hoped.

Table 4: Eritrean students' rating of literature and language activities

	reading Eritrean fiction	reading fiction from other African countries	reading fiction written in the West	seeing a play	listening to poetry	reading texts about things that have really happened	doing language exercises	writing texts e.g. a description, re-telling a story
useful	5.6	5.5	5.3	5.5	4.5	5.3	5.8	5.3
enjoyable	5	4.8	5.6	5.9	5.9	4.8	3.6	4.3

We see that the mean rating of those language learning activities that are not related to literature – reading non-fictional texts, doing language exercises and writing texts – suggests that they are seen as very useful but rather less enjoyable. In fact most students rated these three activities as very enjoyable, but there were a few who rated them with the lowest score, suggesting either a strong dislike of the activities per se, or dissatisfaction with the way they were taught.

Otherwise, my overall impression was that they were very committed to improving their English language skills.

When it comes to reading fiction, we see that this is regarded as both useful and enjoyable, with fiction written in the West being marginally the most enjoyable. This category may have been variously understood as canonical syllabus literature or popular novels: thrillers by for example Sidney Sheldon and romances by for example Judith McNaught, which were in circulation among the students.⁶⁴ I assume that these books were brought into the country by transnational Eritreans, since I did not see them for sale new in bookshops. All the students have experience of Eritrean fiction both from and outside their studies. Most of them rated Eritrean fiction as useful and enjoyable with the top score, but two students rated it as not enjoyable, and another did not rate this item at all, the only instance of non-rating amongst any of the Eritrean students for any of the activities. Clearly the most enjoyable activities were ‘listening to poetry’ and ‘seeing a drama’, and it is worth noting that these are the two spoken genres, and the ones with which the students had most experience.

8.3.4 *Enjoyable and useful literature*

When asked to select a favourite from amongst the literary texts that they had studied at EIT, the students chose mainly canonical pre-twentieth-century British poetry. Table 5 shows which texts the Eritrean students chose. The single most popular text was the Greek tragedy *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles.

⁶⁴ The first draft of the questionnaire distinguished between the two categories but proved confusing in the pre-test, so the two categories were combined in the final version.

Table 5: Literary works the Eritrean students had particularly enjoyed

Title	Author	Genre	No. of students
<i>Oedipus Rex</i>	Sophocles	drama	4
<i>Robinson Crusoe</i>	Defoe	novel	1
“Methought I Saw”	Milton	poem	2
“Dover Beach”	M. Arnold	poem	2
“Ulysses”	Tennyson	poem	1
“Ode to the West Wind”	Shelley	poem	1
“The Sun Rising”	Donne	poem	1

When it came to a literary work that they had *not* enjoyed, two did not answer, one said that everything had some value, and one misunderstood the question.⁶⁵ Table 6 shows that seven of the remaining eight particularly disliked short stories (abbreviated in the table as ‘ss’), and here most of the texts are from the twentieth century.

Table 6: Literary works the Eritrean students had not enjoyed

Title	Author	Genre	No. of students
<i>Macbeth</i>	Shakespeare	drama	1
“The Horse Dealer’s Daughter”	Lawrence	ss	1
“Araby”	Joyce	ss	1
“A Hanging”	Orwell	ss	2
“The Lottery”	Jackson	ss	1
“The Lesser of Two Evils”	Asghedom	ss	2

It seems that demanding language is not a deterrent, the Eritrean students preferring linguistically complex and archaic poetry to modern prose, although here we must be aware that it is probably a ‘teacher text’ of the poems and stories that the students had met. That there are no novels in either Table 5 or Table 6 probably indicates that the students had not themselves read an entire novel as part of their studies.

When asked to explain why they thought that reading fiction was useful or not useful, the Eritrean students said that they valued fiction first and foremost for what they can *learn* from it. This idea of learning from fiction is used in the familiar sense of acquiring *new* knowledge or

⁶⁵ He commented on which *course* he had not enjoyed.

insight. In this sense fiction is valued in particular for the opportunity it provides for learning about unfamiliar cultures and perspectives that have value for the students' own lives or their own society:

Fiction is useful in various ways. It represents various characters, individual behaviour of different people in different region, country, continent the way of their culture, beliefs, customs, about love, result and effective of selfishness, greedy, so in general fiction helps to compares the way of the life in the early centuries and the modern or today's way of life and its outcome. Fiction is the expression and reflection of life in general that makes it to consider a useful. (E2)

But 'learn' is also used of the reception of already acknowledged moral values enacted and reinforced in new representations. These values are invariably to do with how one should live as a socially useful and morally responsible person. This is a sense of 'learn' that the Eritrean students use quite frequently, so that when an Eritrean student writes 'from this I learn...' he means roughly the same as 'this reminds me'. In the following two examples the meaning of 'we learn' in E9's statement is much the same as 'it reminds me' in E2's statement: "I enjoyed *Dover Beach*, because *it reminds me* and strengthen people mentally and spiritually", writes E2, talking of the usefulness of Matthew Arnold's poem. E9 writes about Guy de Maupassant's short story: "... *we learn* that proudness is bad behaviour, so we should not misbehaved like the main character in the fiction 'The necklace'" (italics added in both).

Although learning from literature is by far the most frequently-given reason for valuing the study of fiction, a few students mentioned that literature provides affective involvement or identification. Talking of John Milton's Sonnet Nr. 23, E7 wrote, "I also pity him as well with his blind condition". And E5 is obviously a happy man, who has no difficulty in crossing distances of time and space to identify with other lovers:

I really enjoyed this poem "The sun-rising" of John Donne because it is about lovers in which they enjoy their love in a better way and I enjoyed it because I am in love. (E5)⁶⁶

Several students mention that literature, as well as being a site of learning, is also a source of entertainment and escape. In political, social and educational contexts where they are continually being told what to think, students are left with little room to negotiate what is right and wrong. That they seek entertainment and possibly escape through literature is evidenced by their preference for thrillers and romances from the West. The idea that reading can be a way of expanding a constrained life experience is captured by one of the graduate assistants: "A fiction would enable someone whose legs are tied to run as much as s/he wants".

In the light of the importance that many of the Eritrean students ascribe to learning from

⁶⁶ Donne's poem is the only syllabus literature that E5 says that he both read himself and learned about in class, his preferred way of studying. He reports that he was taught the rest of the syllabus without having read the texts himself.

literature, it is not surprising to find that the texts that students particularly *disliked* were often those that they perceived as ‘pointless’, in the sense that there was nothing to learn from them. E4 writes of “Araby”: “I don’t like this short story by Joyce because it got no theme, no lesson. Its just a story with supposedly love life of a kid which doesn’t make sense at all”.

Especially strongly disliked were texts that dealt with what the students’ perceived to be negative behaviour – betrayal, violence and licentiousness – without clearly condemning it. Macbeth was the text E8 picked out as one that he had not enjoyed, “because the worst thing in the world is to betray (betrayal) a person who is very loyal and sincere to you”.

Two students took exception to what they saw as the misrepresentation of Eritrean society in a story about women, marital violence and genital mutilation by Rahel Asghedom:

I have not enjoyed this title because, in our society means in our culture there are not immoral thing as much as the writer mentioned in her work/book. What I want to say is she had to write about the real things. Moreover, she too dares to narrate about religion, religion is another thing. (E9)

E9 prescribes that one should write about the real things, that is, things that have actually happened, and he rules religion as a subject that one should not write about at all (see also 11.5).

8.4 The Norwegian students as readers

8.4.1 Experience of literature

In the year when this material was collected, over half the adult population in Norway read between one and ten books, and only one in ten did not read a book at all (Fredriksen & Hansen, 2008). When it comes to adult readers, one in four Norwegians reads a book on any one day (Statistisk Sentralbyrå, 2008:11), and most of these readers are women. Since most of the Norwegian students in this study are women, it is important to remember that women buy, borrow and read more books than men, although an interesting finding for the present study is that men read significantly more non-fiction books than do women. In a comparative perspective it is also interesting to note that only 13% of adults in Norway read any poetry at all (Fredriksen & Hansen, 2008).

In recent PISA surveys Norwegian pupils have performed less well as readers than the Norwegian government had hoped, especially given the large public expenditure on education. Boys in particular expressed very little interest in reading, and spent very little time reading, compared to young people in most of the other European countries in the survey (Nes et al., 2007:16). Boys also scored poorly in a survey of attitudes to reading amongst forty pupils in grade six in Hedmark County, where the present research was carried out. In Nes et al.’s study most of the pupils remembered being told stories by their parents when they were younger, 15%

of them reporting that they were told stories almost every day (2007:38). This suggests that there may not be much discrepancy in the *amount* of storytelling which the Eritrean and the Norwegian students had experienced, though one may assume that there were considerable differences in what was told, and for what purpose. Nes et al. found that Norwegian children who were told stories by their parents in their early years were more likely to enjoy reading later on than those who did not have this experience (2007:69). Similar data is not available, as far as I know, for Eritrean pupils.

What, then, of the students' experience of literature in school? All but one had followed the Norwegian national curriculum, but schools and teachers have considerable autonomy, so what literature pupils encounter varies considerably from teacher to teacher and from textbook to textbook (Vestli, 2008:13). Norwegian is a compulsory subject, and in the last years of secondary school all pupils are required to read several books and plays and many short stories in Norwegian. Eight of the students in this study had taken extra courses in English in secondary school, which would have required them to study the same genres in English.

When asked to give some examples of literature in any language that they had read or seen performed *outside* their studies, the Norwegian responses show considerable variation. Some list works and authors, whilst others comment on the genres that they read, or the preferred nationality of authors. The pre-testing of the questionnaire threw up a certain amount of over-reporting of 'respectable' literature, and this may also be the case for the Norwegian students here. Perhaps this is what the students thought I was interested in: the 'highbrow' literature that they had read. One student, for example, mentions a contemporary political satire, and adds in brackets "just some light entertainment...". What is most striking is the range of authors; works by thirty-four different authors are mentioned, and only two (Coelho and Tolkien) are mentioned by two different students. It is novels that make up the bulk of the respondents' reported reading. In addition to contemporary authors, Dickens, Tolstoy and Shakespeare are mentioned. There is a predilection for Norwegian authors and for British fantasy writers. Only two of the respondents mention non-European authors, and two mention poetry. Short stories are only mentioned by one student, and then as a source of inspiration for her own writing.

The Norwegian students were not given the option that the Eritrean students were to write about films that they had seen, since I was most interested in their experience of print media. When one adds up the time that people in Norway spent watching TV, a home computer, TV games and video/DVDs in 2006, one finds that the average time that people sat in front of an electronic screen in their spare time was about three and a half hours a day (Statistisk Sentralbyrå, 2008:126).

8.4.2 *Defining 'literature'*

On the first day of their studies in African literature, the Norwegian students were asked what the term 'literature' meant to them. In their answers they variously defined it from the point of view of the author, as a medium for personal, political or provocative expression, or from the point of view of the reader, as a means of broadening one's insight or entertainment. For some, literature was invaluable. "Literature is one of the things which makes life worth living," writes N6. "Sometimes I can almost get a sense of sadness when I think about all the amazing (music and) literature I will never get to know." The imagery that some of the Eritrean students used is quite lacking in the Norwegian material. Many of the Norwegian students, on the other hand, showed a facility with the concept of definition:

Literature to me is a written text, it can be divided into formal and informal categories, but I automatically think of great novels and poems that have made an impression on me personally.
 (...)

 Literature is tradition, it is culture and it is a way to identify with the author and the context.
 (N10)

8.4.3 *Enjoyable and useful activities*

At the end of the course in African literature, when they had read the three texts in this study, as well as fiction from other African countries, the Norwegian students were asked to rate eight activities relating to their experience of fiction and of studying English. A pattern similar to the ratings of the Eritrean students emerged, as Table 7 shows.

Table 7: Norwegian students' rating of literature and language activities

	reading Eritrean fiction	reading fiction from other African countries	reading fiction written in the West	seeing a play	listening to poetry	reading texts about things that have really happened	doing language exercises	writing texts e.g. a description, re-telling a story
useful	5.4	5.5	5.5	5	4	5.7	5	4.8
enjoyable	5.1	5	5.1	5.3	4.6	4.8	3.5	3.5

Students tended to rate activities at the top end of the scale, and whilst they were not as keen as the Eritrean students to give the top score of 6, nearly all (94%) of the scores for usefulness were between 4 and 6. Unlike the Eritreans, the Norwegians did not score any activities with the lowest rating for either attribute.⁶⁷ The scores for how enjoyable an activity is were a little lower than for usefulness, with 78% of the scores between 4 and 6. Only 'seeing a play' and

⁶⁷ Greaney and Neuman (1990), in their comparative study of children from 15 countries, noticed that Japanese children especially did not like to use 'agree a lot', suggesting that how respondents use a grading scale varies from one national culture to another.

‘listening to poetry’ were regarded as *more* enjoyable than useful. We see that, just as for the Eritrean students, language learning activities that are not related to literature – reading non-fictional texts, doing language exercises and writing texts – are seen as very useful and rather less enjoyable. It is also worth noting that unlike Smith’s students in Scotland (see 3.4.1), the Norwegian students found fiction from Africa and Eritrea as enjoyable as Western fiction.

8.4.4 *Enjoyable and useful literature*

The Norwegian students were asked to select a favourite from amongst the literary texts that they had studied in their formal education. Their answers are collated in Table 8. As we see, their responses ranged from *Hamlet* to contemporary novels by Mark Haddon and Roddy Doyle, with novels being by far the most favoured genre. Only one student selected a poem, Robert Frost’s “The Road not Taken”, and no short stories were chosen.

Table 8: Literary works the Norwegian students had particularly enjoyed

Title	Author	Genre	No. of students
<i>Hamlet</i>	Shakespeare	drama	1
“The Road not Taken”	Frost	poem	1
<i>Jane Eyre</i>	C. Brontë	novel	2
<i>Huckleberry Finn</i>	Twain	novel	1
<i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i>	Lee	novel	2
<i>Jazz</i>	Morrison	novel	1
<i>The Catcher in the Rye</i>	Salinger	novel	1
<i>The Woman who Walked into Doors</i>	Doyle	novel	1
<i>Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone</i>	Rowling	novel	1
<i>The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time</i>	Haddon	novel	1

The reasons given for choosing these texts are affective, cognitive or aesthetic. I give an example of each. First, an affective response to Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*:

This book was one of my favourite because it gave me hope in the sense that love is something that can happen to everyone, and that brains and behaviour (good ones) can exceed looks and beauty. It conveys that it’s what’s inside that counts. (N3)

Then there were cognitive reasons, which emphasise that a literary text can provide information and recreate what we might not otherwise see or experience. Talking of the novel *The Woman who Walked into Doors* N4 writes, “I enjoyed this novel because it gives such a realistic picture of what a woman can experience and go through behind closed doors” (N4). Finally we have

reasons that focus on aesthetic aspects of the text. Writing of Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, N6 writes, "It is very well written, and it is a very good story".

A student sometimes mentioned all three reasons to explain the appeal of a particular text, as does N8 in talking of *Hamlet*. In the following example, the type of reason is given in square brackets.

The play has so many interesting characters [*affective*], and light is shed on many topics [*cognitive*]. Everything is tightly crafted with words and action [*aesthetic*]. You never get bored and the suspense remains with you after the play has ended [*affective*]. (N8)

When it came to texts that the students disliked, Table 9 shows that Salinger's novel *The Catcher in the Rye* was again picked out, making it the only text to feature both as particularly enjoyed and particularly 'not enjoyed'.

Table 9: Literary works the Norwegian students had not enjoyed

Title	Author	Genre	No. of students
<i>The Prime of Miss Jean Brody</i>	Spark	novel	1
<i>Death of a Salesman</i>	Miller	drama	2
<i>The Catcher in the Rye</i>	Salinger	novel	2
<i>The Lord of the Flies</i>	Golding	novel	1
<i>The Stone Angel</i>	Laurence	novel	1

The reasons given for disliking a text were twofold. Either the text was difficult to read or the handling of the subject matter was too negative. When texts were felt to be difficult, it was disjunctive storylines that students found particularly problematic: "it was difficult to keep track of what was past and what was present" wrote N4 of Margaret Laurence's novel *The Stone Angel*. When it came to negative subject matter some students wrote of intense affective reactions. E8 provides an instance of this type of reaction, at the same time as she acknowledges the text's potential literary value despite her own dislike:

Catcher in the Rye

It is a brilliant portrayal of the feeling of futility and stagnation. In fact I found it so frustrating that the main character was getting nowhere that I simply couldn't finish the book. I rather wanted to burn it.

Unlike the Eritrean students, the Norwegian students did not condemn texts for dealing with unsuitable topics. When asked to explain why they thought that reading fiction was useful or not useful they all, without exception, wrote that fiction was useful. Some added the proviso that not all fiction is useful; to be useful it must be 'good'. A comment by N2 summarises the usefulness

of fiction for many of the Norwegian students, namely that it shows “things that I wouldn’t have thought of by myself”. For these students it is the chance for *new* encounters that makes fiction useful. They have left behind the adolescent tendency to involve themselves with texts “almost entirely in terms of identification with the characters and the situations they are in” (Appleyard, 1991:106). Fiction has become an arena for challenge and reflection.

Fiction is useful because it makes us think, sometimes in *new* and different ways than we normally do. It makes us think about *new* themes, personalities and etc. It shows us *new* and interesting point of views and storylines. (N1, italics added)

The importance of newness is expressed through images of extension: expanded horizons and broadened perspectives. It is also expressed through images of intensity, increased insight and greater empathy. Thus for some students the newness that they find useful in fiction has to do with finding out about unfamiliar, sometimes historical, people and distant events and cultures, whilst for others its usefulness is in gaining new ways of understanding the familiar. Here is an example of each. First an extended perspective:

I think fiction is useful because it enriches our factual knowledge at the same time as it can be a starting point for wider discussions on different social and political issues. (N5)

And then an intensified perspective:

Fiction is useful to elaborate on our understanding of our lives and also our inner values. It helps in order to bring in nuances of an emotional scale. (N10)

For many students fiction is useful both to extend and to intensify their understanding of life. A particular aspect of usefulness is the satisfaction that one student expresses in relating to characters and settings that are *apparently* unfamiliar.

What I experiences in my life, in my world, relates to what other people experiences in their world. I find it interesting to discover the similarities beyond the differences. (N1)

Fiction provides this reader with representations of the interrelatedness of her own and other people’s lives, and these are not threatening but interesting. This is clearly a sophistication of the adolescent reader’s search for self-confirmation in fiction that deals with “the fantasy of being unique [which] is inseparable from the fear of being different” (Appleyard, 1991:106). All the same, it is worth stopping for a moment to consider the possibility of an over-reporting of socially desirable responses. I do so by looking at Vincent Greaney and Susan Neuman’s comparative study of reading amongst 10 and 13 year olds. It led them to identify three “quite distinct factors” that were reported as motivating reading, namely utility, enjoyment and escape (Greaney & Neuman, 1990:191). Greaney and Neuman concluded that reading to learn was important for all ‘cultures’ but that it had different functions, with more mention of ‘to help my

country' and 'to pass exams' in developing countries. They developed categories after asking school-age pupils to write an essay on "Why I like to read". The assumption that one does like to read is a serious flaw in their research design. Greaney and Neuman touch on the possibility that their essay title created biases towards socially desirable responses, but they uphold the validity of their categories and their statistics. Despite the questions in my own research being framed to be neutral about the value or non-value of reading, the question about which literature, if any, students had experienced may seem to demonstrate an expectation, despite explicit wording to the contrary, that people do have experience of reading. Given that the questionnaire was answered at an educational institution, rather than, say, at an ice hockey match or in their home villages, the respondents may also safely assume that the questioner believes that reading is socially desirable. One must therefore bear in mind that these expectations may have encouraged the selective reporting of the students' reading experience.

I now turn to a consideration of the students as writers, with a particular focus on academic literacy and the challenges of using learner English and someone else's words.

8.5 The students as writers

8.5.1 Differing academic literacies

The Norwegian students, and especially those who had worked with me before, were familiar with the idea of writing an immediate informed response to a literary text, and the non-critical reaction that their writing would receive. Writing is used for different and perhaps fewer functions in the Eritrean classroom than it is in Norway, and writing one's personal opinion, in the sense of an individual standpoint distinct from that of one's co-students, is not usually one of them. At the beginning of the first response session I asked the Eritrean students if they were used to a choice of writing tasks. A student offered the observation that they were used to choice, but "not used to writing about what we have not learned". In Norway, by contrast, students are frequently called on to express their spontaneous response to educational activities and texts, and variation in their response is both expected and encouraged. Furthermore, they are expected, when required, to be willing and able to put their response into writing.

Matzke describes a culture of secrecy cultivated in the field as a continuation of "the ancient practice of withholding one's deeper thoughts and feelings" (Matzke, 2003:205), and the expectation that one can give an individualized opinion runs counter to such a practice. Eritrean students are indeed experienced at expressing an opinion, but this opinion is required to be consistent with the nationalist rhetoric, whether perceived as an externally imposed requirement or as a personal conviction. Bearing in mind that the Eritrean students are enrolled in military units, one may find similarities between the classroom situation and a scene recounted in a war

testimonial entitled *The Final War*. Neither the text itself, which consistently presents the young Eritrean fighters as fearless, impassioned, successful and, above all, loyal, nor the military commanders it describes, invite alternative opinions:

During the meeting, the company commander Tombossa stated that Zero-hour was at 4:00 a.m. At the end, he gave the members a chance to express their opinions. Wedi Azera, the platoon commander, raised his hand for a chance to speak. He said, “We will do our best, and pass away after performing historic feats”. (Zeratsion, 2003:36)

When it comes to what sort of writing activity students are familiar with, Eritrean pupils, as well as students at EIT, are used to filling exercise books and sheets of lined paper with notes copied from the blackboard, which they reproduce in exams and tests, often verbatim. Pupils in secondary school in Norway take notes from textbooks in preparation for tests, whereas some students of English at HUC do not take notes in class unless the teacher requires them to do so, and they then formulate these notes in their own words. For many of the Norwegian students extensive writing is therefore an academic activity primarily associated with answering written assignments for assessment. The Eritrean students were more used to writing long texts by hand than were most of the Norwegian students, who are, I assume, more used to writing electronically. Writing at speed is not a skill that the Norwegian education system emphasises.

In a joint US-Eritrean research project in which students wrote biographical narratives, Ghirmai Negash found that the Eritrean students “tend to produce abstract and less emotional writing, or more commonly to produce narratives that read as a translated version of their first language” (Chait & Negash, 2007:249). Whilst Norwegian student texts can also read as translated versions of their first language, it is not necessarily the case that they produce abstract and less emotional writing. People in Norway are familiar with English in songs and films, genres where the expression of emotion is often central. Over the years it has transpired that not a few students of English at HUC write poetry and lyrics in English, and one of the students in the present group wrote poetry. This suggests that expressing one’s thoughts and emotions in English is to a considerably lesser extent using ‘someone else’s words’ for a student in Norway than it is for Eritrean students.

A writing workshop run by Jon Smidt at EIT was attended by many of the Eritrean students in the present study. The workshop participants drafted and reworked a text in English based on their experiences of home life. Commenting afterwards, one participant wrote, “Honestly, from today I learned how to look in things from different ways. For me this day will be an impetus to join in the world of writers”. Another explained that he used to think writing was difficult, “but now I come to know that it is easy and just start to write”. These comments suggest how little earlier experience they had of themselves as creative writers.

I now turn to a consideration of the influence of the students' first or home language (L1) on their written English.

8.5.2 *Someone else's words*

One can talk of three main groups of non-native English: English as a second language, English as an official language, and English as a foreign language – EFL (Granger, 2002:49). This last Sylviane Granger defines as “English learned primarily in a classroom setting in a non-English-speaking country”. There are many EFLs, she says: German Learner English, Dutch Learner English, and so on. Norwegian Learner English is, then, a form of English learnt in Norway, where Norwegian exerts L1 influence on the English acquired, and it is the English of all but one of the students in the Norwegian group. It is less clear whether Eritrean Learner English has a distinct form, in that there are many different languages in Eritrea (see 7.2.1). However, given the position of Tigrinya as the national lingua franca and as the language in which all the respondents in this study report that they are fluent, it is tenable for the purposes of this study to talk of Tigrinya Learner English, where Tigrinya exerts L1 influence on the English acquired.

On the whole, I felt that I understood the texts of the Norwegian students. This is only partly, I believe, because I know Norwegian and can compensate for the influence of L1 on the Norwegian respondents' English. Rather, the English of the Norwegian students is quite close to Standard English (see also Nacey, 2010). The Eritrean student texts were more challenging since Tigrinya Learner English differs considerably from the grammatical and syntactic norms of standard British or American English.⁶⁸ I mention three ways in which first or second language proficiency in Tigrinya may affect how students write and speak English. One has to do with pronunciation and spelling. Learners of English with Tigrinya as their first or second language sometimes insert vowels in consonant clusters, /nesties/ for ‘nests’, for example. One has to do with punctuation. Tigrinya L1 speakers show uncertainty in their use of commas, full stops and capital letters. Tigrinya does not have sentence units which start with a capital letter and end with a full stop. The main punctuation marker is a four-point ‘stop’ which occurs after units of

⁶⁸ At a conference entitled “Mapping Africa in the English speaking World”, in Gaborone, Botswana in June, 2009, African scholars repeatedly proposed that there is no Standard English, but only a range of varieties. This is a complex debate which I cannot properly explore here. When I worked as a teacher in Kenya in the mid-eighties I was determined *not* to impose British English but to encourage local varieties of English, but I have come to see that this position is not welcomed by many African learners of English, despite its currency amongst African academics. I risk the generalisation that many students in Africa (and clearly most African academics, too, when it comes down to it) want to write in an English that has high social status. Although proudly self-determined in so many fields, I do not find that the Eritrean respondents in this project are deliberately using an Eritrean variety of English. On the contrary, my impression is that Eritrean academics and learners of English strive to model their language on British or American English, and do not wish to retain significant L1 influence in their written and spoken English.

writing much longer than a typical English sentence. Tigrinya learner English also involves syntactical challenges, one of which is the passive voice, which is not found in Tigrinya.

Problematic for many Norwegian learners is subject-verb agreement, where they tend to omit the third-person 's', and the present progressive, which they tend to overuse (see for example Hasselgård, Johansson and Lysvåg, 1998:184, Simensen, 2008:22 and Swan & Smith, 2001:30-31). Another difficulty which is to be found in the student texts in this material is uncertainty about what constitutes a full sentence, and the appropriate use of commas and full stops.

In the following review I look at some of the interpretive challenges that instances of non-standard English entailed, touching on three aspects of Tigrinya Learner English, which I term lexical substitution, unintentional ambiguity, and syntactic deviation. The interpretive dilemmas that they pose can be illustrated with a few examples, all of which are taken from the student texts about "Anisino". In writing about them I make recourse to other words and expressions that I believe more clearly express the meaning that the writer intended. It is important to illustrate this process, since it clearly has implications for the validity of my interpretation.

In my first example the writer has chosen the word *departs* where his intention, I believe, was to express the meaning *arises*: "Childhood is the sweetest and unforgettable part of our age. What one does during this age *departs* from innocence" (E1, italics added). In the co-text the writer expresses a very positive image of childhood, seeing it as a time when one behaves innocently, when what one does derives from a state of innocence. The literal idea he expresses, however, is the opposite, namely that childhood is a time in which one departs from, or leaves behind, innocence. There is of course a potential pitfall here, namely that I risk dismissing an intended but to me unexpected meaning. Perhaps the writer really does mean to say that what one does in childhood involves leaving innocence behind, even though his co-text makes this an unlikely interpretation.

Ambiguity also arises when the writer chooses a word that he sees as having one meaning, but where the anomalous syntax of his sentence allows for multiple meanings. The ambiguity thus achieved is, I assume, not intended. Here is one such example: "(The story is about) adolescent love that *matches* the girl and the boy during their early age" (E11, italics added). The word *matches* is ambiguous here. One contributory factor to this ambiguity is that it is concrete entities that typically collocate as the subject for the verb 'match' rather than abstract ones like 'adolescent love'. That aside, one possible meaning is that the girl and the boy become a unit – they are brought together by adolescent love and they become partners. This does not say anything about whether the girl and the boy are well-suited to each other. However it is also possible that the writer *is* using 'matches' to say that the girl and the boy do suit each

other well, that they complement or are similar to each other. We find this use of *match* in the cliché ‘They were a perfect match for each other’. As a verb we find it in expressions like ‘Your shoes match your dress’. The one sense of *match* is no more probable than the other here and there is little help to be gained from the co-text, which refers to other themes in the story. I must therefore accept both meanings of this response as possible, although the writer presumably did not intend the sentence to be ambiguous. The pitfall in so doing is that the student’s text becomes overloaded with meaning, and that any interpretation based on this ambiguity can only be tentative.

Yet more challenging are sentences which deviate considerably from the syntax of Standard English. The material contains several sentences such as, “(The story is about) How students were worried to go to school absolutely free where the Ethiopians soldier could not give them mind freedom” (E2). The syntactical relationship between the lexical units is obscure. I presume that the writer probably intended to say something like “(The story is about) how students, who should have been absolutely free, were worried to go to school because the Ethiopian soldiers would not allow them to think and speak their mind freely”. But this presumption imposes my own understanding of the text on the student’s text, thereby making it so ‘readerly’, to use Barthes’ term, that it would become my text more than the writer’s. Rather than assert a readerly meaning, I choose to regard sentences with this type of anomalous syntax as a mind map. The component ideas are there – Ethiopian soldiers, freedom of thought, worried students, going to school – but the connection between them is not clear.

Although the Norwegian student texts posed considerably less challenge, there are several instances of lexical substitution. Here are a couple of examples, which could be confusing. Firstly: “(This story is about) appreciating good things *in the moment*, because you never know when *they* might be gone” (N6, italics added). The phrase ‘in the moment’ could be ambiguous because of its typical deictic reference. Literally, N6 is saying that we should appreciate aspects of a particular moment in time. But the co-text makes it probable that she means something more general, namely that we should appreciate good things when they happen, a ‘Carpe Diem’ ethos that has strong currency in Norway. More complicated is the following example: “(This story is about) a friendship that breaks with conventional borders set by other people” (N10). N10 has used ‘borders’ as the object that follows ‘breaks with’. Two sources of confusion are at work here. For one thing, ‘break with’ constitutes the base of an English idiom that frequently collocates with ‘convention’, as in “Nora broke with convention and left her husband”. Here it seems likely that the epithet ‘conventional’ rather than the noun ‘borders’ has influenced the choice of verb. The second confusion concerns the word ‘border’, where ‘limitations’ or

perhaps ‘boundaries’ would have been a more appropriate choice. This confusion presumably arises because several English concepts – limits, borders and boundaries – correspond to the Norwegian word *grenser*.

8.6 Concluding remarks

The survey revealed that Norwegian students have more experience of written literature than the Eritrean students, some of whom reported no experience of written literature before tertiary education, but considerably more experience of oral literature than the Norwegian students. In both groups there was at least one aspiring poet. Furthermore, it seems that whilst English is an academic language for the Eritrean students, it is both an academic and an expressive language for the Norwegian students.

There was a tendency for the Eritrean students to mark the ‘extreme’ scores of 1 and 6 more often than the Norwegian students. Seeing a play was the most popular activity for the students in Norway, whereas both seeing a play and listening to poetry were the most prized of all literary activities by the students in Eritrea, poetry being a literary form of which they had had considerable earlier experience and which they liked best, along with drama. Both groups, then, were positive to all the activities and they also found all the activities except seeing a play and listening to poetry slightly more useful than enjoyable. A striking difference is the genre of the texts that the students had particularly enjoyed, with nearly all the Eritrean students choosing a poem, and nearly all the Norwegians choosing a novel. What similarities there are in the experience and expectations of the students towards literature lie in how students value literature for “matter before manner, subject before style” (Lindfors, 1995:96). They also rate how enjoyable and useful fiction is, be it Eritrean, African or Western, very similarly. However, we have also seen that Eritrean and Norwegian students value the “matter” of literature differently. This is more thoroughly illustrated and explored in Part Three: Response.

Working in L2, and sometimes in L3, influences what the students are capable of expressing, and how well other users of English can understand them. In making what Abbott (2008) calls an intentional reading of the student texts I respect what I believe the respondents intended to say, and attempt to be consistently non-judgemental of their learner English. There are potential pitfalls as I try to reconstruct the intention of the writer, namely that I may overinterpret or misinterpret the student’s text. One way in which this risk can be reduced, at least for the Eritrean students, is to consider their texts as arising in the space of the literary in Eritrea, the subject of the next chapter, to which we now turn.

9 The literary context in Eritrea

9.1 Introduction

9.1.1 *An overview*

This chapter is about the context in which the literary texts in this study have arisen and it deals with all literature that one can call Eritrean. This introductory section includes a sketch of two ways in which one can talk about African literature, and Eritrean literature in particular, and a consideration of what ‘Eritrean’ means in this context. The bigger literary context includes oral literature, as well as written and printed literature in Eritrean languages. To the extent that oral literature has made up the literary experience of the Eritrean students, its presentation here contributes to an understanding of the expectations that they bring to their reading of literature. The smaller context has to do with Eritrean literature in English, and is particularly important inasmuch as the three literary texts in this study are drawn from this body of works. Again this has particular relevance for the Eritrean students, since in the year prior to their participation in this study they had taken a course on Eritrean literature, where they studied a number of texts from this small body of literature. I attempt to present a comprehensive survey of Eritrean literature in English to show where the three texts in this study belong. This survey makes apparent how small a body of works my discussion builds on. The paucity of titles may have to do with the economic priorities of a very young and impoverished nation, with the low prestige of English (Ahmed, 1995:10), or with the low level of in-country literary literacy.

This chapter has two main parts. Section 9.2 provides an overview of what there is of Eritrean literature, discussed under the headings of oral literature in African and Eritrea, written literature in Tigrinya, theatre and drama, and literature in English. This section includes a discussion of the challenges of translating a text so that it becomes available to a target audience for whom the language and culture are unfamiliar. The other main part is section 9.3, in which I take a stride back to consider how the literary context relates to the larger political context described in chapter 6. I start with McCormick’s term ‘literary ideologies’, which I find useful in comparing how the space of the literary is variously constituted in different nations. I then ask whether national literature is a reflection or a representation of a nation, and, if the role of national literature is to represent the nation, why some literary texts in Eritrea are promoted, and not others. I argue that what there is in English is not a random collection of texts, but a deliberate selection targeting a readership abroad. In sections 9.3.4 and 9.3.5 I look at official and alternative narratives about the conditions for writing and publishing in Eritrea. In section 9.3.6 I consider whether comparing Eritrean literature with some other African literatures can

contribute towards an understanding of what Eritrean literature is, and in 9.3.7 I discuss the intended audience of Eritrean literature in English and ask who actually reads this literature. Let me start, however, by considering whose voice counts where, when it comes to talking about African literature, and in so doing position myself as a commentator on Eritrean literature.

9.1.2 *Ways of talking about African literature*

Wole Soyinka once wrote that theories and prescriptions, when applied by Westerners to African literature, become a form of colonisation where individuals impose abstractions “derived from *their* world and *their* history, *their* social neuroses and *their* value systems” (cited in Miller, 2007:444, original italics). Soyinka and Chinua Achebe have pointed out how peculiarly African it is that ‘African literature’ was written for and mostly read by people outside the continent, and Soyinka regards “the external eye” as an additional post-colonial infliction. Biodun Jeyifo argues with great force that Africa is peculiarly post-colonised by non-African literary critics (Jeyifo, 2007:434). In the following I reproduce and comment on Jeyifo’s argument, for it has relevance to how I approach Eritrean literature in English, both in this chapter and in the thesis as a whole.

In “The Nature of Things: Arrested Decolonization and Critical Theory”, Jeyifo sets out to show that “the traditions of critical discourse on African literature that we have ‘inherited’ [...] raise serious problems with regard to the survival and vitality of its object, African literature” (2007:433). There are, he says, two supposedly distinct camps – the foreign European or North American critic and the native African. What Jeyifo does is to give us a language for understanding this confrontational dispute in a way that allows both parties, African writers and non-African critics, their respective functions and their rights. Jeyifo draws a distinction that overrules and theorises the insider/outsider dichotomy that Soyinka found so infuriating. Instead he distinguishes between Africanist and nationalist criticism. Typical of the Africanist position is a concern with rigour, academic standards, aesthetic evaluation, and a dislike of external non-literary concerns. Typical of nationalist literary theory is its advocacy of just such ‘external’ concerns. Nationalist literary discourse is concerned with constructing a socialist state from a position of post-colonial underdevelopment. As a theory of literature – for it is as much that as it is a political theory – Jeyifo identifies Ngugi wa Thiong’o as its seminal thinker.

The difference between nationalist and Africanist understandings of literature is less extreme than one might think, writes Jeyifo, because most non-African Africanists are politically liberal, whilst most African Africanists tend to be politically conservative (2007:440). Furthermore, many nationalists are also concerned with form and aesthetic evaluation. According to Jeyifo, the problem is not so much that there are two competing understandings of literature, but that

Africanists have a much stronger position and a very narrow agenda, namely to win respectability and legitimacy for the discipline in the West. Behind the claims and counterclaims of these two camps is a hugely unequal power relation. Jeyifo applauds Steven Arnold for recognising that “a very serious imbalance exists in the funding of research on African literatures. Non-Africans can get money to do what Africans often could do better, yet the Africans must sit and watch it get done” (1985:60, cited in Jeyifo 2007:437). Jeyifo describes this as the great paradox of African literature studies.

In the deafening silence on the connection between demands for critical fidelity or rigorous analytical techniques and the positions of entrenched power and privilege (or lack of them) from which any scholar or critic evaluates or theorizes, only feminist critics, and to a lesser extent, Marxists, have systematically drawn attention to the political grounding or *situatedness* of critical discourse. (2007:441)

Himself a Nigerian who has worked for forty years in prestigious universities in the US, Jeyifo puts words to the emotional and intellectual dilemma of the out-of-African literary critic, be s/he Africanist or nationalist:

Whatever genuine “truths” our studies and readings generate, there is always the uncomfortable, compromising “falsehood” of its massive displacement from its true center of gravity on the African continent, there is always the harrowing “falsehood” involved in the production and reproduction of Africa’s marginalization from the centers of economic and discursive power. (Jeyifo:2007:441-442)

In Norway the expression ‘to swallow a camel’ has come to mean that one accepts an injustice or a breach of one’s principles in order to achieve what one believes to be a greater good. An awareness of the falsehood of which Jeyifo writes is the camel I must swallow in order to continue my discussion of Eritrean literature, a strangely appropriate image, as the hard-working and self-sufficient camel is the national emblem of Eritrea.

9.1.3 *When is Eritrean literature Eritrean?*

Both in choosing the literary texts and in discussing the literary context of these texts it is necessary to define Eritrean literature. Although such a definition must be grounded in Eritrea, one can move towards it by glancing at the debate in Africa about what constitutes African literature. A much-cited conference in 1962 held in Makere in Uganda, and continued at Fourah Bay in Sierra Leone, drew the tentative conclusion that literature was African by virtue of its setting and topic, thereby using characteristics of the work and not of the author as criteria. Later definitions, such as that formulated in 2000 for the entry terms of the Zimbabwean Book Fair project to nominate Africa’s hundred best books, identify an African author by his or her

place of birth or nationality (2002).⁶⁹ This criterion, though apparently broad, is in fact problematic when applied to the Eritrean case, because Eritrea was formally a province of Ethiopia from 1962 until 2001.

For the purpose of portraying the literary context of the texts in this study, an Eritrean writer is anyone who lays claim to being Eritrean, whether living in the country or abroad. Certainly living abroad does not disqualify writers in the eyes of the government or the people, it would seem. Reesom Haile who spent most of his adult life abroad, was acknowledged and prized by the people and the government as the de facto poet laureate (Zeitlin, 2003:8). Bereket Habte Selassie was born near Asmara, and is one of many prominent Eritreans who have studied in Ethiopia.⁷⁰ In 1948 he left for London to continue his studies, referring to himself there as an Ethiopian student. Also in 1964, on entering the USA where he now lives, he answered a question about where he was from by saying that he was from Ethiopia (Selassie, 2007: 199). Yet he was committed to the Eritrean cause and led the commission that formulated the Constitution of Eritrea.⁷¹ In his note to the paperback edition of *Riding the Whirlwind* he writes of how a prominent Ethiopian told him that “‘despite your Eritrean nationalist claims, you are still an Ethiopian at heart’. On the contrary, it is because of my involvement, commitment and dedication”, says Selassie, “that I account myself Eritrean” (B. H. Selassie, 1993).

A local definition was offered by Ghirmai Negash, who, before he left Eritrea for the US, was head of the department of Eritrean literature at the University of Asmara. He envisaged that the department would offer courses and pursue research in all Eritrean languages,⁷² arguing that “any African university education without some grounding in local languages, literature and culture can be seen as baseless” (Tekle, 2004:6). Eritrean literature was defined in the curriculum simply as literature in an Eritrean language (i.e. not in English).⁷³ Another ambition of the department was to “create a national archive of all the extant literature within the country, including its precious heritage of oral literature” (2004). The current social and

⁶⁹ Notice, incidentally, that this definition too was arrived at after extensive discussion, and that it includes writers from the entire continent, not only sub-Saharan Africa.

⁷⁰ For a period of thirty years the so-called ‘federation’ between Ethiopia and Eritrea meant that students travelled freely between the universities of Ethiopia and the branch of the University of Addis Ababa in Asmara. In 2000 nearly all Eritreans were thrown out of Ethiopia, including Eritrean students at Ethiopian universities.

⁷¹ Many writers born in Africa live abroad, by choice or by necessity. Buchi Emecheta, Ben Okri and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie are just three of many who are deemed Nigerian, although they have written and published all their work outside Africa, and lived their adult lives in the UK.

⁷² The exclusion of European languages can be understood in the light of this being a relatively small department, finding its place in the shadow of the well-established Department of English, which was one of the biggest at the University, with around twenty-five national and expatriate staff.

⁷³ The Department was approved by the Senate of the University of Asmara in June 2003. As a ‘unit’ it had been offering courses since the autumn of 2001, but as a department it was stillborn. All new students were redirected to the EIT, where a very small department of Eritrean languages and literature was running in 2008.

political situation is, as I have shown in chapter 6, unable to provide the research conditions or the funding necessary to achieve this ambition.

9.2 An overview of Eritrean literature

I organise this presentation of Eritrean literature under four headings:

- 1) **oral literature** from all of the ethnic groups, an indefinite, expanding, remembered body of texts which interact more or less with print media, and to which I have access only through the experience and writing of others.
- 2) **theatre and drama.** Drama refers to scripted dialogue-based theatre. Theatre is a broader term which includes performances that are not based on scripted dialogue and where “boundaries between story-telling, music, song, dance, and theatrical enactment [...] frequently blur. Poetry is sung, songs are danced, and dances can tell a story” (Matzke, 2003:53).
- 3) literature other than drama that is **written and published in Tigrinya.** Most Eritrean literature is in Tigrinya except for a little in Tigré and Arabic.
- 4) Eritrean **literature in English** is a written category, including both texts that are translated from Eritrean languages and those first written in English.

It is important to understand these categories as convenient rather than as closed, and to recognise that very many of the texts presented here relate to more than one of these four headings. Two examples may illustrate this point. Some of the stories which reach a literate audience after being collected, transcribed and translated from local oral performers and storytellers have their antecedents in written texts (see for example 10.2.1). These stories were perhaps first told, then written, then brought to Africa and finally found their way to Eritrea, where they were told, before being again written. My other example is more specific. At a writing workshop at EIT the Eritrean author Alemseged Tesfai read one of his own stories to a group of students. He behaved in some ways like an oral storyteller, looking up from the written text to demonstrate the facial expression of one of the characters, to the appreciative laughter of the students, which he acknowledged with a smile. He also threw in asides in Tigrinya, which seemed to help his audience make sense of the English text, and certainly made them laugh.⁷⁴ When he had finished reading, a member of staff suggested that he should simplify the

⁷⁴ At a literary evening in Oslo that I attended, Norwegian authors read their own texts. Their behaviour showed a ‘non-oral’ dynamic. The Oslo audience chuckled at appropriate points, as though to show their appreciation and encouragement, but none of the readers looked up to acknowledge the audience response. The texts here were finished, products of their creator-readers, and not open for recreation in performance.

language of his text. Although the author later expressed dissatisfaction with this suggestion, it is hard to conceive that it would have been voiced at all at a literary reading in Norway.

9.2.1 *Oral literature in Africa*

Oral literature is understood as performed literature – spoken, recited, shouted or very frequently sung, and indeed “a piece of oral literature, to reach its full actualisation, *must be performed*. The text alone cannot constitute the oral poem” (Finnegan, 1992:28). The idea that oral literature belongs to a long tradition from the primeval mists of the infancy of the human race is now out of favour (1992:20). Indeed in her most recent work Finnegan argues forcefully that the assumptions that all oral literature shares a common identity, and that it is radically different from written literature, need to be examined carefully. Finnegan has crystallised her understanding that oral literature differs from written forms “chiefly in the matter of its being *performed*” (Finnegan, 2007:102, original italics). Yet for some largely illiterate and itinerant communities, such as the Afar in Eritrea and Ethiopia, her earlier definition would seem apposite, namely that oral poetry “essentially circulates by oral rather than written means; [...] its distribution, composition or performance are by word of mouth and not through reliance on the written or printed word” (Finnegan, 1992:16), and that transmission to new performers is often an important aspect of oral performance (1992:19). Finnegan explains that oral poetry is the creation both of a particular community and of a particular individual. Wary of sweeping generalisations, she urges that “for a full appreciation of the effect and context of poetry in any culture, some attention must be given not just to obvious topics like occasion, audience or performers, but also to local ideas about the genesis, purpose and meaning of poetry” (1992:241).

The categories oral/written have a huge interface. Finnegan notes that “there is now also a deepening understanding of the interaction of oral and written forms as a regular and unsurprising process across a multi-dimensional continuum, rather than as something which involves bridging some deep divide” (Finnegan, 2007: xiii). But already in 1977 she insisted that being written did not pose a threat to oral literature: “There is no evidence that writing an oral form detracts from its oral force or life. This is a romantic myth” (1992:160). Finnegan also points out the importance of intermediality, and its role in circulating and keeping oral poetry alive, taking examples from Africa and the Middle East where ‘oral poetry’ is broadcast on radio (Finnegan, 1992:23). The radio is a means of educating and rallying the nation, and is a vehicle much used by governments with largely illiterate populations. B.W. Andrzejewski, who specialised in Somali literature, notes that where poetry is widely used as public entertainment it can also have an impact on the political situation. For this reason it can be dangerous to

investigate, but the use of poetry in politics, whether local or national, is widespread (Andrzejewski, 1985:39). Andrzejewski makes the generalisation that in most African societies there is a hierarchy of genres, and that there seems to be a general tendency for poetic genres to be among the most highly prized (1985:45).

As well as poetry, oral literature also includes genealogies, historical accounts, fables, proverbs, riddles and war cries. A few words about the fable are appropriate at this point, since a fable is one of the three literary texts in this project. The fable is a ‘mixed’ oral-written genre if ever there was one, encompassing both a two thousand year old Indian literature and a migratory oral genre. In his authoritative work on African oral literature, Isadore Okpewho categorises the large variety of tales in Africa in terms of their overriding interest or aim. Typical of the fable, he says, is that the narrator “basically aims to entertain by exposing the audience to the aesthetic delights of the tale and leaving them free to derive whatever message they see fit” (Okpewho, 1992:221).

9.2.2 *Oral literature in Eritrea*

When it comes to oral literature in Eritrea, the academic sources are few: five studies of the oral literature of Eritrean-Ethiopian ethnic groups (Deressa, 1995; Haile, 1995; Hailemichael, 1995; G. Negash, 2003; Parker, 1971), Matzke’s ethnographic review of performance genres, including poetry and theatre (2003), an article which makes reference to the collections of oral literature made by a nineteenth century linguistic scholar named Leo Reinitzsch, who worked with the Afar, Saho and Bilen people, all of whom live in today’s Eritrea (referred to in Mantel-Niećko, 1985:417-421) and one regional study of the oral poetry of the Horn of Africa (Mantel-Niećko, 1985). Fascinating as these studies are, I must restrict my discussion to the role of oral literature in contemporary Eritrea, as this undoubtedly constitutes an important context for the Eritrean students’ reception of written literary texts in English.

Poems, usually sung in connection with ceremonial occasions such as marriage and funerals, are an integral part of Tigrinya culture. Gifted performers compose rhyming poems for each particular occasion, and the poems, celebratory or elegiac, are valued both for their verbal artistry and their delivery. Habtewold Mmsgna Zerea, a veteran of the war of independence and also of the 1998-2000 war, a student of English, a painter and a flautist, also composes and performs poetry. In his view an oral poet must have three skills: he must give expression to ennobling and comforting ideas; he must demonstrate a mastery of poetic diction, rhythm and rhyme; and he must have good delivery, which in practice means that he must sing well and be able to communicate with his audience. In successful poems, he says, “the words fill the music”

(pc). Most of the poems he sings are *qine* (*q'ne* or *qene*) (see G. Negash, 2003:13-15). Such poems frequently have both a literal and a metaphorical meaning: they are “wax and gold” (Matzke, 2003:xi).

When it comes to the status of oral poetry in Eritrea, Negash sees the future of oral literature as dependent on the place that it will find in an increasingly literate society. His fieldwork in 1995 convinced him that oral poetry was still thriving, for he found more than one hundred active oral poets, performers, oral historians and storytellers. They emphasised “the importance of preserving and living out what they called the ‘wisdom, heritage, skill, custom, culture’ of the ‘ancestors’, and constantly display connections with the latter even as they act as cultural-bridges between tradition and modernity” (G. Negash, 2003:28). Negash also documents that many new poems were being created and performed at social events, and that the war of independence was a theme in many of them. With the 1998-2000 war there has been a return to nationalist themes. Matzke observed a striking example when

During a three-day poetry competition at the Eritrea Festival 2000, the only female presenter on the first evening was a nine-year old girl who performed her poetry [...] to great acclaim. Her verse was belligerent anti-Ethiopian war poetry, entirely of her own making, as she repeatedly confirmed. (Matzke, 2003:151)

Eritrean poetry is, according to Cantalupo, extraordinarily popular. Recalling a performance by Reesom Haile, he writes:

In my experience up until then, poetry readings did not draw thousands of people to fill stadiums, the way that Reesom’s did in Eritrea. His work was a kind of common currency or daily bread for Eritreans in those days, and I mean all kinds of Eritreans: not just writers or literary people but young and old, professionals and laborers, men and women, the educated and the illiterate, journalists and government workers, politicians and priests. I saw drunks on the streets of Asmara at 3:00 a.m. and children in the remote Eritrean countryside recognize him immediately and warmly greet him, yet not by his name but by repeating the phrase, “Alewuna, Alewana [the title and refrain of his most famous poem]. (Cantalupo & Kotzin, 2008:9)

But oral literature is more than poetry. Proverbs, which the Afar people call the ‘cream of language’ (Matzke 2003:47), is another form of oral literature that is apparently ubiquitous in Eritrea across ethnic groups. There are a great many. In 1949 Yacob Ghebreyesus produced an anthology of oral literature which includes 3,300 proverbs (G. Negash, 1999:191). Connell writes that members of the EPLF recorded oral histories from tribal elders in the villages during the 1980s, in the belief “that national social and economic reform had to grow out of and extend this heritage” (Connell, 1997:252).

Tales and fables are communally owned and interactively recreated at each telling. In his introduction to *Sagor och fabler som berättas i Eritrea* (1996)⁷⁵, Eyob Tecele draws a picture of

⁷⁵ *Stories and fables that are told in Eritrea*

families gathering together in the centre of the village to sit by the light of the moon or a fire to tell and listen to folktales. “Grandparents on both sides often told tales about the cunning wild animals of the area, about powerful chiefs and about inter-tribal wars” (Tecele, 1996:6). Tecele sees this tradition as being weakened by what he calls ‘foreign cultures’. In his view, oral tradition provides both entertainment and cultural and moral instruction. It provides the listener with role models and the chance to understand love and hate, safety and danger. And it also has educational value, inasmuch as listening to stories sharpens children’s attention and functions as an introduction to written literature. Yonas M. Asfaha observed a primary school teacher whose Tigrinya lessons usually included folk tales told by a volunteer pupil (Asfaha, 2009:76). When Ingunn Bjørndal spoke with a group of teachers, the conversation turned to indigenous education, and one teacher said:

Traditional education is used by means of stories, poems, songs. People sit together at night. The children are gaining knowledge from this not to be a fool. Especially in rural areas. It is not only for satisfaction. They get learning from this. Our mothers – “once upon a time” ... the story telling was a lesson. Even the children can catch it automatically if you tell them by means of a song, a poem.” (Bjørndal, 2002:177)

Andrzejewski makes the generalisation that animal fables in Africa are often intended for children and do not have the same prestige as prose narratives with historical themes, intended for adults (Andrzejewski, 1985:38). I think he may well be wrong when it comes to Eritrea, for I have seen, for example, Tesfa G. Gebremedhin, a US-based agricultural economist of Eritrean heritage,⁷⁶ use a fable in order to rouse parents to deal with miscreant Eritrean youth. After telling the story he continues:

So, the next time we hear that someone, an Eritrean, is facing some kind of youth-parent relationship problem and think that it does not directly or indirectly concern us, let’s remember that it was the same ill-concern and negative thinking that put the pig, the chicken, and the cow into serious trouble. We have to be aware that when the least of us is threatened, we all may be at risk just like the animals in the story. (Gebremedhin, s.a.)

Though it is difficult for an outsider to substantiate such a claim, I find it very likely that for most people in Eritrea, oral literature is the literature of which they have most experience, and which makes the most significant contribution to their sense of individual and ethnic identity. Speaking of the continent as a whole, the respected theorist of African literature Abiola Irene writes:

There is an obvious sense in which it [oral literature] can be considered as the ‘true’ literature of Africa. It is the literature that is still the most widespread and with which the majority of Africans, even today, are in constant touch, and it represents that form of expression to which African sensibilities are most readily attuned. The reason for this is not far to seek, for despite the impact of literacy, orality is still the dominant mode of communication on the continent, and it

⁷⁶ He is also the author of *Women, Tradition and Development: A case study of Eritrea* (2002) (see 6.4.1).

determines a particular disposition of the imagination of a different order from that conditioned by literacy. (Irele, 2007:11)

9.2.3 *Written Tigrinya literature*

The relative dominance of Tigrinya literature reflects the fact that Tigrinya, which is spoken and written in both Eritrea and Ethiopia, has a long history as a written language. “After Ge’ez and Amharic, Tigringa has been a written language for longer than any other Ethiopian language. The quantity of printed material in Tigringa is second only to that of Amharic” (Demoz, 1995:30). Similarly, Joana Mantel-Niećko claims that “after Amharic, Tigrinya is without doubt the language best adapted for written transmission, both of traditional material and that arising from the changes brought about by civilization and cross-cultural contacts” (Mantel-Niećko, 1985:324).

The presentation in this section is based on Negash’s work. He defines Tigrinya literature as “all oral and written texts in the language that are recognised and experienced as literature in the community” (G. Negash, 1999:76) and justifies for example the inclusion of an autobiographical prose text on the grounds of its “special linguistic mastery and artistic literary craftsmanship” (1999:87).

Negash traces the first writing in Tigrinya to the period when Eritrea was colonised by the Italians, and finds two genres: short texts about journeys to and in Eritrea, and biblical translations. The first written literary work in Tigrinya, and in fact the first modern Ethiopian literature, was a travelogue published in Italy in 1895. In the next twenty years the few works that were published were typically collections of stories or oral poems, and all were published in Europe. In the following period, from 1917 until 1942, very little was published, but then, in 1942, under the new British administration, a newspaper was started – *Eritrean Weekly News*. The vigorous chief editor Weldeab Weldemariam is credited with having had a great impact on the development of the written Tigrinya language, and the newspaper facilitated much good writing, not least political poetry and essays. It is these essays, says Negash, which helped the Tigrinya novel into existence (1999:120). “It is desperately hard to track down the exact sociological, educational, publication and literary climates in which the Tigrinya novel emerged” (1999:122), and he refers to the Italian ownership of the printing press in Eritrea as a major constraint. However the period 1949-1975 saw the publication of a dozen or so novels, and two novelists in particular have made a lasting mark: Musa Aron, “probably the best known Tigrinya novelist of all times” (1999:153), and Beyene Haile. Neither of them is translated into English.

Whilst Musa Aron has ‘good’ and ‘bad’ characters and seeks to involve his readers in what

he perceives as serious threats to Eritrean morality and social structure, Beyene Haile is concerned that art be more than life, and that its “usefulness be aesthetic rather than educational” (1999:152). No Tigrinya writer before or since has proposed the unorthodoxy that being educational is not a primary function of good literature. Apart from Haile, the novelists writing in this period are concerned with contemporary life and though only one of them is a woman, issues relating to motherhood, morality and marriage are central in several of the novels. In addition this period saw the translation of Western classics into Tigrinya – Defoe and Shakespeare, amongst others – and this enriched people’s understanding of what literature in Tigrinya could be (1999:143).

The period from 1976 saw the production of political literature, including *The Other War*, one of the three literary texts which the students in this study responded to. Towards the end of the Armed Struggle a flurry of literature, mostly shorter prose texts, was produced for a competition. The texts dealt with issues in Eritrean society, not least the theme of betrayal and defection. A collection of poetry published just a few years later dealt with similar themes: sacrifice, martyrdom, the struggle to be free and the price of the Armed Struggle (1999:196). In addition to this writing from within Eritrea, there were many works of prose written by Eritreans abroad, including at least one fully achieved novel.

When it comes to the current status of Tigrinya literature, we find that despite its more than one hundred years of history, very little is currently being published. Each new text or reprint (and there are only a few every year), is celebrated, it would seem, with a well-attended public launch in Asmara.

Negash bulks out the body of Tigrinya literature in several ways, most surprisingly with the play of Kenya’s probably best-known playwright Ngugi wa Thiong’o. His *I will Marry when I Want* has been translated from its original Gikuyu into English and from English into Tigrinya. Negash describes it as having become “one of Eritrea’s most important contemporary plays” (G. Negash & Cantalupo, 2005:iv), suggesting that he in fact terms whatever is translated into an Eritrean language as ‘Eritrean literature’. Stories from the Bible and Aesop’s fables are also represented as Eritrean in collections of stories and in school readers in English. And of course in one sense they *are* Eritrean, since they have for many hundreds of years been part of the oral tradition. Their identification as Eritrean literature does nonetheless disprove any assumption that local oral literature is unique to, or generated within, Eritrea.

9.2.4 Theatre and drama

This section deals with *The Other War* in its context of production, and describes what experience people in Eritrea have had of drama. To contextualize *The Other War* and to

understand the students' possible earlier experience of the play it is useful to look at the position of theatre and drama in Eritrea and in the EPLF in particular. My presentation draws primarily on Matzke's work (2003). She explains that literary drama had been the prerogative of the Italian, the British and Ethiopian colonizers (2003:196). In Eritrea, as elsewhere in Africa, Western concepts of naturalistic drama have been imposed on performance traditions that were built around music, dance and recitation (Plastow, 1998:100). From the nineteen forties to the seventies there were also urban Tigrinya-language drama associations, which provided many of the writers and performers who later joined the liberation movements (ELF and EPLF). Theatre had always responded to current (often national) events and had always been more or less didactic (Matzke, 2003:6), and until the liberation movements developed theatre and drama to their own ends, drama was a minor and historically alien performance form for most fighters. During the Armed Struggle it became integrated into the work of propaganda and mobilization, and was increasingly seen as an Eritrean form.

The ELF laid the foundation for a unique fighter culture (2003:139), which the EPLF further developed, in reaction to arts activities in the rival organization (2003:157). The EPLF set up a cultural department in 1975. Its revolutionary agenda included the reform of feudal systems of land ownership, gender relations and issues of nutrition and health. Almost all the drama that it produced highlighted the bravery of the fighters, the sacrifices made by and expected of the civilian population and the role of mothers in the struggle for independence (2003:142). A typical EPLF show was staged in the evening by firelight, using hillsides as audience seating, and a built-up, sometimes proscenium, stage (Plastow, 1998:110). Most of these often four-hour-long shows were made up of songs and dances from different ethnic groups, often performed by members of *other* ethnic groups. Fighters reported to Matzke that these performances did indeed make them aware of and value Eritrea's ethnic diversity. Drama was sneaked in during these shows, and could not be longer than the people's patience. That people in rural areas were unfamiliar with staged and scripted drama is evidenced by their not distinguishing between an offstage reality and onstage drama. This sometimes led to the verbal abuse of actors who had played 'wicked' characters (2003:190).

The Strategic Withdrawal in 1979 (see 6.2.1) led to a radical restructuring and professionalization of cultural activities. Early plays had been developed collectively, but gradually scripted texts were used, and cultural troupes handed in manuscripts for evaluation. Tesfai, who had returned from the USA to join the EPLF, was mandated to develop theatre and literature, with the help of the 20 to 30 performers in the EPLF Central Cultural Troupe. There were also other theatre troupes, made up largely of active fighters who put on performances in

the lulls between campaigns. During the 1980s Tesfai was central as a cultural coordinator, as a theorist and as a playwright and journalist. As a strategic theorist he identified social realism as the drama form best suited to serving the ambitions of the Armed Struggle. In his Tigrinya-language work *Literature, its Development and its Role in Revolution* (1982) he combined a Marxist understanding of literature with an insistence that literature must be more than a mechanical representation, that to be interesting it must involve artistry. He emphasised that literature should include the study of other national liberation literatures and of Eritrean national traditional stories and oral poetry, and he advised that it should take civilian and military experience of the Struggle as its raw material. Tesfai became, according to Matzke, “the most influential intellectual concerned with cultural work in the field” (2003:195).

“No matter how much the ‘masses’ were invoked in the struggle, drama in Eritrea was, and has continued to be, a theatre for, not of, the ‘people’”, writes Matzke (2003:205), and it is in her view a benevolent and top-down theatre form. War was and still is the prime theme in the performing arts (2003:152), although the first post-independence period, when the students in this study would have been young children, saw local theatre and drama performances that dealt with other issues, often love and the family. This diversification, as well as a theatre for development project, working *with* rather than *for* the people, led Plastow to write:

Eritrea is a wonderfully dynamic place in which to work. The joy of working in theatre in Africa is that it is important. In countries with strong oral traditions, where access to mass media is often limited and where many are illiterate, theatre has a potential power which we can only long for in the West. (Plastow, 1998:99)

Enthusiasm has now waned, for since the 1998-2000 war there has been a return to a narrow nationalist focus. The PFDJ continues to dominate theatre production. Short Agitprop dramas about the Armed Struggle continue to be an important part of the National Day celebrations and other festivals. To my knowledge, the only post-war drama to have been produced and performed that breaks with this focus is Beyene Haile’s *Weg’i lebi* (see 3.2 and footnote 85).

Matzke is particularly interested in women and theatre, and argues that drama has both reproduced and challenged traditional gender roles. On the one hand performing arts increase the visibility of women (even though girls and women were and sometimes still are discouraged from performing) and treats issues relating to the position of women in the family and the liberation struggle. “Placing their bodies in theatrical spaces – be it through writing, performance or even in inconspicuous background work – is also a claim for more space in other social arenas, contesting customary prescriptions of how women are supposed to act and behave” (Matzke, 2003:33). On the other hand, playwriting and directing, even in plays about women, have been almost completely dominated by men (2003:57). Women in Tigrinya-

language plays from the colonial period were often represented as dependent on men, as scapegoats, as morally inferior, sinful or lost. More positive roles are frequent in liberational Agitprop plays, where the heroic mother figure is a staple, “a woman comfortably settled into her traditional role, yet fighting the colonial enemy with all her available resources” (2003:142). Another staple is the young woman who breaks out of a repressive situation to find new possibilities in the liberation movements. These gender stereotypes can contribute to an understanding of the expectations that the Eritrean students bring to their reading of *The Other War*.

9.2.5 *Eritrean literature in English*

Albert Gérard came up with a definition of national literature as being “made up of all the literary works produced by the citizens of that country (in a broad sense)” (Gérard 1983:89, cited in Oliphant, 2004:23). Although Oliphant found this definition unsatisfactory, “merely a handy way of referring to all the writing produced by writers enfranchised in a state” (Oliphant, 2004:23), it fits the praxis in this section about Eritrean literature in English. The major exception is to exclude “Eritrea Profile”, a newspaper published thrice-weekly in Asmara, even though it includes many poems. I do so for reasons of access and delimitation.⁷⁷

Negash describes the critical responses to Eritrean literature in Tigrinya as being “too scant and too sporadic to serve as the basis of a systematic study”, so that “one is left to rely on one’s own analytical and interpretative strategies” (G. Negash, 1999:44). The same limitations and considerations apply to a study of the much smaller body of English-language literature in Eritrea.

In the hope of gaining some understanding of perceptions of literature in English in Eritrea, I visited the shelves of the main public library, Asmara City Library.⁷⁸ It had about 48 shelf metres of books marked as ‘fiction’. They were mostly paperbacks, including Shakespeare, and nearly all were in English. There were about 30 metres marked ‘literature’, and this was made up mostly of hardback texts and quality-bound paperbacks. The overall impression was that books were classified as fiction or literature on the basis of their material composition. When I visited, the library catalogue had 7751 titles. The works of canonised African novelists such as Achebe, Coetzee and Soyinka were not amongst them, nor were any literary texts in English by Eritrean authors.

⁷⁷ Articles and literary texts in this newspaper are largely written by a full-time team in the Ministry of Information (Susie Asgehedom, pc), and the poems and other literary texts support the ongoing nation-building project.

⁷⁸ Interestingly, this library vacillates between the Eritrean and the Western naming traditions. Books are organized according to the Dewey system, but whilst nearly all authors are Western, they are sometimes placed alphabetically according to the author’s first name.

In bookshops in Asmara, of which there are many, I found that the terms ‘literature’ and ‘fiction’ did not convey my meaning and that my paraphrase of fiction as ‘stories that are not true’ was received with bafflement. When I asked for ‘stories’ I was shown shelves with fiction and non-fiction, Eritrean and Western, shoulder to shoulder with school textbooks and primers. These bookshop encounters, which I first understood as instances of failed communication or categorical confusion, I later reinterpreted as instructive demonstrations of the instrumental position of reading in Eritrea. I also learned that the word *libweled* – ‘something the heart bore’ – is the Tigrinya term used to refer to fiction in general (G. Negash, 1999:123). In the evenings many small enterprises offered English language classes. Several of their offices contained shelves of plain-bound copies of canonical English-language literature. These were used for extensive reading practice and book report writing.

On the basis of these visits, as well as informal conversations with Eritrean readers, I have developed tentative genre categories, and this has involved some fairly ad hoc assumptions as to what constitutes literature. However, as Ashcroft et al. say:

the interaction of English writing with the older traditions of orature or literature in post-colonial societies, and the emergence of a writing which has as a major aim the assertion of social and cultural difference, have radically questioned easy assumptions about the characteristics of the genres we usually employ as structuring and categorizing definitives (novel, lyric, epic, play, etc.). (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2002:20)

The editors of a Polish book about literatures in African languages insist more strongly that “the great variety of genres [...] lays bare the inadequacy of the traditional European genre classifications” (Andrzejewski, Piłaszewicz, & Tyloch, 1985:22). Distinctions between fiction and non-fiction are difficult to maintain, and the classification of texts into literary and non-literary is not helpful, since the same text may be read aesthetically as a literary experience or with a view to its informational value only. Some of the genres I posit are, I suggest, shaped by oral tradition more than by written genres in the West. With the exception of an Ethiopian collection of stories that is included here because it has some stories from Eritrean storytellers, all the texts have been first published since independence in 1993, and all those published in Eritrea have been published in 2002 or later. A comprehensive survey is presented by genre, title, author, and first date and place of publication in Appendix 13. Here, then, are the genres of Eritrean literature in English.

The **poem**. “The region is still very much in ‘the age of poetry’” (Deressa, 1995:182), and poems are the literary form that is most evident on English-language Eritrean websites. There are also a few anthologies. Many poems are commemorative of individuals or the nation, and may be described as examples of *qine*. Combat ballads are another poetic genre. They eulogise the

nation, and are found in liberation testimonials (see below). The Internet is widely used by transnational Eritreans, and given the paucity, inaccessibility and expense of Eritrean books, it may well be the most important arena for the presentation and reception of Eritrean literature, and especially poetry. The writers and readers on special interest sites can live within a cultural enclave, where they can “create and receive their own distinct cultural objects and confine their interactions to those others who share their meaning systems” (Griswold, 2008:157). Griswold remarks that although the Internet is revolutionary in terms of technology, it has “not so much changed cultural practices as reproduced and facilitated them” (2008:151). “The net sets me free/ To think in poetry” rhymes Reesom Haile in his poem “Voice”. “We share the screen/ Like the sun”.⁷⁹

The **tale**. A short piece with a strong fictional plot. Many of the tales that have found their way into writing are fables – “stories centred on animals and other beings and not related to any historical events” (Okpewho, 1992:117). “The Monkey and the Crocodile” is an example of this genre.

The **essay**. Negash identifies this as an early genre in Tigrinya literature (G. Negash, 1999:117). I know of only one example, “The Heart of a Tegadelai”, which is the piece to which my attention was most repeatedly directed when I enquired after Eritrean literature in English. The essay was written in 1988 and inspired by a solitary human heart that Tesfai and some other combatants came across after a decisive Eritrean victory. Tesfai explores the heart as a metaphor for defiance and responsibility. Public debate, however, has apparently often engaged with the question of whether the heart could really have been torn out of a human body. This anecdote about literary reception in Eritrea was told to me with tongue-in-cheek amusement by several Eritrean academics.

The **short narrative**. This genre includes only two authors. There are autobiographical and other texts by Alemseged Tesfai. Telling from your own life, he said, is straightforward, for it is just like telling stories [orally] (pc 05.10.08). The other short narratives are by Rahel Asghedom and have a fictional component. They are often about formative childhood experiences or relationships between men and women. “Anisino” is an example of her writing in this genre.

⁷⁹ from *We have our Voice* (2000)

The **liberation testimonial**. These texts, which range in length from 30 to 350 pages, share an ambition to ‘tell the world’ about Eritrea’s struggles to achieve nationhood. In 1961 Frantz Fanon described such literature as “a fighting literature, a revolutionary literature, and a national literature”. It is, he says, often written by men and women who feel that they must speak up even though they have never previously thought of writing a literary work (Fanon & Sartre, 2001:179). Eritrean liberation testimonials are written by people with first-hand experience of the Armed Struggle. The reviewer of a liberation testimonial was struck by the story being told in English rather than in an Eritrean language. “People who do not read English deserve to share the experience. After all, it is their story. The book is also a stark reminder of how much we are missing because other participants in the armed struggle are not writing their share” (Habte-Giorgis, 2004).

The **political novel**. It relates the adventures of an Eritrean hero who contributed to the Armed Struggle and/or the building of the post-independence nation.

Drama. All written drama texts are translated or transcribed from earlier Tigrinya versions.

Diverse. Four longer non-fictional texts, one a history of Eritrea, two records of and handbooks on how to organise and deliver acute medical services in times of war, and, most recently, the autobiography of Bereket Habte Selassie.

Some of these English-language texts were first written in other languages. Before turning to a discussion of the socio-political space of their production, I consider a central issue for any translation, namely how to make a text culturally and linguistically available to a non-authorial readership.

9.2.6 Thick and thin translation

As Appendix 13 shows, many of the Eritrean texts in English have been translated from Tigrinya. The English language in some of the translated texts, particularly in the genre of liberation testimonials, is sometimes awkward. I understand that what I perceive as clumsy language is seen by some Eritrean writers themselves as a shortcoming rather than as a willed variation. Several of the texts have been translated collaboratively. But what happens in this process of translation, and to what extent do the translations assume a particular audience, with a particular insight into the source culture? In this section I review some issues related to these questions.

Already in 1923 the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski alleged that the best way of

making the language of an unfamiliar culture understandable to the English reader was neither to translate it literally (since this would give a culturally faithful but unintelligible text), nor to translate it freely (since this would give an intelligible text without cultural insight), but to provide a translation with a commentary (Hatim & Mason, 1990:36-37). Such a ‘thick’ translation, explains the Ghanaian linguist and philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah, “aims to produce a new text that matters to one community the way another text matters to another” (Appiah, 2000:425). In so saying he exemplifies the ‘cultural turn’ that now dominates translation studies, with its emphasis on translation as cultural rather than linguistic transfer. ‘Thick’ translation can serve the political end of engendering respect for an otherwise unfamiliar and inaccessible culture. The US-based Ethiopian academic Solomon Deressa writes that the linguistic and cultural differences between the Horn of Africa and “English” are daunting, but that it is important to find ways of bridging them:

Perhaps the real task that awaits gifted Ethiopian, Eritrean or Somali Americans is the rendition of poetry from the various languages of the Horn into English so that the world, particularly English-speaking Africa, can have access to the hidden aspects of its legitimate patrimony – to the extent that translation can serve such a purpose. (Deressa, 1995:175)

Basil Hatim reflects on the particular technical and ideological problems that relate to little-known literatures when they are translated into a dominant language, such as English:

Little-known literatures tend to pose problems that are mostly related to the scant knowledge available regarding the background against which a text may be read and understood by the target reader. In these literatures, not only are the norms and models non-existent or faintly present for the target reader, but they might also be inaccessible to the source reader. This is generally coupled with an inflexible set of attitudes on the part of target readers from certain cultural backgrounds. (Hatim, 2001:57-58)

“Scant knowledge” and “inflexible attitudes” present problems for the translation of Eritrean literary texts into English. Source readers may be ill-equipped for the task, and target readers may not be able to relate the one text they are reading to other examples of Eritrean literary production. They may be unfamiliar with the work’s original audience and with the work’s contemporary and current reception in the media, in academia and in conversation. And they may have an incomplete, an exile or an outsider perspective on the conventions the text expects its audience to share. Although most of the texts presented in Appendix 13 have not been provided with a thick translation, such as Malinowski and Appiah advocate, *The Other War* is an exception. The two English-language editions are accompanied by a glossary and an afterword written by the author.

9.3 The space of the literary in today's Eritrea

I now turn to the conditions for writing, publishing and distribution that prevail in Eritrea, and attempt to develop an understanding of the ways that the political ambitions of an emergent nation define and constrain what is published, and for whom.

9.3.1 *Literary ideologies*

McCormick (1994) introduces the term 'literary ideologies' to enable a discussion of the way texts are perceived, produced, published and presented, and sees literary ideology as the crucial determinant of what is and can be written, and how what is written is read. Amongst the issues that a literary ideology addresses she lists whether an author is a spokesman or a unique voice; which genres and conventions are valued; how women writers are received; whether poetry is understood as the thoughts of an individual or as the common beliefs of the people; whether literature is expected to express political or individual positions; whether drama is regarded as a ritual or as escape; whether literature is expected to be 'true to life'; and whether it can be sexually explicit. McCormick explains that literary ideology works both for the writer and the reader, because it makes what is written seem 'natural', "concealing struggles and repressions, forcing language into conveying predominantly those meanings reinforced by the dominant forces of our society" (McCormick, 1994:74-75).

Together, the answers reflect the distinctive assumptions of a particular society about the writing and reading of literature. They show us the ways by which a society's general ideology is articulated through its literary practices, and they help to determine the particular shape these literary practices take. (1994:76)

In a similar vein, McDonald urges that also the literary critic and the researcher interested in who reads texts, and in what circumstances, should be aware of literary ideologies. We should be self-reflexive, he says, about the way we have been formed professionally into the institution of literature, "the linguistic, cultural and intellectual traditions to which we are aligned, the institutional positions we occupy, and the media we use".⁸⁰ Both the writer and the critic are socioculturally constituted.

9.3.2 *The functions of national literatures*

In order to understand the enormous importance that people I spoke with in Eritrea attributed to the play *The Other War*, it may be fruitful to look briefly at what nations *do* and *have done* with literature, and what literature they do it with. One understanding of national literature is that it reflects national character. Sara Corse explains this position as the belief that "the unique

⁸⁰ Peter McDonald: Diary of a bad year in the world? Paper presented at the University of Oslo, 14.05.2009.

experience of national life generates a national, collective consciousness [...] marked by a distinctive set of values, tensions, myths, and psychological foci, that produces in turn a certain readily identifiable national character [...] then discernable in indigenous cultural products” (Corse 1997:1). Opposed to this is the idea that national literature is a representation, a deliberate construct serving social and/or political ends. Richard Ohrman writes, “There is just no sense in pondering the functions of literature without relating it to the actual society that uses it, to the centers of power within that society, and to the institutions that mediate between literature and people” (Ohrman, 1975, cited in McCormick, 1994:172).

The work of Corse is interesting here, because her comparative investigation of the function of national literature in the US and Canada has a clear focus on what these literatures *represent*. Corse argues that canonical national literature is highly selective. It favours literature that takes as its theme those aspects of a nation that distinguish it from those from which it is politically important that it be distinguished. She argues that works of art are selected for the national canon to the extent that they explore and constitute the politically important concept of a unique nation and its exceptional experience (Corse, 1997:6). National literatures do not arise naturally, she says, but “are an integral part of the process by which nation-states create themselves and distinguish themselves from other nations” (1997:7). National literatures work by demonstrating what is important and special about ‘us’, by distinguishing between ‘us’ and ‘them’ through the specification of boundaries marking both who and what are within the nation and who and what are outside the nation. “The boundary specification and maintenance work of national literatures is accomplished by delineating the difference between one nation and other relevant nations” using cultural repertoires, in which only some elements are canonised (1997:158). Timothy Brennan puts the case more adamantly, claiming that cultural creations are essential to the very construction and maintenance of nationhood, since nations are “imaginary constructs that depend for their existence on an apparatus of cultural fictions in which imaginative literature plays a decisive role” (Brennan, 1990:49).

Corse poses a research question that is of interest for the present study. She asks how readers respond to the canonical works of their country, since despite the rigid framework within which the majority of readers encounter these works, the possibility for resistance and for improvisation remains (Corse, 1999:169). Her conviction that this possibility is available to readers is based primarily on her experience with the space of the literary in North America, and I question its applicability in an authoritarian state. But even if one cannot improvise or express resistance, Smidt reminds us that all reading of literature has both a subjective and a social dimension. And that while the reading of literature meets “society’s need for alignment

through common language, norms and frames of reference” the individual reads to explore and come to terms with his own identity and the world (Smidt, 1995:147). Let us now look at the availability of such possibilities for resistance and exploration in Eritrea.

9.3.3 *The functions of Eritrean national literature*

Corse’s theory of representation sheds an interesting light on Eritrean literature, for inasmuch as Eritrean texts in English consistently promulgate the pride in the heroic struggle of the Freedom Fighters that Asmeret Berhe identified as an essential part of the construction of Eritrean nationhood (see 6.2.2), they do indeed serve the purpose that Corse identifies of establishing the nation as separate and exceptional.

Corse is right, however, to question the validity of a generic theory of the relationship of nation formation to literature, for her account of literary texts that have survived in the public domain in the USA for sometimes several hundred years cannot properly describe the literatures of very young nations. Similarly, not all Anderson’s generalisations fit the Eritrean case. Anderson finds patriotism typical of national literature in general, and in his reading, the cultural products of nationalism are expressions of love to the nation/king and only exceptionally the expression of hatred towards named enemies (Anderson, 2006:138). This is most certainly not true of Eritrean literature, which consistently both names and shames the enemy.

For the Eritrean case, at least, the function of literature in nation-building is not as straightforward as Corse describes for North America. For one thing, Corse operates with assumptions about the ‘literariness’ of ‘literature’ that do not work for Eritrean literature, as we saw in 9.1.2. Corse also takes it for granted that a nation’s literature is a *written* literature in a common language, but for most people in Eritrea literature is not read, it is sung, told, or performed in a local language. In what follows I argue that it is primarily the interests of national politics that are served by Eritrean literature in English. As Eritrea’s foremost literary critic, Ghirmai Negash tends towards an Africanist rather than a nationalist position. In his doctoral thesis *A History of Tigrinya Literature in Eritrea 1890-1991* he defines Eritrean literature as “all oral and written texts in the language that are recognised and experienced as literature in the community”, and explains that they are “recognised and experienced as literature, predominantly, for their *creative use* of language, *fictionality* and *imaginative qualities*” (G. Negash, 1999:77, original italics).

Creativity, imagination and fictionality are not to the point in the in-country delimitation of the literary that Amanuael Nayr presents on the PFDJ-run Shaebia website:

A piece of writing that is published is different from what is written in a diary or notebook on its objectives. Most often the first tries to benefit society while the latter is for personal use. Thus, any written piece has to inform, educate, and transform society to a better state. Writing to confuse, frustrate and hurt humanity or a segment of it is immoral and devoid of personal gratification. (Nayr, 2009)

Literature, according to Nayr, is defined by its functions. It should counteract the demoralising effects of colonialism, egotism and capitalism and contribute to the establishment of a shared Eritrean identity. I know of no systematic theoretical Eritrean exposition of this aesthetic *in English*, and turn therefore to the Cuban thinker Roberto Retamar, whose theorising of the relation between aesthetics, culture and nationhood is reminiscent of the Eritrean case. And indeed, when I presented an earlier draft of this chapter to two in-country Eritrean academics, they did find Retamar's exposition pertinent. Like Eritrean literature, Latin American literature for a long time "took its engagement with politics for granted. The 'unacknowledged' ties between writing and legislating [...] are no secret in Latin America" (Sommer, 1990:73).

Retamar rises combatively to the question "Does a Latin American culture exist?" and claims that "our culture is – and can only be – the child of revolution, of our multiseular rejection of all colonialisms. Our culture, like every culture, requires as a primary condition our own existence" (Retamar, 1989:38). He goes on to argue that this culture "has become a possibility *in the first place* because of the many who have struggled, the many who still struggle, for the existence of that 'great people'". From this understanding of how the culture of Latin America came into existence, there follows an aesthetic, which Fidel Castro expressed in 1971 in the following terms: "We, a revolutionary people, value cultural and artistic creations in proportion to what they offer mankind... Our evaluation is political. There can be no aesthetic value in opposition to man" (cited in Retamar, 1989:43). And the best interests of man are served within the revolution. In 1961, two years after Cuba gained its independence, Castro declared that whenever "us revolutionaries" are asked what matters most to them, they always say "the people". This means, according to Castro:

Within the revolution, everything; outside the revolution, nothing. No one, to the extent that the revolution understands the interests of the people, to the extent that the revolution expresses the interest of the nation as a whole, can maintain any right in opposition to it. (1989:43)

Castro's doctrine does not question the capacity of the revolution to continue to understand and express the interests of the nation after independence has been achieved. Nor does it allow anyone else to raise this question, for "no one [...] can maintain any right in opposition to it". It is, therefore, a Cuban rationale for a totalitarian aesthetic, promulgated by the erudite Retamar

when he first published this article in 1971, and re-enacted almost forty years later in the Eritrean state.

Retamar's argument pertains to written literature. But what of oral literature, which is performed and sung for a local audience? I assume that there is a certain political ambivalence about the promotion of local literatures outside the societies in which they are current, since, as Homi Bhabha says, the people "represent the cutting edge between the totalizing powers of the social and the forces that signify the more specific address to contentious, unequal interests and identities within the population" (Bhabha, 1990:297). The Eritrean government has sought to develop national unity through displays of dances and singing from the various ethnic groups, but contemporary local literatures may not be so easily subsumed into the nation-building project. Perhaps an official neglect of local non-nationalist literatures can pre-empt the development of uncontrollable anti-nationalist voices?

9.3.4 Writing and publishing in Eritrea: Official voices

Head Librarian of the University of Asmara, Assefaw Abraha, has published online and in print an account of writing and publishing in Eritrea. He represents a political position which allows him to describe the relationship between the only political party and the government as one in which "horizontal co-operation is very smooth". Abraha is both uniquely qualified to comment on literature and library access in Eritrea and also a loyal proponent of government policy. He describes Eritrea as a small, struggling nation that has not yet found the time, money and political space in which to develop a literature (Abraha, 2002a). In what follows I refer extensively to his article, in both its printed (a) and its online (b) version. Abraha himself believes that a fair presentation of the current situation for written literature in Eritrea should emphasise (more strongly than he did in his article) the progress that is being made (pc, October 2008). He praises the government for doing everything possible to promote books through annual book fairs, by increasing the number of mobile libraries and through TV and radio programmes. With reference to an earlier draft of the present chapter he advised me to "write about the environment within which the culture of book publishing was hampered during the Ethiopian occupation and conclude by the kind of development made in the post war period". Book development, says Abraha in his article, has met many difficulties. "The war was, above all, the most serious external constraint." Abraha explains the historical context in which people have written:

The status of writing in Eritrea was at its lowest ebb during the protracted war of independence. Any published academic or non-fiction works belonged either to Eritrean authors in the

diaspora⁸¹ or to those in the liberated zones within the country. However, remarkable progress was seen in Eritrean literature, especially in Tigrinya, during the war of independence. Much of it was created by freedom fighters, who eventually emerged as prominent writers. Their works deal within the context of, and in reaction to the war. (Abraha, 2002a:32)

Since independence more progress has been made, although Abraha would like to see government policy change in relation to the promotion of a book culture.

The last decade after independence was concerned with the whole process of building a nation. This short period of transition showed remarkable achievements, particularly with regard to the expansion of the educational system, the proliferation of schools and libraries at all levels, the encouragement of literary works in the various national languages, etc. However, much remains to be done in order to promote book development in the country. This includes: the introduction of policies on national library services, provision of deposit and copyright laws, lifting tax and custom duties and other barriers to the availability of books, the allocation of reasonable budgets to book development, and the encouragement of literary works and writers. (Abraha, 2002a:34)

In his online article Abraha also regrets that the government took textbooks away from the bookshops, since these “usually form the bread and butter of the bookshop business”. He concludes that this, along with external economic factors, “in the final analysis has victimized the reader and reading development” (2002b). I observed that a very limited range of imported English titles was to be found in many bookshops, the same titles in different shops, and I understand that importing books is under the control of central government. Abraha’s article corroborates my impression that bookshops exist only in the capital, but in 2008 he said this impression was incorrect. Abraha also looks at other constraints on publishing and distribution:

... there are not many publishers or agents in the country, and those that are available are usually reluctant to accept manuscripts easily as they are not sure about the market demand for a particular book. This means, too, that potentially valuable and interesting works have remained (and still remain) without seeing the light of day. (Abraha 2002a:32)

Virtually everything that is published in-country supports the independence narrative, and it would seem impossible for writers to distance themselves from it. An example is provided by Bocesion Haile who, in a history book with the far from neutral title *Collusion on Eritrea* (2007), writes that “as far as possible the author has tried to be neutral” (B. Haile, 2007:iv). Yet throughout he supports the independence narrative, and his writing is replete with loaded expressions like those I have italicised in the following passage: “The recent war between the two countries was a *camouflage* to *trap* Eritrea into the war, so that Ethiopia would *appear*

⁸¹ The term ‘diaspora’, as it is used here and elsewhere in this thesis, derives originally from the Jewish concept of exile from one’s homeland, but in an Eritrean context it is now used without implying that Eritreans living abroad – transnational Eritreans – dream of returning to Eritrea.

innocent and invaded” (360).⁸² The nationalist aesthetic means that Haile’s ‘neutral’ perspective strikes a non-Eritrean reader as unequivocally pro-Eritrean. It also, like many of the other Eritrean texts in English, exemplifies the national narrative template outlined in 6.2.1.

Developing a national literature in Eritrea is challenging because of the country’s many languages, the dominance of Tigrinya, and the fact that apart from Tigrinya, only Arabic and Tigré have a written tradition at all. A conference held at the Ministry of Information in December 2008 demonstrated the government’s involvement in the promotion of reading in Eritrean languages, and also its perception of literature (Habtetsion, 2008). Although a news bulletin about the conference was written in English, the conference was held in Tigré only, a language spoken by about a third of the population (see also 7.2.1). Ten research papers were to be presented and five hundred people were expected to attend. The conference organiser Saleh Mahmmud applauded the role played by the EPLF in promoting the Tigré language and literature, both written and oral. “Even during the most critical condition of the struggle, the EPLF worked hard for the development of the Eritrean languages and the Tigré language started to revive.” This commitment, he said, continued after independence, where “the Government of Eritrea considered literature to be a cornerstone in the national construction endeavors and provided the languages necessary ground”. This account overlooks the considerable resistance to literature in Tigré that G. Negash ascribes to the Tigré elite, who overturned the attempts of educationalists to promote learning in Tigré, preferring to promote Arabic instead (Negash 1999:59). This attitude was also reported to be prevalent amongst Tigré parents after independence (Hailemariam, 2002). When Mahmmud says that “the Conference aims at identifying the major challenges that deterred the development of literal works of the language and thereby enable the concerned bodies take swift measures”, we see something of the intense interplay of politics and literature. Literature is to be ‘evaluated’ and hindrances to its distribution ‘eliminated’; it is to be promoted by ‘swift measures’, an expression that to my ears carries connotations of strategic planning more military than literary. I note also that the target is the development of ‘literal works’. Perhaps the journalist meant to write ‘literary works’, but perhaps ‘literal works’ is deliberately used of literature conceived not as imaginative writing, but as the retelling of what actually (literally) happened. Tekeste Negash suggests that the conference was a rhetorical exercise designed to placate the Tigré population who experience urban and rural crowding and displacement due to the expansion of Tigrinya-speakers into traditional Tigré areas (pc, May 2009). The discordant interpretations of a

⁸² Haile’s ‘neutrality’ can be read in the light of the book’s dedication: “I dedicate this book to my father *Blata* Haile Gebre Mussie Abib, who died in August 1978 at the age of 87 as a result of shelling his village by the Ethiopian troops”.

conference promoting literature are illustrative of the complexities of describing the Eritrean contexts.

Concluding his overview of Tigrinya literature in 1997, Negash looked forward to “unprecedented opportunities” for writers, who could now “freely use and practice writing in their language without fear of any colonial intervention” (Negash, 1999:203). With hindsight this optimism would seem to have been misplaced. Beyene Haile has since published two novels (in 2003 and 2006), and a play in 2008. Commenting on the situation for literature and art in general in post-independence Eritrea, Haile told Negash:

Technological know-how in health, education, agriculture, leadership, architecture, and business could have fared much better if inspired by the dynamics of art and culture. Being artistically illiterate, many are not actively participating in the unique artistic regeneration of Eritrea, even if this is the best of times to enjoy the process of spontaneous creativity. (G. Negash, 2009:172)

So why is there such a dearth of creativity? The political refugee and poet Ararat Iyob describes the fraught situation for Eritrean literature when she says, “I have always asked, sometimes begged most Eritreans whom I met to write literature about anything, anywhere even for entertainment” (Iyob, 2000). And she describes “an indifferent world” and a fragile literary community where “the few [writers] we had were exiled, harassed, and most have died without writing their experiences”.

Matzke who carried out her fieldwork under the supervision of the EPLF, writes that for the purposes of nation-building the EPLF/PFDJ pool available talent in the visual and plastic arts to produce “works of a nearly identical aesthetic with common concerns and for similar purposes” (Matzke, 2002:34). She argues that the Marxist-socialist tenets of the EPLF explain the prevalence of (social) realism in both pictorial imagery and literal writings (2002:43). Talking of sculpture and painting in particular, she claims that “there exists a public discourse in Eritrea, both in critical evaluations and in spontaneous audience responses, which repudiates art that moves beyond naturalistic, life-like imagery and the literal reflection of what is already known” (2002:44). In an interview with Dhar, Tesfai explains the mono-voiced literary space:

In the days of the revolutionary fervour of the armed struggle, socialist realism in literature and the arts served best the needs of the independence struggle. Fighters had to be glorified, the enemy’s “invincibility” had to be cut to size, the equality of women was to be promoted, the inevitability of the final victory despite the odds had to be inculcated into the psyche of men and women; in short, art had to serve revolutionary objectives. Few doubt the important role that the resulting cultural activities played in the final outcome of the struggle for independence. (Dhar, 2006:7)

One of the reasons that self-expression has not replaced allegiance to the revolutionary principles in art, says Tesfai, is the 1998-2000 war with Ethiopia, “bringing back to life aspects

of revolutionary art that had started to outlive their purpose” (2006:9). Indeed there are still excited voices pleading for more of the same:

It is OK to be a country of “small words”, but there are times when these men and women with guts and brain got to tell their story. In their story there is a lesson to be learned. So talk Eritrea. If not; your colorful history and story will remain buried in the Eritrean mountains, valleys, and plains. Or worst yet; a bankrupt or a Hasus, suffering from unfulfilled personal journey through life from the streets of the West, will come along to deny, or bury, or to rewrite your colorful history, gallantry, and proud heritage. (Fessehaye, 2007)

9.3.5 *Writing and publishing in Eritrea: Alternative narratives*

The critic and journalist Amanuel Sahle wrote an article entitled “How to Paint a Secret” in the newspaper *Eritrea Profile* (8th January 2000), in which he cautiously suggests going beyond the reinterpretation of the war of independence:

A 30-year-long bloody war cannot be erased overnight. Nor should it be tried. But, after giving it its due merit, the artist should turn his/her gaze a degree or two to the left or to the right and explore the hopes and fears of the people even if that meant laughing at oneself and disclosing one’s weaknesses. (cited in Matzke, 2002:7)⁸³

In this section I look at writers and publishers who have “turned their gaze a degree or two” and moved away from the nationalist prescription. First and foremost is the unique voice of Rahel Asghedom, who would seem to be the exception that proves the rule. She is a young writer who feels ‘freer’ when she writes in English, her second language. Hers is an aesthetics of matter over style, a voice of personal integrity that drags the distasteful and the female into print – domestic violence, female genital cutting, infertility and the wastage of romantic love. Adrian Hunter suggests that we see literary innovation not so much as an expression of individual genius, but rather as an interaction between the creative imagination and the material, ideological and technological conditions prevailing at a particular historical moment (Hunter, 2007:46). If Hunter is right, one can ask why Asghedom is one of so few creative imaginations interacting with the conditions that prevail at this particular historical moment. The answer is of course complex, but Asghedom is unusual in coming from a family where writing is normal. She has grown up seeing herself as a writer. She is not so much innovative in *how* she writes, but in her choice of subject matter and in the endeavour of writing itself. And she is “animated by the notion of the writer functioning in, and as part of, his or her community” (Hunter, 2007:97).

There are also literary texts that non-government actors see a value in and promote. These

⁸³ Another interviewee and artist, Rhawa Ghirmai, who returned from Zimbabwe in the mid-1990s, expresses a respect for the Freedom Fighters, but she cannot understand their feelings, and would like to move on. “For me, I can’t feel that way, that is almost monstrous for me, but this is how they made it through those thirty years. This is the kind of strength they needed for Eritrea to become independent” (Matzke, 2002:47).

actors are either transnational Eritreans in the USA, or international academics, most conspicuously Kassahun Checole, Tej Dhar, Plastow, and, again, Cantalupo. Checole is the most prestigious of this group, an Eritrean-born academic who became the founding publisher of Africa World Press and Red Sea Press, which promotes African scholarship by Africans or Africanists. Selected Eritrean texts, including those of Tesfai and B.H. Selassie, benefit from Internet and other marketing offered by the Africa Books Network, facilities that are not available in-country. Dhar is a Kashmiri author and academic who was for many years professor of English at the University of Asmara and a staunch promoter of Eritrean literature. He once told me, “If you want to study Eritrean literature, learn Tigrinya,” and bewailed that several significant authors were available in Tigrinya only. The anthology *Who Needs a Story?* (2005), edited and translated by G. Negash and Cantalupo, seeks to reach non-native speakers. It presents Tigrinya, Tigré and Arabic poems alongside an English translation. In my reading there are a few slightly critical poems amongst many that conform to the political orthodoxy.

Plastow has promoted Eritrean drama in-country and through performance, broadcasting and publication in the UK, and has encouraged their translation. Cantalupo works in-country and in the US to promote Eritrean literature. He wrote the introduction to *We Invented the Wheel*, by Eritrea’s now deceased poet laureate Reesom Haile, which he also collaboratively translated with the poet. In his long narrative poem “Non-native speaker” Cantalupo describes how their mutual friendship, after starting with great respect, ended when Haile but not Cantalupo came to see the international language and literature conference in which they were both involved – “Against all Odds” (2001) as a manipulated showcase for Eritrean nationalism. Cantalupo asks himself, “White man and non-native speaker, could I ever understand?” (2007). *We Invented the Wheel* is proudly Eritrean but also critical of the post-independence leadership. The anthology is not for sale in Eritrea. Cantalupo continues to promote the Eritrean nation-building project and returns every summer to hold English writing workshops for the Ministry of Information.

Eritrean literature in academia is a very new, highly politicised and insecure domain. Talking of the attempt to introduce the study of Eritrean languages and literature at the University of Asmara, G. Negash was struck by his colleagues’ detachment, or lack of any sort of enthusiasm, especially those in the departments of English and Education whom he felt should have been natural partners (G. Negash, 2005:9). On the other hand, I was told by members of the two departments who showed this “clear detachment” that the difficulties in recruiting students to courses on Eritrean literature had to do with the students’ lack of enthusiasm for nationalist literature.

Discussion forums and polemic articles are the two text genres on the Internet that deal with frustrations and aspirations for a different political system. It is therefore important to remember that the literature discussed here and in the rest of this chapter is not representative of the opinions held ‘out there’ and fiercely voiced, though seldom in literary form. These opinions are presumably not available to students resident in Eritrea.

In “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1993) Gayatri Spivak questions the authority of the voices of intellectual writers and critics. They are not in a position to recover and represent the silenced voices of women and other marginalized groups, she argues, and she introduces the term ‘subaltern’ to describe such groups. Her argument is that *any* writer who is published is so assimilated into the intellectual world of privilege that they are too distanced from the lives of the non-privileged to be able to represent them, and are therefore not qualified to speak for the subaltern majority (see also 9.2.4 for a discussion of literary paternalism). This is an interesting remark in relation to Eritrean writers. Their small rank numbers two medical doctors and two lawyers trained in Ethiopia and the USA respectively. Most of them were directly involved in the Armed Struggle, and this involvement meant that they have for decades not been “assimilated into the intellectual world of privilege” themselves. However we should bear in mind Tronvoll’s (1999) point that members of ethnic minorities in Eritrea may also have felt uncommitted to and even marginalised by the Armed Struggle, and EPLF/PFDJ writers certainly do not represent these ethnic minorities. So Spivak’s question is not quite to the point for Eritrean writers, who represent neither the world of privilege nor the people, but the nation, and they represent it as the EPLF/PFDJ requires that it be represented.

Ali Jimale Ahmed talks in general about the conditions for writing in the Horn of Africa, and highlights the unenviable situation of intellectuals who have served the interests of what are or what become dictatorial regimes. “Being alienated from the people by his/her involvement with the regime, such an intellectual is forced to either wallow deeper in political mud or to silence his/her art” (Ahmed, 1995:10). Since independence, in-country publishing has been dominated by the government-owned publishing houses Sabur and Hidri (Hdri). Their ideological agenda sets the national aesthetic and is an insurmountable constraint to in-country artists who do not share it. One author decided not to go ahead with plans for the publication of a book after being told by the publisher not to include anything about going to church or, alternatively, to include some Muslim characters (pc). The publishers conform with the government’s decision that Christians should not be given preferential treatment to Muslims, and even the mention of Christian activities is seen as having a negative influence on this balance. When such strict control is exercised over what may or may not be published, one can understand that critical or

controversial literature is simply not published and not available in Eritrea. Once a work is published, and not just performed for a local audience, one more or less loses control of who will read it and certainly of *how* it will be read. In this perspective the state control of publication and distribution can be seen as an attempt at damage limitation. I have also experienced that book packages from Norway have been opened before being sent on to their recipient. In this way the government ensures that literature they deem unsuitable does not reach readers in Eritrea.

9.3.6 *Eritrean literature in English and other African literatures in English*

Can an understanding of Eritrean literature in English gain from comparison with other national literatures in Africa? After all, censorship and state control of cultural expression is by no means unique to Eritrea, although it is an extreme case (see 6.2.1). The Eritrean literary context differs in several ways to that of African countries with a well-established post-colonial literature. As a written literature it is very new and very small, and despite there being many well-educated transnational Eritreans, the number of in-country people with higher education is much smaller than in say Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya or South Africa, countries which generate many of the texts referred to in post-colonial theories of African literature. Racism is said to create a political vortex into which much of this literature has been drawn, and Ashcroft et al. list as pervasive concerns of Nigerian and Kenyan writers “dispossession, cultural fragmentation, colonial and neo-colonial domination, post-colonial corruption and the crisis of identity” (Ashcroft, et al., 2002:26). This breadth of concerns is absent in Eritrean literature. Ashcroft et al. suggest that black South African literature might fruitfully be compared with that of other African countries (Ashcroft, et al., 2002:26). Although this is too big a task to be undertaken in depth here, we may at least compare Eritrean literature with the literature of South Africa, as it is discussed in de Kock’s article with the provocative title “Does South African literature still exist?” (2005).

De Kock reviews South African literature in the light of the international allegory of racism that South Africa became in the global consciousness.

Our writers could take on a sense of grave importance by virtue of writing in and about one of the great crisis points in the world. South Africa had become one of the world’s grand allegories of racial strife, of the struggle for justice and truth in the wake of successive waves of imperial, colonial and neo-colonial misrule. (de Kock, 2005:75)

De Kock goes on to claim that earlier South African literary parameters of repression and false singularity have been superseded by “the conceptual and actual freedoms of democracy” in the post-apartheid era.

In an ironic parallel, writers in Eritrea could also take on “a sense of grave importance” by virtue of writing about a liberation struggle that was largely *ignored* by the popular media, and where ‘the world’ threw its economic and political clout behind the Ethiopian government. Although Eritrea shares other parallels with South Africa, not least that it achieved its formal independence from Ethiopia in 1993, only a year before South Africa elected its first democratic president, the democratic and literary freedoms which de Kock acknowledges in the new South Africa have not emerged in Eritrea. So de Kock can reject a literature that is still founded on “the ‘unlovable’ site of struggle”, which he permits himself to describe as “often a place of asphyxiating repetition and nausea-inducing pain, a play of stereotype and antitype which, even in the hands of a master.... could become too singularly obsessive, too much about race and twisted irony, or in the hands of other writers, too much about skin, skull and jackboot” (2005:77). It is unthinkable that such criticism could be voiced, let alone printed, in Eritrea.

Another way in which Eritrea evades post-colonial categorisation is that its literature is mostly written in an African language, so argumentation about colonial hegemony reinforced in colonial language falls wide. Eritrea builds its national identity, as we have seen, in relation not to its history as a European colony so much as to its secession/liberation from an African geopolitical heavyweight, Ethiopia.

Post-colonial discourses about how African nations represent themselves through literature do not map readily on to the Eritrean case, and as yet Eritrean literature in English does not constitute a post-colonial literature. According to Ashcroft (2002), texts produced under conditions where both the available discourse and the material conditions of production for literature do not allow a full exploration of the anti-imperialist potential of their subject matter cannot be termed post-colonial, and I would maintain that this has been the situation for Eritrean writers both before and after independence from Ethiopia. “The development of independent literatures depended upon the abrogation of this constraining power and the appropriation of language and writing for new and distinctive usages” (Ashcroft, et al., 2002:6). In so saying, Ashcroft can be seen to be universalising a Western aesthetic evaluation of literature, as Jeyifo describes it, inasmuch as Ashcroft values novelty, independence of thought and the freedom to criticise over the literary projects of many emergent nations, namely the construction and reinforcement of a unified national identity.

9.3.7 *Intended and actual audiences*

We have seen in this chapter that the space of the literary in Eritrea is highly politicised. Written Eritrean literature is mostly in Tigrinya, but its being translated and published, or republished, in English says something about the function the government hopes that this

literature will fulfil. As I understand it, when the government supports the translation of a Tigrinya text into English, it doesn't expect an in-country readership, but markets the books towards the transnational population and other foreigners abroad. It is in this context that one can understand the prominent display of Eritrean literature in English alongside Eritrean music at the international airport in Asmara.⁸⁴ In these texts the government represents Eritrea in a body of nationalist literature whose unified aesthetic is an exercise in public communication. I argue that for all Eritrean literature in English, there are nationalist considerations at stake. From the government's point of view, English language texts published in-country are intended to reinforce a particular ideology of nationhood. They do so with 'more of the same', a strategy which may not be effective for disenchanted readers who have access to alternative narratives.

My conjecture about the intended audience of Eritrean literature in English rests on my understanding of the government's all-embracing nation-building project, which includes the transnational Eritreans upon whom the country is financially dependent. In the two decades before independence, groups of Eritreans in exile in Europe and North America had strong organisational links to the EPLF. They arranged feasts and festivals, demonstrations, fund-raising events and political meetings which were a large part of the social lives of most Eritreans in exile (Conrad, 2006). These groups were largely disbanded at the behest of the new government after independence was achieved. Subsequent to the 1998-2000 war Eritrea lost a great deal of the support it had enjoyed in the international community (Wrong, 2005), and anecdotal and financial evidence suggests that the transnational Eritrean community was also disenchanted by this second war. The estrangement of the young generation has been a subject of especial concern to the Eritrean authorities (Conrad, 2006:20). For this generation, Eritrean music and nationalist lyrics continue to combine with other forms of popular culture to construct an imagined Eritrean identity (2006:7). Written literature about the Armed Struggle also has a role to play here.

A special case is the two anthologies available in-country of Eritrean language poetry with parallel renditions in English. These presumably have a triple audience: a moneyed in-country readership, transnational Eritreans who buy these texts on return visits to Asmara or order them online, and an international readership with a particular interest in African literature. From the

⁸⁴ Interesting in this context is *Let the Camel Smile*, a collection of short texts published in 2007 by the Trondheim-Keren Friendship Association of Norway. It includes travel reports written by Norwegian exchange students. Several describe the poverty and crowding in Eritrean schools, and a couple of them express disappointment in the government policy that does not allow Eritrean students out of the country, and the hope that this situation will change. The book could only be accepted for distribution in Eritrea because of considerable good will on the part of Ministry of Information towards the Friendship Association. A Tigrinya translation, where the book might be expected to meet a bigger and broader in-country audience, was not accepted.

point of view of scholars, the translation of selected Tigrinya texts into English is an attempt to promote an international appreciation of Eritrean cultural diversity and skill, and perhaps also to promote a seedling post-colonial literature where ‘other things’ can be said and read.

I have little idea who actually reads this literature. I am also unsure of the availability of the written Tigrinya literature presented in this chapter, and this is unfortunate, since the extent to which the students know about, have access to and read Tigrinya texts is an important aspect of the expectations and experience they bring to their reading of the literary texts in this study. Its readership, as far as I know, is a tiny literate minority who have an interest in non-instrumental reading. Asfaha reports findings from a reading survey. Reading of religious texts was a significant area for literacy practices, whereas his respondents apparently made no mention of fictional literature (Asfaha, 2009:35). Instead they reported ‘entertainment literacy’, which included reading about sports, solving crossword puzzles and reading cinema announcements or video subtitling. Furthermore, the majority of his respondents engaged in literacy activity only ‘now and then’ (2009:39). Even Cantalupo, whose writing about Eritrean literature is marked by great optimism, not to say partisanship – he goes so far as to say that “the literary history of Eritrea dwarfs England’s, and, of course, America’s too” (Cantalupo, 2006:6) – expects that in-country sales would amount to two hundred copies at most (2006:8). It would seem that reading literature is a low status activity in a society that favours loyalty over reflection.

Beyene Haile describes his readership, or lack of one, in very particular terms:

The majority of my friends and acquaintances had, to my surprise, been unable to read a book in Tigrinya [...] many are often heard to say that they can only read in English. [...] It seems as if they are proud of their deprivations, being blinded by a colonial education, which acts as a monstrous screen mercilessly shutting out the better side of culture and art. It dries up a well of creative nourishment that springs from one’s own language and tradition. (Beyene Haile, 2007:172)⁸⁵

But, as we have seen, it is not Eritrean literature in English that his friends and acquaintances primarily read. What then, will Eritrean and Norwegian students make of this literature? This is the subject of Part Three: Response, to which we have now come.

⁸⁵ Haile’s prose and drama works are admired for their creativity but are said to be dauntingly opaque, and this must be borne in mind as a probable factor in his friends’ ‘inability’ to read his work. Of his most recent work, the play, *Weg’i lebi*, Matzke writes that it “seemed to defy all recognisable cultural discourses. Difficult to understand, with no clear plot or clear-cut message, it nonetheless drew crowds during the two weeks of its performance, largely, I suggest, because it allowed audiences to roam the inner landscapes of their minds” (Matzke, abstract for 3rd European conference on African Studies, 7-9 June, 2009).

10 “The Monkey and the Crocodile”

10.1 An overview

In this chapter I consider how the students in Eritrea and Norway make sense of a story about a monkey and a crocodile. In 10.2 I present the story itself, its origins and genre, and how response was elicited in the two classrooms. The illustrated version which the students were given is reproduced in Appendix 4.⁸⁶ The writing task was presented in 5.6.2. In 10.2.2 and 10.2.3 I describe and discuss how the student texts were elicited in Eritrea and in Norway. In 10.3 I look at the discursal positions in the student texts, and how they express ownership or distance to the literary text and assertion or ambivalence in their response to it. In 10.4 I review the interpretive strategies that the respondents use to make sense of “The Monkey and the Crocodile”. These include recognising the story, telling other stories, reading the story to learn from it and offering meta-textual commentary. Having discussed the discursal positions that the students occupy and the interpretive strategies that they employ, I turn in 10.5 to categorise the messages that the respondents identified, and discuss some of the difficulties I encountered in so doing, before discussing the categories in more detail. In 10.5.3 I review those messages that deal with friendship and trust, where the respondents are concerned with the conditions for friendship, and how these can be betrayed. In 10.5.4 I look at what the respondents write about how one should respond to threatening situations, before in 10.6 tying together the chapter in a critical comparative perspective.

10.2 The story in use

10.2.1 *The literary text*

“The Monkey and the Crocodile” was the first literary text that was presented to both groups. The story, or tale, or fable – I use the terms interchangeably – is found in very many versions. Here is a summary of the version used in this study: A crocodile lures a monkey down from his palm tree with the promise of juicier dates on the other side of the river. He then swims with the monkey on his back to the middle of the river. There the crocodile announces his intention of killing the monkey to acquire the monkey’s heart for his sick wife. The monkey tells the crocodile that he has left his heart back in the palm tree, tricking the crocodile into taking him safely home again.

I have been told that the *Jataka* includes a version of this story, but have been unable to confirm this information. The *Jataka* is a collection of tales from the 4th century BC and belongs to the primary canon of Buddhism (Mack, 1995:186). Some of the same stories are found in

⁸⁶ The illustrated text is reproduced as a pdf document. I also include a more legible version as a Word document.

later Hindu and Jain collections, including the *Panchatantra* – five volumes of tales which offer guidance on statesmanship and how to live one’s life. These are described in *The Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces* as “the best-known collection of folktales and animal fables in Indian literature” (1995:1168). The theme of many of the stories is that to be wise one must always show discretion and good judgement, otherwise one risks becoming a victim of treachery. Several stories illustrate the lesson that naivety can have fatal consequences (1995:1169). The version of the story in this study is a translation from the Norwegian version in Leif Mevik’s *Eventyr fra Eritrea* (1993) (*Stories from Eritrea*), an anthology he collected from his pupils in Asmara in the 1950s. He believed the story to be Eritrean, or possibly Ethiopian (pc). In Mevik’s retelling the story is somewhat elaborated with descriptive phrases about the characters and setting, distinguishing it from the plot-driven minimalistic fables of Aesop. The translation was made by a colleague at HUC with long experience of translation. The story filled an A4 page with single spacing, and was illustrated by a small woodcut of an open-jawed crocodile, a detail from an illustration in Mevik’s book.

I assumed that “The Monkey and the Crocodile” was well-known oral literature in Eritrea since I had come across it not only in Mevik’s book, but also as one of two tales in *Fisken og Apen* (Kahsay, 1993)⁸⁷, and in the collection *Colorful Stories* by Asghedom (2003). The only in-print commentary on this fable of which I am aware is Kahsay, who offers an interpretation in his preface to *Fisken og Apen*. The story, he says, reflects Eritreans’ ability to turn situations around for their own benefit, and how this makes them resourceful (Kahsay, 1993:5).

“The Monkey and the Crocodile” is a paradigmatic trickster tale, inasmuch as it demonstrates the following five functions of these tales, which usually, as here, involve animal characters:

1. Friendship: The tale often assumes or specifies a situation of friendship or solidarity between the characters involved.
2. Contract: Next, there is frequently an agreement reached or some kind of appointment made, which has the value or aim of testing the friendship.
3. Violation: One of the parties in the contract invariably does something that amounts to a breach of faith, e.g., by deceiving or cheating the other.
4. Discovery: The deceived or cheated party frequently discovers the trick played on it or the violation of the agreement reached. In many cases this is followed by a countertrick or counter violation from the offended party.
5. End of Friendship (Dundes 1971, cited in Okpewho, 1992:176).

⁸⁷ *The Fish and the Ape*

Another way of describing the fable is as an enactment of the national narrative template that was identified in 6.2.1, where the monkey represents an idyllic state of independence and the crocodile a coloniser interested in using the monkey for his own ends.

10.2.2 Eliciting the student texts in Eritrea

The Eritrean students wrote their responses in class, under my supervision. I explained that they would be working with a story that many of them might be familiar with. I read the story aloud, animating the voices of the monkey and the crocodile. This rendition – the high-voiced monkey, the smarmy-voiced crocodile – constituted an interpretation-in-performance. I believe it was warranted to ensure that the story was interesting to the students, and to motivate and encourage them to give me back something of themselves. We remember (see 9.2.1) that Ruth Finnegan re-emphasises the importance of performance in the second edition of her book (2007). In the first edition she wrote that “a piece of oral literature, to reach its full actualisation, must be performed. The text alone cannot constitute the oral poem” (Finnegan, 1992:28). Finnegan is also at pains to show that it is very common for oral and written forms to interact, and that there is no evidence that transcribing an oral form detracts from its oral force or life (1992:160). The interaction of the written and oral forms in my reading performance of “The Monkey and the Crocodile” may have given rise to associations with this or other fables that the respondents had heard in non-institutional settings.

Whilst the students wrote their response to the question “What is the message of the story?”, I moved around the classroom, offering encouragement, listening to comments and answering questions. I intended in this way to emphasise my interest in their response and to show that this was not a formal evaluative situation. Using the typology of interview questions that Steinar Kvale lists in *InterViews* (1996), asking what the message was could be described as an introductory question.

After the students had been given five minutes or so to write the message, the three writing tasks were presented orally, briefly explained and written on the board. I then withdrew to a corner of the room, on the assumption that my presence might be intrusive or inhibit their writing. The writing options that the students were offered resemble Kvale’s examples of probing questions:

“Could you say something more about that?”; “Can you give a more detailed description of what happened?”; “Do you have further examples of this?”. The interviewer here pursues the answers, probing their content but without stating what dimensions are to be taken into account. (Kvale, 1996:133)

The students expressed an interest in receiving feedback on their language, and I undertook to give them this. This undertaking was motivated by the principle of reciprocity; giving feedback

was a way in which I could acknowledge and value the students' contributions. I realised afterwards that it may also have served my own interests, since it may have stimulated the students to write more, or more carefully, than they might otherwise have done.

10.2.3 Eliciting the student texts in Norway

Writing about the story was one of several activities that comprised the first three-hour teaching session of the course in African literature that the Norwegian students were taking. Students were expected to have read four short texts of oral literature prior to this session, one of which was "The Monkey and the Crocodile". After a PowerPoint presentation on oral literature, I turned off the lights, sat with the students in a horseshoe and read the story, animating it in a slightly more subdued way than I had in Eritrea. I then asked students to write 'the message'. This task was not immediately clear to several of them. I rephrased the question as "What are we supposed to learn?". This phrasing clearly presupposes that the story does have something that we are supposed to learn, the same implication that is in fact present in asking what the message is. Presumably not all respondents would have read the story in this way, had it not been required of them. The short messages that were produced were read aloud. The rest of the writing task was given as an out-of-class assignment, and handed in a week later.

As in Eritrea, this response session came at the beginning of my interaction with the students, and I felt it important to add significance to the story in order to motivate them to read and respond to it. A possible way in which I may have influenced the Norwegian respondents is that I introduced the story to them by saying that the fable could be understood by the Eritrean students as representing a conflict similar to that between smart little Eritrea and big greedy Ethiopia. In fact only two Norwegian students made reference to this interpretive possibility. One of these, however, shows in her response that I had led her to an interpretation that she probably would not otherwise have identified, since she writes:

When I read "The monkey and the crocodile", I thought it was a very cute story. But when it came to find the moral of the story, I was lost. After some thought, I came up with two very vague suggestions; [...]

It was not until I was told what it meant (Monkey = Eritrea, crocodile = Ethiopia) that I started to appreciate the story. (N3)

The respondent refers to being "told what it meant", and this interpretation has displaced her first response, which was simply to enjoy the story.

10.2.4 The length and choice of writing task

Most respondents wrote quickly and continuously. The Eritrean student texts were on average slightly longer than the Norwegian ones, and a contributory factor here is that several of the

Eritrean students chose to write a relatively lengthy new story with the same message. The *range* of length, however, was much greater for the Norwegian responses; two students wrote more than 460 words (neither of these responses included a new story), whilst one wrote only 31 words. Part of this range can be attributed to the fact that only some of the respondents elaborated their answers out of class before handing them in.

When it comes to which writing assignment the respondents chose, this apparently straightforward aspect of the material proved to be a touchstone in my own understanding of a more fundamental issue relating to academic socialisation. I started out by filling in Table 10. The total number of tasks that the students chose does not tally with the total number of respondents because two Norwegian and one Eritrean respondent answered both writing task 1 and 2.

Table 10: Which writing task the respondents chose to answer

	Eritrean	Norwegian
Message only	0	1
1. My thoughts about the story	9	9
2. New story	3	2
3. Parallel story	0	- ⁸⁸
<i>Total</i>	13	12

Deciding what counted as ‘the message’ and what counted as ‘my thoughts about the story’ turned out to be a challenge. The categorisation in Table 10 is therefore not as clear-cut as the figures suggest, for it was not always obvious where the presentation of the message ended, and the respondent’s thoughts about the story began. Or, to put it another way, the question of how detailed the presentation of the message could be, before the response could be categorised as “my thoughts about the story”, can be answered in several plausible ways. And, for that matter, how clearly must the message be stated *as a message*, for it to count as such, rather than as the respondent’s thoughts about the story? In order to reach the figures in Table 10, I counted as ‘my thoughts about the story’ those texts that discuss some aspect of the story. However the extent to which the messages are elaborated varies, and therefore I also counted as ‘my thoughts about the story’ student texts which have just a brief comment, as well as those that reflected not on the story itself but on the difficulty of the writing task, a type of response I had not foreseen. I categorised only one student text as ‘message only’ (N1). This is a one-sentence statement of message with no elaboration of any kind.

Whilst categorisation can be advantageous in allowing one to see a bigger pattern, the legitimacy of the pattern is dependent on a plausible and clear distinction between the

⁸⁸ This option was not given to the Norwegian students.

categories. The tasks themselves could not act as these categories. It is in fact an interesting comparative aspect of the responses that the Eritrean students tend not to indicate when they are moving on from a statement of the message to an elaboration of their thoughts about it. It is as if, for them, the message is either something that is stated clearly in a fable, or, if it is not stated, it is an integrated part of one's thoughts about the story. Or perhaps, more generally, the idea of a statement and an elaboration, or of an introductory question followed by probing questions, is not part of the academic socialisation of which they have experience.

That the texts of the Eritrean students do not follow the format I had envisaged is something that also occurs, although to a lesser extent, in their response to "Anisino" (see 11.3.2).

10.3 Discoursal positions

10.3.1 Personal pronouns and discoursal positions

Roz Ivanič (1998) demonstrated through case studies that students encode positions of identity when they write academic texts (see also 3.5.1). One of the aspects of student writing that Ivanič reviewed was precisely the use students made of the personal pronouns 'I' and 'we'. She found that writers can shift identity within a single piece of writing, and from one writing assignment to another (Ivanič, 1998:295). Awareness that students may take several positions in one text, and that the position they take is partly determined by the particular assignment, is a premise for my discussion here, where I review the use of 'I', 'we', 'you' and third person pronouns.

Table 11 shows the number of respondents who use the various personal pronouns.

Table 11: Number of respondents who use the various personal pronouns

Personal pronouns	Eritrean	Norwegian
I	5	10
we	9	3
you	4	4
one	3	3
<i>Total</i>	21	20

Reference to the frequency or function of a pronominal category also refers to the pronoun in object position. Hence 'I' includes 'me', and 'we' includes 'us'. The possessive adjective 'my' in the phrase 'in my opinion' is also included in the category 'I'.⁸⁹ A striking contrastive aspect of the student texts is the frequency with which the Norwegian students use 'I' and the Eritrean

⁸⁹ 'Our' occurs in two texts, but refers in the one case to the version of the fable that the students were given – "our stories" (N10) – and in the other to the stories that N2 already knows, "our stories". These occurrences of 'our' do not represent discoursal positions in that they are used to identify which stories the writer is referring to, not to represent the position of the writer in relation to his/her text and his/her reader.

students use ‘we’. This would seem to corroborate Hofstede’s survey of national differences along a scale of collectivity and individuality (see 3.5.1). Many of the students use more than one personal pronoun. All the Norwegian and five of twelve Eritrean students use ‘I’. Ivanič refers to the various uses of ‘I’ as a continuum, and points out that it is not always an instantiation of subjectivity. The most subjective ‘I’ is used with cognitive verbs, she says (Ivanič, 1998:307). There are several instances of this in the Eritrean and in the Norwegian material. In the following pair the respondents express an affective response to the story using ‘I’ and a cognitive verbal phrase:

I am impressed by the cleverness of the Monkey. (E9)

I thought this was a very cute story. (N3)

In the following sections I am especially interested in two other ways that the pronouns are used: their contribution to the expression of ownership or non-ownership of the story, and the expression of an assertive or an ambivalent or uncertain response to it.

10.3.2 *Owners and visitors*

Ownership, to use Ivanič’s term, involves ‘having property rights’. An owner acknowledges something, in this case a text, as belonging to himself. A non-owner visits a text to see what they will find and is more or less enthusiastic, more or less well-informed. Let us look at how personal pronouns contribute to an expression of ownership or non-ownership, starting with the pronouns ‘we’ (and ‘us’). It is clear that they have greater referential flexibility than does the pronoun ‘I’, since ‘we’ can refer either to oneself (the rhetorical use to which Hyland refers, see 3.5.1), to oneself *and* one’s fellow thinkers, or to oneself and one’s assumed readership. According to the Tigrinya linguist Nazareth A. Kifle, the Tigrinya pronoun ‘we’ is semantically equivalent to ‘we’ in English and ‘vi’ in Norwegian. She writes that it is likely that “your informants are using ‘we’ as a generic pronoun to mean ‘we Eritreans’, ‘we students’ or ‘we human beings’” (pc). ‘We’ is the pronoun most frequently used by the Eritrean students. Not only do most of them use ‘we’, many of them use it a great deal. When ‘we’ is used about oneself and one’s assumed readership, it is described by Fløttum et al. as a manifestation of the author creating “a common ground for him- or herself and the reader, a central rhetorical means of creating agreement” (Fløttum, et al., 2006:68). However the Eritrean respondents use ‘we’ not so much to *create* common ground and agreement; rather, ‘we’ is used on the *assumption* of commonly held values. Here, for example, E10 explains what ‘we’ should learn from the story:

There fore from this story of the two wild creatures *we* should understand, the background *we* have also the limitation *we* are encountered before *we* suffer to danger. If *we* lost this conscious

we should not be disturbed, rather *we* should think the opportunities how to be free from *our* present circumstances. (E10, italics added)

The recurrent use of ‘we’ indicates that for E10 the authorial audience for this story is not an individual reader or listener, but a group of people. His own response is part of this collective reception. For him, reading and/or listening to this story does not require an act of individualised interpretation but a recognition of a message intended for all the real or possible listeners. The fable has no author, and can be rightfully owned and elucidated by all Eritreans and/or by all of us, possible readers of the text. This assumption seems to underlie the texts of many of the Eritrean students, allowing them to act as owners of “The Monkey and the Crocodile”.

The Norwegian students, on the other hand, tend to position themselves as visitors rather than as owners. The most significant indicator of this is the relative infrequency of ‘we’ in the Norwegian material, and the functions it serves. The Norwegian respondents tend to use ‘we’ when they take a step back to discuss the context, not the content, of the story. For example N5 writes: “If we for a moment consider the African continent only...”. Here ‘we’ refers to those who consider the text, looking at it from afar. A more complex case is presented by N4. “Through this short story”, says N4, “we get a moral lecture, something I believe to be typical for many African stories”. Is this response also an expression of distance to the story? From the phrase “we get a moral lecture” it is not possible to tell whether N4 is making a meta-textual comment about the instructional purpose of this kind of story, or whether she identifies with the intended audience, and sees herself as the proper recipient of the moral lecture. By using the hedge “I believe” she can proffer a generalisation, whilst distancing herself from it. This is not something she really knows about, is the implication here. However in using the phrase “typical for many African stories” N4 clearly distances herself from the genre. This is the most explicit example of non-ownership in the Norwegian material; there are none in the Eritrean material.

Several of the Norwegian students achieve distancing through the use of other pronouns. In using the indefinite form ‘one’, N9 supplies an example: “the moral of this story could, aside from the message, be that the *one* who tries to outsmart the other, might be the *one* who’ll eventually be outsmarted” (italics added). The pronoun ‘you’ occurs in both the Norwegian and the Eritrean material.⁹⁰ In using ‘you’ the student can either be making an indefinite reference or

⁹⁰ Hyland employs an addressee feature called ‘indefinite’. It appears from his examples that this category covers both ‘you’ and ‘one’ with indefinite reference (Hyland, 2001:70). Although this category may well be appropriate for the discourse of natural science with which Hyland was concerned, I maintain that there is a significant difference between the use of ‘you’ and ‘one’ in the student texts, and that in the student texts under discussion ‘one’ has indefinite reference, but ‘you’ can refer, as we have seen, to a definite person, namely the reader of the story.

addressing a particular reader or group of readers. In both cases ‘you’ might be said to express distance between the writer and the message. It is as if the student is saying that this message applies to you, but not necessarily to me (perhaps because I know it already). On the other hand it seems that a statement using ‘you’ does express ownership of the message, if not of the story too, inasmuch as it implies that the writer knows what the story is about and is entitled to pronounce on it. There are many more instances of ‘you’ in the Norwegian material than in the Eritrean material. Let us consider N1, as one of many possible examples, who writes, “When *you* try to put a trick on someone, *you* must see the possibility that they will trick *you* back” (italics added). N1 is typical in that she expresses the message of the story as a piece of common sense or everyday wisdom, or even perhaps as a piece of advice. It is a general statement that is not linked by first person pronouns to her own experience, or to that of a group to which she belongs.

In the next Eritrean example the student has made use of both ‘we’ and ‘you’, to serve different purposes in his text.

If *we* see it seems somehow a children’s story and joking story. But it is not like that, If *we* observe and feel it in detail it has an importance that gives message and enlightens the ability to understand about who are *you*, how would able to have a relation or an else contact. (E2, italics added)

E2 uses the pronouns ‘we’ and then ‘you’ to develop a rhetorical approach in which he first invites other readers to belong to a ‘we’ that is the community of readers who think the story is just simple and amusing. After inviting them to share this first reading with him, he then suggests that they go back to the story in order to learn from it. Now E2 is explicitly didactic, and explains that the story allows ‘you’ the readers to find out about yourselves, and how to build a relationship with another person. In shifting from ‘we’ to ‘you’ E2 distances himself from the message, perhaps signifying that he himself does not need to be enlightened on these issues.

E7 makes just the same pronominal manoeuvre, and to a similar end, when she writes:

I suppose the story is trying to tell *us* that *we* shouldn’t put *our* trust on anyone or anything that *we* think *we* know about, that *we* should know better that to be that trusting. I believe that being wise always keep *you* on the safe ground. (E7, italics added)

E8 provides an interesting illustration of how ‘you’ can indicate both distance and disapproval.

One the story is targeted towards cheating someone and make it *your* victim by creating stealthy pretext. And here we note that people who approach us may look very sincere but we don’t know them what they are thinking about. (E8, italics added)

The phrase “make it your victim” generalises the behaviour of the crocodile to human behaviour, and allows E8 to distance himself from it. He then returns to the collective ‘we’ to present the lesson to be learnt from the crocodile’s deceit: “we note”. But he also uses ‘we’ to identify the listeners with the monkey. For when people approach ‘us’, ‘we’ don’t know what their real plans are, just as the monkey didn’t know what the crocodile really had in mind.

10.3.3 Assertiveness and uncertainty in Eritrean interpretations

Let us first look at which of the rhetorical strategies for expressing assertiveness and uncertainty (see 2.4.6) the Eritrean respondents employ. Many of them express certainty in their interpretation. Whether they support the monkey uncritically, or whether they find some factors that exonerate the crocodile’s intention to kill the monkey, their position is stated in value-laden language that seems to offer the reader no other position than agreement. Here is one of several possible examples where the respondent supports the monkey and condemns the crocodile:

This shows how the monkey is honest towards the crocodile, but the disloyal and dishonest crocodile tells the monkey that his heart will be taken. At the end of the story it is revealed that the honest monkey is very wise and cunning to cheat the false friend. (E2)

Two other ways in which certainty can be expressed are exhortation and rhetorical questioning. There are no instances of either in the material. Indeed neither rhetorical nor real questions are to be found in any of the Eritrean responses, though exhortations are to be found in Eritrean student texts otherwise excluded from this study.

One Eritrean respondent, a woman, is less assertive in her interpretation.

I suppose the story *is trying* to tell us that we shouldn’t put our trust on anyone or anything that we think we know about, that we should know better that to be that trusting. *I believe* that being wise always keep you on the safe ground. *Hopefully* the story that I’m about to write now will confirm what I’ve just wrote. (E7, italics added)

Hedging allows respondents to lessen the assertiveness of their responses. E7 hedges with “I suppose”, and later with “hopefully”, when she introduces a story of her own. Even the story itself is described as being cautious, for it is “trying to tell us...” However, when it comes to the expression of her own convictions, this respondent writes “I believe”, which may also express her uncertainty but might instead mark her return to a firmly-held belief.

10.3.4 Assertiveness and uncertainty in Norwegian interpretations

The Norwegian students are more likely to express themselves non-assertively than the Eritrean respondents, using a hedge such as “I think”. In the Norwegian material, hedges sometimes appear in initial position, especially at the start of the whole response or at the start of a later paragraph. In initial position hedges lessen the assertiveness of the statements that follow, and

invite the reader to consider the response as an opinion, rather than as the definitive meaning of the story.

Questions are a way of expressing uncertainty, though used rhetorically they can underscore the obviousness of the writer's interpretation. N5 asks four rhetorical questions, and N6 asks one real question. The response of N5 is discussed at more length in section 10.4.4, so let us here look more closely at N6's response.

I wondered whether the respondents' indictment of the crocodile would be lessened by the fact that the crocodile intends to take the heart of the monkey to save not himself but his wife. The crocodile is not, after all, motivated by greed or viciousness. This potentially ameliorating consideration is, however, only commented on by two of the respondents, N2 and N6:

In similar stories, the violator's reason for being cruel is usually that "it is in my nature". But this crocodile wants to kill the monkey to save his wife's life. Does that make the crocodile more sympathetic than if he wanted to kill the monkey solely for feeding purposes? (N6)

This response shows a considerable level of meta-textual insight. Firstly N6 classifies the crocodile as 'a violator', a classification that implies that there are rights or rules that the crocodile contravenes. She then introduces the violator's conventional defence. By putting the phrase 'it is in my nature' in quotation marks she introduces another voice, not heard in this story, into her interpretation. Finally, the question as to whether the crocodile's motivation makes him more sympathetic than had he been motivated solely by self-interest explores the meaning of the story. It also challenges the reader to address the particularity of this story, rather than to assume that the crocodile straightforwardly fulfils the role of deceitful villain familiar from other tales. At neither level is the question that N6 asks rhetorical, although it is left unanswered, since it is not possible to adduce what answer she would give to her own question.

In her response N6 also talks about the relative value of an Ethiopian and Eritrean life, and adds a comment in parenthesis, "(This is perhaps pretty far-fetched, but it crossed my mind when I read the story, so I thought I should include it)". Her comment is interesting because whilst on the one hand she expresses uncertainty about the value of her own comment, she also expresses her understanding of the writing task as being one of truth-telling, the idea being that since she thought it, she should write it. This sheds a contrastive light on the assertiveness of many of the Eritrean responses. Their assertiveness is, I believe, based on an Eritrean academic literacy practice where personal responses and associations to literature are *not* to the point and are therefore not mentioned. To be of value their response must be endorsed either through the authority of a teacher, or through being a collective interpretation that is also held by an

interpretive community that extends well beyond the classroom. When thus endorsed, their response can (and should?) be assertively presented.

N2 recognises the moral complexity of the story, and he reports that he no longer stands by his first perception of the crocodile as ‘bad’. Indeed he goes so far as to see the monkey’s motivation of self-preservation as inferior to the altruistic motivation of the crocodile.

At first I thought that the crocodile was bad, but at the same time he was bad for a reason. He is interested in the monkey’s heart so that his sick wife can get better. The monkey only thinking about his tummy when he makes his decisions. (N2)

N2 sees the story as morally complex, in that good and bad, craftiness and naivety, are characteristics of both animals. This means that the story can be both presented and received in many different ways, says N2, depending on the intentions of the storyteller:

I think that this story can be understood differently according to who is telling the story. I’ve heard it different places and every time the message changes a bit. It might be because I change my opinion all the time, but I also like to believe stories like this have many different messages. The different messages can be strengthened or weakened according to what the story teller want’s us to believe. (N2)

Whilst N2 is certain about there being many interpretive possibilities, he is not sure how to make sense of the story himself, seeing its complexity as a hindrance to the drawing of a lesson about right and wrong. Another Norwegian student, N8, writes explicitly about her confusion in making sense of the story:

I would like to put into words my immediate reaction to the text. It simply didn’t make sense to me. I found it impossible to get passed the fact that the monkey was willing to sit on the back of the crocodile when it knew that it was dangerous. (N8)

N8 is a student who also in other classroom discussions looked to literary texts to corroborate or confront her own life experiences. She offers an explanation for what she describes as “my first and very personal reaction to the piece”. The explanation is based on a self-assessment of her personality, and the idea that she may in this be representative of a typically Norwegian view of the world:

Being a very cautious person myself, no amount of “dates” would make me risk “sitting on the crocodile’s back”. Personally I’d just wait for the crocodile to leave so that I could get back to my own dates. Perhaps it’s my Norwegian scepticism. (N8)

In Hofstede’s terms “Norwegian scepticism” can be understood as a strategy of uncertainty avoidance, a strategy his research found to be less marked in Norwegian society than in most other societies in his study (Hofstede, 1984:122). And indeed, rather than *avoiding* uncertainty, N8 is interested in developing strategies for increasing her tolerance of uncertainty, and reading

fiction is one such strategy. In answer to the question in the questionnaire about why fiction is useful or not useful, N8 wrote:

Fiction allows you to glimpse into someone else's mind, thus expanding your own. ... It helps you understand that you are very biased in your way of thinking because of your own background and culture. (N8)

10.4 Interpretive strategies

10.4.1 *Recognising the story*

I start my review of the interpretive strategies that the students use by looking at students who wrote that they were familiar with a version of the story, or who recognised it as relating to other texts with which they were familiar. It is perhaps a little forced to describe recognising the story as an interpretive strategy, but in the sense that recognition necessarily activates associations to the previous contexts in which the reader has encountered and interpreted the story, it is useful to discuss recognition as an interpretive strategy. Two comments, one Eritrean and one Norwegian, show how the respondents construct their interpretation of the story by calling to mind other texts from their own culture: "When I read this story a tigrina proverb strike my mind", wrote E1. "I also see some similarities to stories/tales from Sápmi", wrote N2.

I have already argued that when the Eritrean respondents use 'I' they position themselves as members of the community that is entitled to expound on and interpret the story. In the above pair we see that also one of the Norwegian respondents is positioned to do the same. This student mentions that he was familiar with this or other versions of the story and makes it clear that the story is part of the oral tradition in which he was brought up.

I've heard this story many times during my childhood and the versions differ according to who the story teller is, while the underlying message stays the same. (N2)

N2 compares this story to others with "a similar structure" that he has heard. In these other stories it is important to outwit one's enemy, and N2 reports that it is usually clear who is stupid and who is smart, and who is wrong and who is right. In "The Monkey and the Crocodile", however, the roles are not so distinct:

The monkey and the crocodile has a similar structure to the animal fables that I've heard. In our fables the characters are often "black and white" where one of the animals is clearly dumber than the other. In *The monkey and the crocodile* neither of the animals are foolish, although the monkey does outsmart the crocodile in the end. (N2)

Another Norwegian respondent, N10, found the story on the Internet, where it was said to be a *Jataka* story originating in the epic writings of Buddhism in India. He wrote the Internet version of the story in his own words, and most of this respondent's comments are based on this

version. They have therefore been excluded from this analysis.⁹¹ However his approach to the writing task is of interest, for N10 uses it to make a strong claim to participation in the academic community: “He [the crocodile] does also admit his defeat in the end which shows that he is somewhat intrapersonally reflected”. By imposing the discourse of pedagogy – “intrapersonally reflected” – on his reception of this story, N10 expresses his identity as an experienced and academically skilled student. He goes on to explain how “after merely having googled the words ‘monkey’, ‘and’ and ‘crocodile’, I found a somewhat similar story to the one we read in class”. Here I understand N10 to be proffering advice to the teacher/reader about how to go about researching the origin of the literary text. That this was intended as information to me was made explicit when he later asked if I had now read this version of the story, and if I had found it interesting.

N2 also knew the story to be of Indian origin, but his comment tactfully exonerates the teacher/researcher from an accusation of having been sloppy in finding the source of the story: “I always thought this was a story from India written in Sanskrit (200BC), but I suppose good stories travel”. Other respondents may have been familiar with the story but not mentioned it, since this was not explicitly requested of them. In Eritrea, one of the graduate assistants wrote that she was familiar with the story from her childhood:

→ As a child, I remember a similar story of a little fish and a monkey. But the difference between these two stories is that in the story which I knew as a child, the fish was not wicked from the very beginning. It was nice and friendly at first. But then having told to bring a monkey’s heart for his dying chief, he asked the monkey for a ride on his back and was very sorry to tell the monkey his wicked plan in the middle of the sea.

10.4.2 Telling other stories

One of the writing tasks that respondents could choose was to write a different story with the same message. I had expected that this option would be chosen by students who enjoyed writing creatively, and I had envisaged that they would write stories that they had made up themselves. In fact it was to a large extent used to retell stories which they already knew. The two Norwegian respondents who chose this option both integrated their stories into their discussion, illustrating other aspects of the fable that caught their attention, rather than re-exemplifying the message. We have already reviewed N10’s version of the fable that he found on the Internet. N8, for her part, retold “The Elephant’s Child” by Rudyard Kipling (although she did not attribute it to him), introduced with the phrase “I recall a fable about...”.

⁹¹ An Indian member of the English faculty at EIT also recognised the story as one familiar from his childhood in India. He forwarded the theory that the story might have been brought to an area in central east Africa that is now Sudan by people from the Indian sub-continent who were employed there more than two thousand years ago as construction workers.

The assumption that originality is a criterion of quality was not shared by the Eritrean students. Several of them who understood that I was interested in Eritrean literature gave me stories that they had copied verbatim from other sources and signed these copies with their own name. In their view these texts, which I have excluded from this study, were as valuable as, if not more valuable than, their classroom encounter with the text.⁹²

The Eritrean respondents typically presented their text as a new story with the same message and then let it speak for itself. Two of the three Eritrean storytellers were women. This should not be given undue significance, for amongst the responses not included in this study were five more new stories, all told by men. All three stories that the Eritrean respondents wrote are based on human characters. I adduce that two of them are based on incidents that have actually taken place since they include the phrases “near my town” (E9) and “in my neighbourhood” (E7). E9’s story is about a greedy bully who is fooled by two young girls who serve him insect-ridden food. E7’s story is about a young girl who uses ingenuity to escape from and secure the punishment of a man who has hounded and abused her. A second type of story, told by E4, I judge to be based on a story she has read elsewhere or possibly composed herself. E4 introduces it as a story with the same message as “The Monkey and the Crocodile” but in fact it also fills the requirement of writing task 3, a new story where the monkey is a school boy, the crocodile is a bad person, and the setting is a town. E4’s story deals with a young boy successfully tricking a “very tall huge man with black sunglasses” and the lesson is that one should not fool somebody who is willing to trust you. Several features of the story – the boy’s name, David, the black car, the police officers on the street (something one does not see in

⁹² One such was given me a day or two after the classroom session was finished. Written in his own handwriting, with his own name on the sheet of paper, I recognised “The Lion and the Clever Rabbit” as being from Rahel Asghedom’s collection *Colorful Stories*. The story is well-chosen, for the “moral and advice” that concludes this story is the same as the message that this respondent identifies:

If trouble happened
Don’t be frightened
Instead, think carefully
Then you will solve it surely.

The graduate assistant who wrote this story as part of his response introduces it simply as “a different story with the same message”. I would like to add a reflection here on the non-crediting of reproduced texts, which in me has tended to produce a knee-jerk reflex cry of “Plagiarism!”. ‘Reflexes’ can be wrong, or rather, learned. The lengthy citation of other people’s writing can be understood as admiration for, and sometimes an aspiration to emulate, that work, not as an attempt to claim the writing as one’s own. In the case of the graduate assistant, I believe that he wanted to give me, the reader/researcher, insight into the tradition of Eritrean fables. I had previously had a long discussion with him about the meaning of one of the other literary texts in this study, and what sort of writing task I should set for that text. He had therefore considerable involvement in the concerns of this project at the time of writing his response to “The Monkey and the Crocodile”.

Eritrea) and the very tall man with black sunglasses – suggest that it may be American in origin.

Although there were only three Eritrean students who wrote a new story, their stories differ from the two stories of the Norwegian students in several ways. Most obviously, they are longer. A prosaic explanation is that the Eritrean students had more time to write in class than did the Norwegian students. But their stories are told with a narrative tension that is not found in the Norwegian stories. Two of the three Eritrean stories are presented as stories from the students' own experience, or from their own cultural repertoire, whereas the two Norwegian stories are claimed to belong to an international canon. The Eritrean stories are taken from a local literary repertoire of narratives that the student recognises as having didactic impact for the student him/herself and his/her reader, indicating a familiarity with the genre of the fable, and a pleasure in storytelling. E7 actually wrote a short note at the end of her response where she says, "Well, that's all – it has been a pleasure to write this story".

In describing and interpreting the messages of the student texts in section 10.5 I make occasional reference to the new stories that the Eritrean and Norwegian students told.

10.4.3 Learning from the story

Determining whether the interpretive strategy of learning from the story was an unprompted response is complicated by the writing assignment. I cannot show that the respondents have made an independent identification of the story as having an educational message, since they were explicitly required to find a message in the introductory question. But there are other ways in which students show an understanding of the story as educational, as when E8 describes it as being "very informative". What makes it informative, apparently, is that the reader is shown a situation "from different aspects of perspectives". Most of the Eritrean respondents, however, position themselves as learners through phrases such as 'I am able to learn', 'we can see', 'we understand' or 'this tells us'. The word 'should' is also frequently used, for the story tells us what sort of person we should be and how we should behave. E3 for example says "we should not get disturbed, instead we should try our best to make good out of bad". Expressions such as 'everyone...' and 'you have to be...' are also instances of the reader drawing educational messages from the story.

The term 'fable', which in itself implies that the text has an educational function, is used by three of the Norwegian respondents. The Eritrean students often explicitly express the idea that it is the *function* of the story to impart a lesson to the reader. The respondents' understanding of the story is in line with Okpewho's comment: "Perhaps it is in the folktales or fables – stories centered on animals and other beings and not related to any historical events – that we have the clearest example of oral literature designed to teach specific lessons of behaviour" (Okpewho,

1992:117). Nearly all the Eritrean respondents do in fact perceive the story of the monkey and the crocodile to be designed to teach “specific lessons of behaviour”. E1 writes: “The Monkey and the crocodile” is an interesting story which has a teaching lesson to any reader who wants to be careful and cunning in any time in trouble circumstances”.

The Norwegian respondents, as a group, are less inclined to embrace the story as educational. “When studied I’m sure this story could give some sort of insight”, says N8. The Norwegian responses are more inclined to look at various interpretive possibilities, of which learning is one. In so doing they exemplify an understanding of literature as open-ended and meaning as indefinite. This idea is explicitly expressed by N5. He is convinced that it is the instability of meaning that characterises this and any other good story: “Every reader will undoubtedly to a large extent understand the story in accordance with his/hers own life experience, but isn’t that the very fact that a good story aspires to achieve?”. N5’s final rhetorical question is a strong expression of his conviction that meaning is unstable. The converse view – that the story has a pre-determined stable meaning for all readers – is an implicit assumption in the Eritrean responses.

According to Okpewho, stories are important both in allowing the younger members of a society to absorb the ideas that will guide them through life, but also in reinforcing these ideas in older members of the society (Okpewho, 1992:115). Some of the Eritrean respondents position themselves as reader/listeners who in Okpewho’s terms have already absorbed the ideas in the story. E9, for example, identifies the story as suitable for young children:

The story is very fantastic and enjoyable story. When I was in fifth grade, I used to read it. This story has an important message specially to young children, Because, they can learn cunningness or cleverness from it. (E9)

E9 apparently enjoyed the story when he read it as a child – in fifth grade he would have been about eleven years old. “I used to read it” suggests that he returned to the story several times, although the phrase is perhaps used here as an alternative form to the simple past tense.

Okpewho, writing about the classification of oral literature in Africa, argues that the problem with classifying a tale as either animal or human is that “the one class of beings often behaves so much like the other that it hardly means anything, in the world of the folktale, to separate one from the other” (Okpewho, 1992:181). For, as he goes on to explain, reading the stories as simple narratives about animals is not the intended reading: “human characteristics are introduced partly to entertain us and partly also because the experiences of these animals are meant to have some relevance or message for us” (1992:181). E1, for example, writes that “the crocodile is a suggestive to a lazy fellow who expects to live without his effort”. The phrase “is

suggestive to” demonstrates his understanding of the animal characters as representing human qualities and behaviour. An interesting question is whether it is necessary for the story to be explicit about the message to be learnt from it, thus making it clear to the reader that a story about two animals is to be understood as advice about *human* relations. For the Eritrean students this was not necessary, for although E11 understands the story to be about the way monkeys and crocodiles behave (“it tells us that the monkey is more cunning than the crocodile”), he also generalises the animals’ behaviour to human behaviour. None of the Eritrean respondents write that they had difficulties in identifying the message. Okpewho maintains that “the portraiture of the characters and their behaviours is invariably so explicit that no moral need be stated specifically” (1992:117). But for some of the Norwegian students finding the message proved very difficult. “When it came to find the moral of the story, I was lost”, says N3, who is otherwise an enthusiastic and sensitive reader of Western literature. “It simply didn’t make sense to me”, says N8. For these students, then, a statement of message would have facilitated an educational reading of the story.

One Eritrean and one Norwegian respondent also suggest that there may indeed be a need to state the moral explicitly. E2 writes that without a careful reading it is possible to oversee the didactic aspect of these stories, an aspect that he insists is also present:

This story is a wonderful and fantastic story. If we see it seems somehow a children’s story and joking story. But It is not like that, If we observe and feel it in detail it has an importance that gives message and enlightens the ability to understand about who are you, how would able to have a relation or an else contact. (E2)

The same approach is taken by N4, this time expressed more cautiously as a personal opinion:

At first, the monkey and the crocodile might seem like just an entertaining story with talking animals. In my opinion, it is more than that. I believe that this story has got a message... (N4)

A key reason why so many of the Eritrean respondents read “The Monkey and the Crocodile” as a story from which they can learn appropriate behaviour and values, lies, I argue, in their understanding of what constitutes good literature, as discussed in chapter 8. It is pertinent to recall what the Eritrean students wrote when asked about a text that they had particularly enjoyed. The most common reason the Eritrean respondents gave for their choice was that they had learned something from it, or that they agreed with its message. For many of them the only reason that they mentioned was that it promoted moral values which they found educational, or with which they already agreed. As a corollary to this question several Eritrean respondents identified the lack of a message as a reason for disliking a story. By contrast, not one of the Norwegian respondents mentioned moral or educational guidance as a reason for liking or disliking a literary text.

We have looked at the possibility that the readiness with which most Eritrean respondents identify the story as educational was influenced by the writing task itself – finding the message. The fact that the story was presented and the responses elicited in an educational setting also influenced their reception. Yet another factor that may have encouraged a didactic reading is the respondents' awareness that I, a non-Eritrean, was the intended reader of their texts. It is possible that the Eritrean respondents were especially interested in making the didactic insights offered by this *Eritrean* story available to me.

10.4.4 *Meta-textual commentary*

I turn now to the meta-textual expressions that the respondents use when they write about the story. In particular I consider the response of N5, who is the only respondent to devote his long answer to a discussion of the form and function of the story.

The Eritrean respondents who include a meta-textual expression typically combine this commentary with an acknowledgement of the educational value of the story for themselves. This double positioning allows the respondent both to claim ownership of the story and to claim an identity as a student of literature. Familiarity with the genre of the didactic story is signalled, for example, when E8 writes “we learn from this *typical* story”; or when E10 writes “‘The Monkey and Crocodile’ is *an ideal example* for this principle” (italics added in both). The meta-textual comments of the Norwegian respondents are, with the exception of N5, limited to naming or briefly remarking on the genre of “The Monkey and the Crocodile”. N4 speaks of “this short story”, which is perhaps not a genre definition at all but an epithetic comment on the length of the story, and N2 compares it to other animal fables, such as Aesop’s fables, whose purpose is to “gently teach us a lesson”. N8, although she finds the psychological logic of the story improbable, compares it to another “fable” that she remembers. In fact most Norwegian respondents do not write about the genre of “The Monkey and the Crocodile” at all, they simply refer to it as a story. This may partly be to do with the fact that it is to be found under the heading “Orature” in the course compendium, and so the overarching genre is already given.

N5, then, is the only respondent to devote his answer to a meta-textual discussion of the story. He is one of the older respondents, at least 28 years old, and his out-of-class reading spans four continents and includes Isabella Allende, Salman Rushdie, Umberto Eco and Joseph Conrad, as well as the poetry of Robert Frost. At the beginning of the research period N5 emphasised the importance of literature for the development of informed discussion. “The purpose of literature, in my opinion, is to make the reader reach a deeper insight, reflect and hopefully learn something more about the theme considered, as well as to entertain and enrich our lives”, he wrote in the first teaching session. At the end of the course in African literature,

N5 focused on what one can learn from reading literature. Fiction is useful, he wrote, “because it enriches our factual knowledge at the same time as it can be a starting point for wider discussions on different political and social issues”.

N5 starts his discussion of “The Monkey and the Crocodile” by wondering about the meaning of the story. The discussion is aligned with the academic genre of meta-textual analysis by the consistent use of the distancing pronoun ‘one’ and the recurrent use of the passive voice:

After reading *The Monkey and the Crocodile* one is left wondering what the true message and purpose of the transcribed orature is. What is actually that the story, since the author is unknown, wishes to achieve? Is it something exclusive to the people of Africa who have a tradition of hearing this kind of medium or is the content of a more universal kind? As it is said that the beauty is in the eye of the beholder, one could probably say that the true meaning of every story is in the heart and soul of the receiver. Such is the case, in my opinion, of *The Monkey and the Crocodile*. (N5)

We can see that N5 moves from a consideration of the story as a specifically African text to claiming that it is a text that can resonate in any reader. N5 is also concerned to identify what he calls the “true meaning” of the story. He moves from the universal to a more specific lesson in his discussion of the fable’s possible functions.

The story can be interpreted on several levels: as being a simple story told in order to entertain, a story told in order to shed light on an important issue of life and educate the receiver or as a story with political undertones told to reinforce the sense of, a hard fought for, independence. (N5)

In line with Okpewho’s characterisation of the fable in use, N5 identifies entertainment and education as its two functions, but he also elaborates the story’s educational range to include political commentary on local and international conflicts. In so saying N5 acknowledges that a fable such as this one could have a role to play in a nation-building project where the resilience necessary to achieve and maintain independence must be kept to the forefront of the public imagination.

Furthermore the story has a strong political message; one that could be understood as a description of a conflict particular to the African continent or that could easily apply to any conflict where a weaker party has experienced being violated by a superior power. (N5)

N5 concludes that the reader should not underestimate the multiple layers of meaning in the story simply because it is presented in simple language. Indeed, he asks if the simplicity of the story does not make it an ideal vehicle for conveying “the greatest wisdoms”.

In conclusion *The Monkey and the Crocodile* is a story that “works” on many levels. [...] To reach out to as many people as possible in a simple, easily understandable language, that we should not be deceived by because is it not the case that the greatest wisdoms often are best told in the simplest terms? (N5)

In using “wisdoms” N5 aligns with the values of the Eritrean respondents more clearly than do any of the other Norwegian respondents. In this and other ways N5 is present in his own text. Indeed, meta-texts are in themselves a form of authorial manifestation, says Fløttum, since they are intended to guide the reader (Fløttum, et al., 2006:167). And yet, despite N5’s measured reflection on the possible meaning positions that the story offers, he does not choose between them to find the lesson that the story has for *him*.

10.5 Messages

10.5.1 *Characterising the messages*

The messages identified by the respondents fall into two main categories that deal with friendship and trust on the one hand and how to react expediently to a threatening situation on the other, although they overlap considerably. These categories are discussed in some detail in sections 10.5.3 and 10.5.4. There were also some other messages which are discussed more briefly in section 10.5.2. In this section I consider more generally how many and how complex are the messages that the respondents found.

The writing task asked the respondents to pick out the message of the story, a formulation that implies that there is one, and only one, message. Many students, however, picked out more than one message. The extent to which a message appears as distinct from other messages depends on its presentation as well as on its content. If students distinguish them with bullet points or by explicitly identifying more than one message the case is uncomplicated. But when respondents reflect at some length on the message they find, they introduce a variety of arguments and considerations, some of which could arguably be regarded as new messages. Several Norwegian respondents write of the possibility of there being more than one: “There could be more than one message”, writes N1, “it is up to us to interpret the story”. This comment suggests a certain confidence in herself as a reader, since it demonstrates a willingness to contest the premises of the writing task, already on the first day of the course in African literature.

In fact five of the Norwegian respondents identify two or more distinct messages, and they comment explicitly on there being more than one interpretation of the fable. By contrast, only two students in the Eritrean group (E6 and E12) find more than one message, and neither of them states explicitly that there is more than one. Had these two students not been included, and, for that matter, had I not interpreted their responses as identifying two distinct messages, it would have been possible to say that all the Eritrean students found only one message. Even with the inclusion of E6 and E12 one might still have been tempted to suggest that there are different reader expectations in Eritrea and Norway, to the effect that Norwegian students are

more likely to look for and find multiple meanings. After all, the Norwegian students list the messages or otherwise identify them as distinct, whereas the Eritrean students do not show this awareness.

A salutary warning of how misleading such broader generalisations from these two small groups can be is provided by reviewing the seventeen Eritrean respondents excluded from the body of this study. Amongst their texts there are four students who do in fact identify two messages explicitly, as well as those who find two messages without identifying them as distinct. One writes, “I think the story have two messages. It is my opinion”. Note, incidentally, the deliberate way this student introduces an opinion that might seem to run counter to the assumption of one message in the introductory question. Clearly, then, something found in one of the groups and absent or nearly absent in the other must be treated with great caution. It does not allow for the conclusion that this something is not available to other students in the same classroom, or might not have been found had the students worked with a different literary text, or with a different writing task. In short, it is possible to offer tentative comparative generalisations on the basis of what can be found in the material, but not on what is *not* found.

There is a somewhat greater number of distinct messages in the Norwegian material, but some of the Eritrean messages show a greater complexity than do any of the Norwegian messages. E12 is an interesting case in point.

In sum up If we think of this message, we can understand that no one can know one's plans in mind Except at the final ends of desires on one hand and after looking such terrible resolutions instead of becoming a victim simply being a hopeful to win trying your best so as to save yourself using a wise and well being thoughts than that of the foes or enemies which looks friends at first but beasts next. (E12)

The first thing to note is that this discussion of the message comes in the second of the two paragraphs that make up E12's response. The first paragraph, though introduced with the phrase “the message that we can see or find...”, is in fact a plot summary. Thus E12 designs his answer to match the structural pattern of a fable: story first, then message. E12 writes the whole second paragraph without other punctuation than a capital letter and a full stop, so layout and punctuation do not indicate when or if a new message is introduced. The first message, that you can't know someone's real plans until they are played out, could be drawn from the behaviour of both the crocodile and the monkey, but the use of the distancing third person in “one's plans” might indicate that it is the crocodile – the animal we do *not* identify with – whose plans we cannot know. E12 moves on with the conjunction ‘and’ to a second message about expedient reaction in the face of a threatening situation. I understand him to say that you can save yourself by being smarter than your enemies. The last subordinate clause, beginning with “which

looks...”, could be regarded as a third message, one about friendship, to the effect that enemies can look friendly before they prove themselves to be malicious. Alternatively it could be regarded as an apropos to the advice about remaining optimistic and smart in a threatening situation. I have chosen this latter option, on the grounds that the message about friendship is not elaborated and not sufficiently distinguished from the message about expedient reaction, but it is clearly a borderline case.

Bearing these cautions in mind, I do find it striking that two of the Norwegian students, N2 and N5, devote a considerable part of their text to discussing the possibility of there being several interpretations. Both these students have ‘hyphenated identities’, to adopt a phrase from the Norwegian-Indian author and counsellor Loveleen Brenna (2001). Brenna reflects on the particular hyphenation of ethnic and national identity in people who have lived for many years, or all their lives, in Norway and whose parents are from another nation. A person in this situation, she says, can shuttle between two realities and be both observer and actor: “He can see one and the same situation from two different angles and thereby develop a depth of perspective that many in the majority society and in his parents’ situation lack” (2001:86, my translation). One can therefore conjecture that the possibility and value of multiple interpretations is particularly apparent to Norwegian respondents who themselves have hyphenated identities.

10.5.2 ‘Other messages’

I here consider messages that are not about friendship and trust, or how to react in a threatening situation. We have just looked at E12, who identified the message that you can’t know someone’s plans until they are played out. The other messages in this mixed bag are from the Norwegian group. They occur only once, with the exception of a message about tricksters, which occurs three times. The messages are typically mentioned without being further discussed. They can all be described as proffering Polonius-style advice about how to get on in the world.

Table 12: Other messages in the Norwegian group

a trickster can be undone by/deserves to experience his own trickery	N1, N4, N9
the importance of understanding one another’s cultures	N1
there is good and bad in everybody	N5
stick to what you know	N3
the grass isn’t greener on the other side	N6

The Norwegian respondents identify what I deem to be a greater range of distinct messages than do the Eritreans. It is possible that the greater number of *different* messages identified by the Norwegians can be partly accounted for by the particular categories that I have developed to describe the material. But it may also reflect a Norwegian and a classroom culture in which originality is valued. This was demonstrated when the messages were read aloud in class; unexpected phrasings and messages were rewarded with expressions of interest or laughter.

N6 mentions three distinct messages, one about friendship, one about expedient reaction, and one which is a proverb, “The grass isn’t greener on the other side”. This is the only example of a proverb in the Norwegian material and refers to a common saying that is widely adapted in English and Norwegian. In line with Wolfgang Mieder’s (1995) remark that this particular proverb (or aphorism) is usually employed as a recognizable bit of wisdom signalling dissatisfaction with one’s present situation, and that writers who use it do not deem further explication to be necessary, N6 presents this message without elaboration.

The category about tricksters deserves special comment. It is represented by three of the Norwegian students:

I also feel that this story says that it is OK to give someone what they deserve, as the monkey does when the crocodile is trying to trick him. (N4)

the moral of this story could, aside from the message, be that the one who tries to outsmart the other, might be the one who’ll eventually be outsmarted. (N9)

In my opinion:

When you try to put a trick on someone, you must see the possibility that they will trick you back. (N1)

The idea of all three messages is that a bully can also become a victim. For N4 one is justified in ‘paying someone back’ if they have behaved unfairly. “This story says that it is OK” may be either a cautious or an assertive expression of this belief. N9 and N1, on the other hand, describe *the possibility* of roles being reversed, rather than the question of whether such role reversal is justifiable. All three responses are concerned with not accepting the role of victim, a concern they have in common with responses that deal with an expedient reaction to threat. However these Norwegian responses see the situation not as an occasion for expedient reaction but as a demonstration of just rewards. One could even see the balance that they identify between the two animals in terms of equal opportunities, a central aspect of the Norwegian concept of *likhet*, discussed in section 6.3.3. N4, who understands the story to be a “moral lecture”, points to the quandary that arises when a friend becomes an enemy, and states that one is then entitled to trick one’s erstwhile friend in order to survive oneself. This message also deals with friendship and trust and with how to respond to threat, illustrating again that

categorisation can involve relatively arbitrary decisions, however necessary for the coherent presentation of a material involving twenty-two respondents.

All three students who wrote about tricksters hedge their identification of the message, using the phrases “I also feel.”, “the moral could [...] be” and “in my opinion”. This hedging probably reflects a general caution about identifying the message in the story. This is particularly the case for N1, who was new to me and to her co-students at the time when this first response was collected. Her lack of elaboration may similarly reflect diffidence towards the group and the teacher, and the rustiness of her English, at the outset of the course. N4 and N9 had already identified another message, so their hedging might also reflect their uncertainty about finding a second and less obvious message.

10.5.3 Friendship

Let us turn now to the theme of trust and friendship, one of the two main categories and the one most frequently identified by the Norwegian students. Five Norwegian respondents and five Eritrean respondents identify the message (or one of the messages) of the story as relating to this theme.

Respondents in both groups write of friendship as a relationship whose value and authenticity must be proved over a long period of time. They warn against the risks involved in hasty and incompatible friendships. They advise that one should be cautious about new friendships, especially when the new friend may be motivated by factors of which one is not aware. For these respondents the message of the story is to warn, remind or teach the reader that friendly behaviour may not be what it seems. Both E8 and N5 present this message as a general observation. E8 writes that “people who approach us may look very sincere but we don’t know them what they are thinking about”, and N5 writes that “good gestures often come with an agenda”. A similar sentiment is expressed by E7 in the form of advice: “we shouldn’t put our trust on anyone or anything that we think we know about, that we should know better that to be that trusting”.

Several of the Eritrean respondents describe the qualities of a real (as opposed to a false) friend. The qualities they mention are different in focus to those that the Norwegian respondents use to characterise a friend. Being honest and faithful is mentioned by E5, and behaving faithfully by E6. Frankness and being sympathetic and wise are mentioned by E2. Being wise, however, is more frequently associated with responding expediently to threat, and is discussed in the following section. The difference between honesty and frankness, at least for E2, seems to be that one may be honest and say nothing, but to be frank one must be honest *and* speak one’s

thoughts: “Friends must be wise, frank, sympathy and always must share their problem and happiness frankly, because a friend in deed is a friend in need”.

None of the Norwegian respondents write of honesty or frankness in their discussions of friendship. Trust, on the other hand, is an important concept for them, occurring in four of their texts (as opposed to only one of the Eritrean texts, E7). N9, for example, notes that “trust is fragile, it can easily be broken”.

Two Eritrean students make the point that the crocodile and the monkey are inherently incapable of friendship. E11 mentions that a difference of class or power makes an expectation of trust and friendship unrealistic: “we can’t do relationship with those whom are not at the same class. or if it can be, It will be the relation of selfish and a false friend”. E10 sees this incompatibility in terms of natural law, and he makes the crocodile responsible for ignoring this law. He writes: “The crocodile in contrast being selfish, he want to eat poor, miserable monkey [...] Forgetting the right to live on earth according the law of nature”. The terms ‘right’ and ‘law’ introduce a judicial dimension to E10’s reception of the story. In attributing human traits to the crocodile – he is selfish and he forgets – E10 apparently condemns him for wilfully contravening a law of which he is aware, and which he could, if he chose, respect.

The Norwegian respondents are particularly concerned with the risks involved in choosing a friend, and in knowing whether an early friendship is well-chosen, and in this concern they reflect the challenges of choice in personal relations. Anthony Giddens sees notions of trust and risk as having a particular application in the circumstances of uncertainty and multiple choice that he describes as prototypical of contemporary modern society. Trust, he says, “stands guard over the self in its dealings with everyday reality” (1991:4). And everyday life is characteristically risky, inasmuch as risk is fundamental to the way people organise the social world. “Thinking in terms of risk is vital to assessing how far projects are likely to diverge from their anticipated outcomes.” The choice of a friend in the context of what he calls a pure relationship is intrinsically risky, as such a relationship can only exist for whatever rewards it can deliver, and is not determined or restricted by criteria outside the relationship itself, such as kinship, social duty or traditional obligation (1991:6).

The relative infrequency with which the Norwegian respondents use the pronoun ‘we’ or ‘I’ in discussing the message of friendship is compatible with the possibility that they do not own this message and that they observe the story from a distance. Another factor here is that this text came very early in the course, before trust had been established between the participants in the group, and the students therefore gave their response from a safe emotional distance. Although the Norwegian respondents recognise a message about how friendship can be abused, and draw

the conclusion that the value and authenticity of a friendship must be proved over time, it is not clear whether this is important in their own expectations and experience of friendship.

Discussion at this personal level would have been inappropriate, given the respondents' primary status as students of African literature. They were not, after all, participants in a cross-cultural study of personal relationships.

I believe the Eritrean students can relate to both a system of personal relations in their home lives in which kinship commitments and social duty *are* determining factors, and also to a modern 'pure' relationship in school and on campus, in which they can choose friends solely for the rewards that friendship offers. Whilst the setting of "The Monkey and the Crocodile" allows the respondents to evaluate the friendship between the two characters in terms of a 'pure' relationship, without reference to kinship commitments and social duty, the setting of the two other texts in this study – "Anisino" and *The Other War* – is Eritrean, and kinship commitments and social duty have a strong influence on the characters' personal relations and the choices available to them.

The sociocultural understanding of friendship in Norway that Gullestad discusses in terms of class and difference (see 6.4.2) contrasts with the more general ideal of friendship which the Norwegian students express in relation to the monkey and the crocodile. It is trust and betrayal which make and break a friendship; intrinsic incompatibility based on class, in this case the class of crocodiles and the class of monkeys, is not mentioned as a reason for the breakdown of the relationship. The students' acceptance of friendship across class has in part to do with a convention in fables that different species of animals have friends from different species. Ken Saro-Wiwa (1991) tells Ogoni stories where animals even marry quite different species to themselves, and I was told similar stories of animal intermarriage in Botswana in 2009. It is therefore far from straightforward to infer what the Norwegian students think about the conditions for viable friendship on the basis of their response to a fable in which such particular and non-realistic literary conventions are inscribed.

10.5.4 Expedient reaction

A significant difference between the two groups of respondents relates to the extent to which they identify a message about the value of choosing an expedient reaction in a threatening or dangerous situation. Three Norwegian students identify this as one of the story's messages, (and these students also identify one or two other messages), whereas a message about expedient reaction was by far the most frequent in the Eritrean group, occurring in eight of the twelve texts. Also the three new stories that the students told relate to this theme, as they deal with outsmarting people who have done someone harm, or who intend to do so.

Many of the Eritrean respondents underline that if one behaves appropriately in times of danger, the danger can be controlled or averted. Some of them underline the seriousness of the message. “What we display outwardly can have the difference of life and death”, writes E1, and E11 capitalises LOSE to show just how important it is to react appropriately: “The monkey understood that if his reaction is in anger, she will LOSE her life”.

“The Monkey and the Crocodile” can be described as a story with two main parts: a problem is presented, a smart solution is found. In this it is reminiscent of the dilemma tales told in parts of West Africa. The finding that the Eritrean students focus on the solution – on the ingenuity of the monkey – could be indicative of their familiarity with this narrative pattern. It is also possible that the literary repertoire of the Christian readers is influenced by biblical stories with a problem-solution narrative structure, such as the miracle of the two loaves and the five fish, or the dilemma that Solomon faced when two mothers claimed the same baby as their own.⁹³

The appropriate response to danger, say the Eritrean respondents, is to be wise and cunning (or ‘cunny’), words that occur nine and ten times respectively in the Eritrean responses. Although other adjectives are also chosen – ‘creative’, ‘clever’, ‘broadminded’, ‘intelligent’, ‘patient’ – it is ‘wise’ and ‘cunning’ that are by far the most frequent. E1 for example writes that “being cunning and wise to save his life one should think twice before making decision”. None of the Norwegian respondents mentions being wise or cunning. Does this mean that these are qualities that the Norwegian respondents do not readily recognise? The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary⁹⁴ states that ‘cunning’ is mostly used pejoratively. Also data from the British National Corpus show that ‘cunning’ is usually linked to undesirable behaviour, or to undesirable epithets. However it *is* used with positive connotations in the corpus texts in situations of threat or attack, when cunning becomes a necessary and even an admirable, attribute. This same ambivalence can be found in the Eritrean material. As a necessary and admirable response we find E1 and E2 linking the epithets cunning and wise, and E9 links “cunningness” and cleverness. On the other hand E8 and E2 see *both* the crocodile and the monkey as cunning animals. Since characters in a fable are usually good or bad, wise or foolish, and since the crocodile is seen as bad, explicitly or implicitly, in all the Eritrean texts, cunning must be a negative attribute, at least when describing the crocodile. The ambivalent values of

⁹³ Biblical stories, whether or not they are acknowledged as such, are well represented in the readers that the Eritrean Ministry of Education publishes for learners of English.

⁹⁴ The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary was accessed at <http://www.oup.com/elt/catalogue/teachersites/oald7/?cc=global>. The British National Corpus website was accessed at <http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/>.

‘cunning’ also find expression in the contradiction in E2’s text. He both approves and disapproves of being cunning, and both wants the monkey to be successful, and wants the monkey to fail, since he has used cunning to achieve his success:

Both [the monkey and the crocodile] are very cunning, but much more the monkey is cunning [...] So generally from this what we can understand is the one who think evil or cunning is always at lost. (E2)

Another interesting question that the material invites is whether it is an inward state of control – being calm – or an outward display of control – playing it cool – that is crucial to an expedient reaction to a threatening situation. A concept in four of the Eritrean student texts is ‘disturbed’ (including the related terms ‘disturb’ and ‘disturbance’). E6 provides a typical example when he writes, “But if it [friendship] is turn in to such dangerous thing we have to think over it with out been disturbed.⁹⁵ And it is quiet possible ride free of such trouble events”. I understand ‘disturbed’ to refer to an inner state of imbalance, confusion or perhaps even panic. The term does not refer to an outward display of emotion. “Not been disturbed” is therefore not first and foremost a question of appearance, though it may be that too. It is a question of not *being* or becoming confused. E4 expresses this idea in the story she retells. When David is threatened by a man who tries to force him into a car at gunpoint, he stays calm and manages to escape.

David who was 14 years old and the son of one of the richest man in the city has been told that things like this could happen to him. So rather than showing him how frightened he was calmly said

‘If I were you sir I would put that gun down because there is a police officer coming behind you”

The driver sweating, put his gun back in his pocket and after taking a deep breath and trying to look normal turned around to see to old ladies coming towards him. Knowing the kid was playing games with him turned around to shout at David who was nowhere in sight. (E4)

One Eritrean respondent sees an expedient life-saving reaction as being one that combines both an outward and an inner control. He first describes the importance of how one is perceived, and then elaborates in terms of the monkey’s inner state:

In my opinion the message is that about the role our facial expression plays during a dangerous situation. What we display outwardly can have the difference of life and death. To make it clear, had the monkey been afraid and disturbed when he heard what the crocodile had said, his life would not have saved. (E1)

Of the three Norwegian respondents who write that the message is about how to react to a threatening situation, none of them deals with an inner state of calm or control. On the contrary, the responses mentioned are “quick-thinking” (N3), “wit” (N2) and “playing it cool” (N6). Being quick-thinking, or exercising wit, are admirable reactions that demonstrate intelligence,

⁹⁵ I understand ‘been disturbed’ to be a phonetic approximation to the passive voice in ‘being disturbed’. The passive is a difficult form for Tigrinya speakers (Jayashree Francis, April, 2007).

but they are not morally right in the way that demonstrating wisdom is. Being wise, the quality most often mentioned by the Eritrean students, is a moral quality, whereas quick-thinking and wit refer to intellectual capacity. The third response suggested by a Norwegian respondent – playing it cool – refers to behaviour: not showing one’s opponent how one really feels suggests a different approach to the one put forward by the Eritrean respondents, whose advocacy of equanimity, of not being ‘disturbed’, has to do not so much with appearance and behaviour as with inner state. The Eritrean approach, as it is expressed in this material, would thus seem to be that if one maintains one’s equanimity, the appropriate behaviour and appearance will follow.

Why do so many of the Eritrean respondents focus on an expedient reaction to threat? One possibility is that this theme reflects well-established and currently-held values in the interpretive community. This possibility finds some support in the fact that E1 adduces a proverb to support the message he found, which “goes like this ‘brave and smoke never lose exit’”. The meaning of this proverb was explained by one of the graduate assistants, namely that if one is brave one will always find a way out of one’s difficulties, just as smoke will always find a way out of a room, even if there are no windows or chimney. In his discussion of the value of proverbs in informal conversation and formal discourse, Okpewho explains that proverbs in Africa “are treated with authority and respect because they are regarded as truth tested by time, and are often used for resolving conflicts and other problems between citizens” (Okpewho, 1992:234). As we have seen in 9.2.2, proverbs are part of everyday speech in Eritrea and therefore undoubtedly available to the Eritrean students when they write about literature. Their relative infrequency in the student texts suggests that some of them may not see proverbs as a component of the academic literacy to which they aspire.

Harvey Sacks (1995) discusses the use of proverbs, and notes that their basic power has to do with their poetic orality and their being atypical. They are atypical in that they are always correct in themselves, but can be appropriately or inappropriately used. They have their value in that “you maintain a stable body of knowledge and control the domain of its use” (Sacks et al., 1995:110). Thus people learn proverbs and have them at hand for what they perceive to be the appropriate occasion. When E1 introduced the proverb about bravery and smoke, it had a double appropriateness. It is an appropriate commentary on the story itself, and writing his text provides an “appropriate occasion” for introducing the reader to the richness of Tigrinya proverbs.

There are also two instances of an inappropriate occasion. E5 writes that the story is about “friend in need is friend in deed”. The same proverb is used by E2 to conclude his comments,

but inverted and in quotation marks: “friend in deed is friend in need”.⁹⁶ E5 and E2 have identified an appropriate domain, since the proverb does, like the story, deal with the testing of friendship. However it is appropriately used when someone proves their loyalty by supporting their friend in a situation where that person is vulnerable and needy, quite the opposite situation to that of the monkey and the crocodile.

Proverbs exemplify well-established, traditional values, but another aspect of Eritrean culture that may contribute to the focus on expedient reaction could be that students identify the monkey with Eritrea, and the crocodile with Ethiopia. In this interpretation the sense of threat that the small monkey Eritrea feels from the much bigger crocodile Ethiopia is based on the two countries’ fraught history and the atmosphere of military alertness that prevailed at the time when the respondents wrote their statements. Not only is military alertness a national preoccupation, but the Eritrean respondents in this project are on national service. They are enrolled in and report to army units whilst they complete their studies. In other words, although the proverbs, and the values they illustrate, represent “truth tested by time”, as Okpewho says, their pertinence is accentuated in a situation of military tension in which Ethiopia is seen as a false friend and an enemy in the public rhetoric and in the eyes of many Eritreans. Especially available here are the defining qualities of the ‘Freedom Fighters’ – resourcefulness, fearlessness, winning against all the odds – that are upheld in the state construction of national identity, and that are re-presented in the monkey’s victory over the crocodile. The importance of self-reliance is a recurrent theme in books about Eritrea, and it was intensified during and after the intervention of the Soviet Union, in 1979, when “the behavior of the rest of the world, socialist or otherwise, confirmed the EPLF view that when the chips were down, there was no one to trust but the Eritreans themselves” (Connell, 1997:186).

One aspect of interest here is the occurrence of the word ‘enemy’ or ‘enemies’. It occurs in three of the Eritrean student texts, and in only one of the Norwegian ones, where it moreover occurs in quotation marks, as though the student is distancing himself from this particular message through the use of archaic language: “know the ways of thy enemy” (N10). This indicates that the idea of ‘enemies’ is more substantive for the Eritrean than for the Norwegian students.

10.6 Concluding remarks

This chapter began by considering the story of the monkey and the crocodile as a fable, and more specifically as a trickster tale. Its antecedents were putatively traced to India. To say that a

⁹⁶ I believe these two students sat next to each other as they wrote, and perhaps E2 read E5’s opening sentence and decided that it would make an appropriate conclusion for his own text.

literary work is a cultural expression that can be traced to a particular culture does not mean that it does not also belong to other national cultures. In an important sense it belongs to the individuals and groups of people who know and tell the story, whether or not they share the country of origin of the work. I describe the two very different classroom contexts in which the students encountered the story, but the *textual* context of the two encounters also differed considerably. As McDonald says, “in any actual situation particular readers [...] find themselves face to face not with the ‘words on the page’ but with a richly encoded artefact, which bears witness to multiple intersecting histories”.⁹⁷ For the Norwegian students the story was on the reading list of the course they were taking, and they encountered the text in the course compendium. This “encoded artefact” identified the story as an object of study, rather than, say, as a source of entertainment or moral education. The text came already categorised as ‘African literature’ and subcategorised as ‘orature’. This ‘othered’ the story, by labelling it as being from another continent, and as being representative of a subcategory, orature, which is categorically different to other literature on the English syllabus at HUC. For the Eritrean students, by contrast, the story was presented as Eritrean, and the suggestion made that they might already be familiar with it. Their ownership of the text had to do with their familiarity with the genre of (educational) fables in general, but it may well have been brought more forcefully into play because I presented the story as Eritrean. The different embedding contexts of the two groups of respondents and the two textual contexts in which they encountered the story make any claim that both groups responded to the *same* text far from straightforward.

When it comes to the student texts themselves, I have discussed which assignments they answered and reviewed how they positioned themselves in them through the use of personal pronouns. In chapter 3 I reviewed earlier studies that identified and explained how the use of personal pronouns varies from nation to nation. Unlike the subjects in some of these studies, the students in my material were not professional academic writers. They assumed other roles, including that of storyteller, learner of life skills and literary commentator. Their presence in their texts through the use of the first person pronoun was a part of the way in which they realised these roles.

I have considered the interpretive strategies that the respondents used to make sense of this particular literary genre and this particular story. Student texts about “The Monkey and the Crocodile” can be described as a genre that, although elicited in an academic setting, is in some respects the co-construction of meaning that typifies a qualitative interview, and at the same

⁹⁷ Peter McDonald: Diary of a bad year in the world? Paper presented at the University of Oslo, 14.05.2009.

time an individual written self-presentation to a particular reader, me, whose interests and role were more or less familiar to the respondents. The two groups were significantly different in the discursal positions and interpretive strategies they employed. The Eritrean respondents demonstrate a strong degree of ownership of the story; the Norwegian respondents do not. The Norwegian respondents are more inclined to position themselves as interested visitors, expressing their thoughts and personal associations, or commenting on the story at a meta-textual level.

I have shown that the respondents use a range of rhetorical strategies to show their interpretive certainty or ambivalence in responding to the story, and the Eritrean respondents demonstrate interpretive certainty to a far greater extent than do the Norwegian respondents. There is, however, a considerable degree of overlap between assertiveness and ownership, on the one hand, and ambivalence and non-ownership (or visiting, as I have termed it) on the other. The assertiveness of the Eritrean students reflects both an academic literacy where facts are facts and individualised opinions don't count for much, and also patterns of rhetorical uniformity in the country at large. Whilst the Eritrean students are members of an interpretive community that expresses certainty, the Norwegian students are members of an interpretive community that favours uncertainty and ambivalence, and it is arguably as possible (or impossible) for the one to feel uncertainty as for the other to feel certainty. In other words, it would seem that if someone is uncertain, it is as difficult for them to understand other people's certainties as it is for those who are certain to understand other people's uncertainty.

The Eritreans, as a group, are more inclined to see and value the story for its educational import. They also show greater facility in identifying a lesson to be learnt from it. Appleyard describes 'becoming a reader' as a set of developmental stages, where the university student is a systematic interpreter. This role, in Appleyard's developmental schema, is higher than, and better than, the role of the adolescent reader, who

looks to stories to discover insights into the meaning of life, values and beliefs worthy of commitment, ideal images, and authentic role models for imitation. The *truth* of these ideas and ways of living is a severe criterion for judging them. (Appleyard, 1991:14)

I find Appleyard's schema, which describes readers in terms of how they develop and mature, and sometimes regress (1991:2-3), a little problematic. Whilst his developmental understanding of 'becoming a reader' has descriptive force for Western education, it loses legitimacy when it values reading for multiple meanings above reading to learn life wisdom. The first is arguably more sophisticated, but it is not more "mature" or "higher" or "better". An alternative developmental schema finds expression in an African proverb: "When an old person dies, it is like a library burning down". This library is a store of history and genealogy, stories and poems,

tradition and wisdom. On the whole the Eritrean students demonstrate a confidence in reading this library that contrasts with the uncertainty of the Norwegian students when they are required to access it.

As regards the messages that the respondents identify, I have discussed the pitfall of generalising too broadly on the basis of two such small groups. As a group, though not as individuals, the Norwegian students identify a greater range of messages than do the Eritreans. This finding, which seems quite clear on the basis of the present material, is less clear when I review the Eritrean responses that have been discarded from this study. More interesting, and with a greater likelihood of external validity, I argue, are positive findings in the material. One such is that so many of the respondents in each group identify a message about friendship. Recent Norwegian data (see 6.4.2) shows clearly the importance of friendship for young men and women in Norway. In the absence of similar data from Eritrea, one may take the emphasis the Eritrean students put on how to choose and how to be a good friend as evidence of the importance that friendship also has for young people in Eritrea.

The identification of a message about how to react in threatening situations, on the other hand, shows a significant difference in distribution between the two groups, being a major concern only for the Eritrean respondents. An explanation for this finding can be sought in the national culture, which values self-reliance so highly, and in the nation's recent historical experience, reinforced by its nation-building representation in literature and the media.

11 “Anisino”

11.1 An overview

In this chapter I consider the short prose text “Anisino”. The full text is to be found as Appendix 5, where line numbers have been added to the version that the students were given. Section 11.2 starts with a short synopsis. I then describe the text as part of the author’s work as a writer and as a promoter of literature in Eritrea. I identify the issues of religious and ethnic difference and of boy-girl relationships that the literary text broaches, and sketch the political and social context in which these issues are raised. I also discuss the genre of the piece, for the expectations that both I and the student readers bring to the text are important for how we read it, and what we find in it. In section 11.3 I look at the student texts in more detail, with a view to highlighting similarities and differences between the two groups. Each response was made up of three theme statements and sometimes also of additional comments. The theme statements are sorted into categories, which form the basis for a comparative exploration of the meaning this story had for the students. In section 11.4 I discuss narrative structure, because similarity and difference *between* the groups may be usefully described not only by theme, but also by where in the narrative the students looked to find that theme. Taking as my point of departure the dramatic structure that Aristotle prescribed, I discuss the relative importance of the various components of that structure for the two groups.

11.2 About the story

11.2.1 My presentation of “Anisino”

“Anisino” is only 625 words long, published in a slim volume of prose and poetry called *Some Sweetly Kept Thoughts*. It is set in the capital city of Asmara, and describes a carefree but intense friendship between the story’s female Christian narrator, who was then thirteen years old, and a Muslim boy, Anis Mohammed. The friendship is abruptly ended when the boy is sent away to Yemen. Looking back ten years later the narrator reflects that the loss of this first friendship may account for her unwillingness as an adult to make commitments that might end in a similar experience of loss.

The author, Rahel Asghedom, was born in Eritrea in 1976. During the period of this research she was the only in-country author writing and publishing fiction in English. She comes from a family where writing one’s thoughts is a matter of course. She writes in English, she says, because she finds it a better language for expressing herself. She also feels that when she writes in English she is less visible (pc 11.03.07). Asghedom was encouraged to complete her first collection after her work attracted positive attention when she published it online at

asmarino.org, and in 2005 the state-owned printing and publishing house Hidri published *Some Sweetly Kept Thoughts*.

The eight stories are about the complexities of love and friendship. The longest piece, and the one to which a certain local notoriety has attached, is a novella entitled “The Lesser of Two Evils”. I will say a few words about this piece, as the Eritrean students in this study had read it the previous year during their course in Eritrean literature. It thus constitutes part of the literary experience which they brought to the reading of an unfamiliar text by the same author. The novella is concerned with two women friends, and the inequality they experience within their marriages. In the course of the story the two women discuss and condemn sexual coercion and female genital cutting, a majority practice in Eritrea. Asghedom has received considerable negative and even aggressive criticism for this story from, amongst others, some of the male students at EIT. Both her former teacher Mohandas CB and her fellow author Tesfai ascribe this aggression to the students’ unwillingness to acknowledge what is a reality for many Eritrean girls and women, and perhaps even a real ignorance of their situation. Asghedom herself recognises an imperative to write about these issues. “I write for young people like myself. I want them to face issues that are not talked about here [in Eritrea]. If we don’t talk about them they will never change. Here we are supposed to just say that everything is good, and I am criticised by young people as being unpatriotic and not Eritrean” (pc 11.03.07, from memory). Asghedom makes explicit whom she is writing for, who her authorial reader is: young Eritreans who need to be given the words and the stories that enable them to talk about issues that are not usually part of public or home discourse.

Asghedom shares with her authorial reader the conventions of sexuality and silence that her writing deliberately flaunts. Talking about intense personal emotions is another such flaunted convention, as is writing about religion. Picking out “The Lesser of Two Evils” as a text he had *not* enjoyed, E9 criticised the story for exaggerating the immoral things in “our culture” and adds: “Moreover, she too dares to narrate about religion, religion is another thing”. It is presumably readers with attitudes similar to those expressed by E9 that Asghedom has in mind as she writes. Her work with children’s reading groups and with book discussions on national radio is motivated by her conviction that reading is a way to foster democratic consciousness and fight patriarchal authority and tradition-bound taboos. That she is writing for an Eritrean reader is inscribed in the text, inasmuch as the setting in Asmara – the contiguity of Muslim and Christian families, the Catholic Church itself (a landmark in the city), the presence of Ethiopian soldiers – is not explicitly ascribed significance in the text but assumed to be associative for her readers. Inasmuch as the perspective of the narrator is young and disempowered, the story

speaks to other young, disempowered readers.

Comments from older readers, myself included, have tended to recognise the story's ambitions, but been concerned with weaknesses of form and craftsmanship. In the only published review of her work, Dhar expresses disappointment that "The Lesser of Two Evils" "falls short of the radicalism that it promises, and ends with a tame and somewhat uneasy truce between modernity and tradition" (2004:16). He quotes the main character-narrator to illustrate his point: "Being independent was great but I knew I had to have a husband and children. I had to choose and so I chose Tekle, the lesser of two evils". In criticising this ending Dhar has, I think, missed the full social and gender-specific implications of the phrase "I had to choose". The three women characters in *The Other War* and the monkey in "The Monkey and the Crocodile" must also make life and death choices in heavily constrained circumstances. The main character in "Anisino" has *no* choice.

Writing in English, Asghedom has chosen a language that, as Kramersch says in a different context, comes "unfettered by the painful memory of an immediate colonial past, yet part of the linguistic fabric of a more distant history" (Kramersch, 1993:254). English would seem to allow Asghedom to speak with a personal voice that can negotiate the aesthetic requirements of the Eritrean state. The first 2000 copies of her book were sold or distributed to schools and libraries, and a new issue of 2000 copies was printed, a clear indication that her authorship is favourably regarded.

11.2.2 *A story about the nation*

Christian-Muslim equality is a cornerstone of Eritrea's nation-building project, as it was for the EPLF before independence. EPLF-endorsed literature, and in particular plays and sketches that were performed during the Armed Struggle, made use of what Paul Warwick (1997) describes as "simple and powerful metaphors" that underlined that Eritrea needed to be united in order to win 'against all the odds'. Religion was a potential arena for national disunity, and therefore reconciliation between brothers and between Muslims and Christians was a recurrent theme in these plays (Warwick, 1997:226) and in war testimonials (see 9.2.5). In conversation with English-speaking Eritreans in Asmara I have encountered a pride in the equal status that Christians and Muslims enjoy in Eritrean society. Religious tolerance and Christian-Muslim equality seem also to be unquestioned assumptions on websites I have visited, both those that support and those that seek to undermine the present government.

According to the EPLF's ideological platform, formulated in the National Democratic Programmes of 1977 and 1987, religious beliefs and religious education belonged to the private sphere only, and religion is to be separated from the state and politics. The EPLF will "punish

those who, whether during the armed struggle or in a people's democratic Eritrea, try to undermine the struggle and progress of the Eritrean people through religious discord" (cited in Wilson, 1991:174 paragraph 7.D). One could argue that "Anisino" supports the project of a secularised national identity, and indeed this is an obvious first reading, since Asghedom shows how disruptive religion can be in the private sphere, as well as the public. However, "Anisino" was published in 2005, nearly thirty years after the first formulation of the policy of religious equality, and with time there has been a growing disillusionment with the nation-building project and a renewed interest in other ways of fulfilling human promise. In 6.2.3 I considered various views as to the relative importance of ethnicity and national identity. According to Hepner, religious identity has for some people become more important than national identity, and one reason for this is that until recently religion has had a certain degree of autonomy (Hepner, 2009:161). The secularisation of the 1970s and 1980s, says Hepner, has not done away with subnational identities founded on ethnic and religious difference. Using Barth's terms (1969) we can say that "Anisino" illustrates the destructive force of *subnational* identities in a nation determined to represent its citizens as members of a synthetic and harmonious state where people have adopted a secularised *supraethnic* identity.

In the seventies and eighties the EPLF worked in a long-term perspective, showing sensitivity to local tradition, but promoting discussion and guiding rural communities towards change (Wilson, 1991:137). The question of marriage was a key issue in this process of re-education. Several years into the process, in 1980, a document on marriage was used to promote discussion at a seminar for fighters. It raised some of the same questions that "Anisino" can be read as asking: How has the question of love been perceived and handled in different societies? How will love be seen and what place will it have in a classless society? Should love be hidden? Is love only the concern of the two individuals? (Wilson, 1991:194). The document asks sixty-nine questions about sexuality, love, marriage, and what motivates the attraction between a woman and a man. Not one question addresses the issue of inter-ethnic relationships.

Asghedom's text, then, supports the state project inasmuch as it says that what differences there are should not matter. It also shows the damage that can be done by insensitive parenting, a message compatible with the PFDJ's desire to replace traditional religious and family ties with new overarching loyalties to the state. "Anisino" may also be read as encoding another message about the alleged success of synthetic nationalism. It shows that the state's policy of integration has failed, that differences do exist, and that they matter very much to people. They matter so much that a family would send a boy out of the country rather than let him develop a friendship that trespassed beyond his subnational community. Reading "Anisino" in this way

allows the text to become not only a personal story but a representation of the nation-building project, opening up the text as a critique of the state policy of enforced lip service to the unimportance of religious difference. It can also be read as a subversion of the national narrative template, in that it is not an outside coloniser that worsens the situation of Eritrean citizens, but conflicting interests within the country.

Do the Eritrean students recognise and comment on this aspect of the story, and if so, do they comment on it as confirmation of the need for a national synthetic policy, or as an indication of its failure? As to the Norwegian students, as non-authorial readers I assumed that they would not see that pointing out difference is a radical gesture, since discussing issues that affect Muslim and non-Muslim communities in Norway is a popular, though sensitive, topic in the media and in private and public discourse. How then do the Norwegian students understand the differences between the narrator and Anis, and what role in the story will they ascribe to religion? Before turning to the student texts to find answers to these questions, there is another aspect of the story that is important to consider, namely what sort of ‘story’ it is. The “Monkey and the Crocodile” is a typical fable. *The Other War* is clearly a play. But what is “Anisino”?

11.2.3 What sort of story is “Anisino”?

Our understanding of whether a story is autobiographical or fictional contributes importantly to how we go about making sense of it. Rabinowitz suggests that one common cause for misinterpretation can be ambiguity of genre (1997:176):

... if we use the notion of genre as preformed bundles of operations performed by readers in order to recover the meanings of texts [...] then we can see that correct reading requires, among other things, a correct initial assumption about the genre that a work belongs to – and that misreading follows in the wake of erroneous placement. (1997:177)

It is pertinent here to remember McCormick’s (1994) discussion of genre as in itself a culturally specific term, part of the literary repertoire of some but not all cultures, not something that is *in* the text, but something we bring to our understanding of the text. This has implications for the reading of “Anisino”, for it is not obvious which “bundle of operations” the reader should perform to recover its meaning. The title of the anthology in which “Anisino” is published – *Some Sweetly Kept Thoughts* – invites the reader to be curious, empathetic even. The subtitle – *Poems and Stories* – does not prescribe which bundles of operations will help recover the meaning of the prose texts. After all, ‘stories’ can be fables and novels, biography and autobiography, meticulously crafted short stories, yarns told round a bonfire, and even lies.

So what sort of story is “Anisino”? Is it a short story, an autobiographical sketch, or does it defy such classification? An autobiographical book jacket typically has a life-like picture of the person whose story the book tells, and this packaging arouses expectations as to genre. Already

before we start reading we expect that the text to be about a real person. If we meet the same text with, say, an abstract design on the jacket cover we will more probably expect the characters to be fictional. This genre expectation is thwarted in *Some Sweetly Kept Thoughts*, which is bound in a uniform pale blue soft cover that tells us nothing about its genre.

The story itself, on the other hand, is easily read as an autobiographical sketch. Jerome Bruner (2002) maintains that we organize and impose meaning on the flow of events by turning our lives into textual events in the stories that we tell. This same impulse, he says, provides narrative structure in literature. Laurel Richardson (1990) describes autobiography as a particular form of narrative that articulates how the past is related to the present, thereby enabling us to relive the past. Autobiography also serves to mark the narrator as a unique person, says Richardson, and allows him/her to draw a bigger picture, making “existential sense of mortality”, and making this experience available to the reader. “When people are asked why they do what they do, they provide narrative explanations, not logico-scientific categorical ones” (Richardson, 1990:23). This, it seems, is what the first-person narrator is doing in “Anisino”, in that she tries to understand her present and persistent wariness of emotional involvement by constructing the narrative of her early involvement with Anisino as a state of innocence that was brutally disrupted. The ending has the orality of a confidence shared with the reader, or of a discussion that the author is holding with herself. To me the peculiarly confessional and intimate tone of the end of “Anisino” indicates the author’s deep involvement with her material.

For many of the Eritrean students, the first person narrator may well be understood to be the author herself. They knew her as someone who had taught at the University and who had visited and spoken to the class. As a young woman, she would not be accorded the same authority as Tesfai, either as a portrayer of Eritrea or as an interpreter of her own texts (see 12.2.6). The Norwegian students did not know the author personally, and this alone may have made them less predisposed to identify the narrator with the author. For them the author’s given name, Rahel, which was written at the top of the response sheet, may not have identified her as a woman, so that they responded without being aware that a woman was writing about a woman.

When considering the students’ texts I hold open the possibility that they either take “Anisino” to be true, that is, autobiographical, or that they take it to be a fictional narrative. Either way, the urgency in the text is intended as a wake-up call to its authorial readers to acknowledge what is actually going on, and its emotional price. The young Norwegian readers lack the conventions that would enable them to read the story as the authorial reader for whom the text is rhetorically designed. Their unfamiliarity with the setting both within and beyond the

literary text may lead them to overlook its remarkable openness about subjects that nobody else has written about in Eritrea.

11.2.4 *The beginning, the middle and the end*

Leon Dickinson's *A Guide to Literary Study* (1959) was on the first-year reading list of the English course at HUC at the time of this research. His description of narrative structure is indicative of the authority of Aristotle's prescriptions for the teaching of literature at this institution.

The opening part of a story, called the *exposition*, acquaints us with the characters and shows us their condition in a certain setting. The characters may be doing things, but for a while we do not know what their actions are leading to. Before long, however, a situation develops that promises *conflict*. This situation and those that follow it develop the conflict in the section of the story called the complication, usually the longest portion of the story. The *climax* occurs when it becomes clear which way the conflict will be resolved, and the final part of the story – the *denouement*, or *resolution* – shows how the conflict is settled. (Dickinson, 1959:13)

This classic narrative schema, with a tripartite structure, beginning, middle and end, can describe any narrative that has three causally related phases, and it well describes the structure of “Anisino”. It invites us to describe the scenes with the narrator and Anis in Asmara as *exposition*, the paragraph in which Anis disappears from the narrator's life as the *complication*, and the rest of the text as the *resolution*. I have therefore chosen to name the structural components of “Anisino” with the simplest of Aristotle's terms: ‘beginning’, ‘middle’ and ‘end’, and apply them in their most literal sense. What is read first, lines 2-26, is the beginning; the end is read last, lines 33-42, and the middle is what is in between, lines 27-32. Aristotle's terms ‘work’ for “Anisino” (and would also ‘work’ for the two other texts in this study) because the order of events in the fictional world is also the narrative order. Rabinowitz assumes that “one can study narrative structure not only in terms of concrete textual features, but also in terms of the shared interpretive strategies by which readers make sense of them” (Rabinowitz, 1997:1). In section 11.3 I organise the student texts according to whether they have to do primarily with the beginning, middle or end of the narrative, and I call these the three possible textual *locations*. A tripartite description of narrative structure does not give precedence to one over the others. However I have found that the student texts cluster at particular locations, and in section 11.4 I suggest why this might be the case.

11.3 What the students say

11.3.1 *Some general comparative observations*

The writing task required respondents to complete three sentence fragments with a theme statement, and each student did in fact write three of them. Before looking at the theme

categories in more detail, I review the theme statements in a more general comparative perspective. A first observation is that the Eritrean theme statements are often longer than the Norwegian ones, which are typically structured around a noun phrase. This may in part reflect the differing academic socialisation of the two groups. The Eritrean students may be more used to writing longer answers because texts that they submit to a teacher are always formally evaluated, and they assumed that teachers favoured longer answers. The Norwegian students may be more used to adapting the length of their written response to the particular writing task, and may perceive a short answer to be appropriate for the non-evaluative setting in which the response sheets were written.

Secondly I note that some of the Eritrean theme statements refer to specificities of place – Asmara and Yemen in particular – whereas none of the Norwegian ones do so. Elisabeth Bowen draws a distinction between fictional places that have a dramatic function to fulfil and those which just provide a background for the action, since there must be a somewhere for something to happen (Shaw, 1983:151). This would suggest that for some Eritrean students, at least, this is a story about a specific place which does have a dramatic function, and that their recognition of this place, and hence also their familiarity with its history, contributes to the meaning that they find in the story. For the Norwegian students, on the other hand, the place constitutes a setting that does not contribute to the drama of the story, and may even fall foul of Shaw's observation that "an emphasis on locality usually entails a lowering of narrative interest" (Shaw, 1983:159).

A third point has to do with the degree of generalisation in the student texts. I expected that the written task would elicit a generalised formulation, such as 'the importance of friendship', rather than a synoptic reference to the particularities of the text, such as 'a boy and girl in Asmara whose friendship was broken up'. However the students appropriated the task to their own reading and writing expectations, and this has in fact produced far more interesting material than had all the students responded with a noun phrase, as I had predicted. Genre awareness may again be a factor that can partly account for the Norwegian students writing more generalised theme statements. The majority had taken their first year of English at HUC, where theme had been a central term in the literary repertoire. A factor that may have encouraged the Eritrean students to write less generalised theme statements is the possibility for intense identification that the story offers them. The characters are 'closer to home', and this has perhaps led them to generate theme statements that include the particularities of the story.

All the Norwegian statements are generalised, though sometimes the students formulate the generalisation using the pronouns 'we/us' and 'you' to relate the generalisation to themselves,

the people around them, or to a referential world of which they are a part. When the Eritrean students use ‘we’ it seems that ‘we’ refers sometimes to the community of all people and sometimes to the community of Eritrean people, though it is not always clear which of the two possible referents is intended. However what *is* clear is that the Eritrean students focus more on the couple, completing the sentence fragments with a noun phrase or personal pronoun that refers to these characters. The narrator and Anis are usually referred to together – ‘the children’, ‘they’, and so on – but three of the Eritrean theme statements, all of them to do with loss and looking back, present a theme from the girl’s perspective. E1, for example, writes, “past experience of a lady to her love who left an impression on her mind”.

Two students, E9 and E3, write about Anis. First E9:

‘Anisino’ the boy friend of the writer (may be Rahel). He was a lovely boy. Both the writer and Anisino used to go to school together near the commercial Bank. When they came near to the protestant church, they entered to compound and prayed though he was Moslem. (E9)

E9’s response can scarcely be described as a theme statement. (For a discussion of the genre of his response see the following section). In this re-telling, Anis is seen through the eyes of E9 as a friend who is a boy and a Moslem, and through the eyes of the narrator as “a lovely boy”. E3 makes a particularly interesting statement about betrayal that I *believe* refers to the boy: “Betrayal. One must not betray or forget what one has come across. To make it clear, we should not forget former friends”. Neither E9 nor E3 focuses on the boy in a straightforward way. Yet *any* focus on the boy is unexpected, inasmuch as the narrator takes the girl’s point of view. We know nothing of Anis’s thoughts, as distinct from the narrator’s, either before or after the characters are separated from one another. The young men E9 and E3 have filled this gap and given Anis in the one case an attribute – he was a lovely boy – and in the other a moral responsibility not to betray one’s friends. E3 is the only respondent to identify betrayal as a theme. What does he mean? Is Anis himself, who never again makes contact with ‘I’ and doesn’t even say goodbye, seen as the betrayer? Or are the interfering adults seen as betraying the innocent children? A partial answer to these questions can be found by reading E3’s response as a continuous text. Read in this way, his response seems to interpret the literary text as being about a three-stage development from the simplicities of childhood to adult alienation:

Childhood. Childhood is the sweetest and unforgettable part of our age. What one does during this age departs from innocence.

Friendship. To befriend with someone, difference in religion does not matter. The only thing is giving each other’s heart.

Betrayal. One must not betray or forget what one has come across. To make it clear, we should not forget former friends.

We see that in each theme statement E3 identifies a theme from the literary text with an abstract noun: childhood, friendship and betrayal. He then elaborates each theme with two normative sentences. Each elaboration involves sentences that generalise a value in the text, and makes a universal statement about how we do or should live. Thus, if we look at the two longer sentences in the first theme statement, we see that E3 states that children act innocently – thereby generalising a value that he finds in the text. And he also says that childhood is the finest part of our lives – a normative statement about the human condition. Similarly in the third theme statement, about betrayal, E3 generalises a value that he finds in the literary text: we should not forget former friends (for to do so would be to betray them). And he makes a normative statement that we should not betray or forget our earlier experiences. For E3 forgetting and betraying are in a sense synonymous. Perhaps ‘betraying someone’ carries a connotation of disappointing someone, by not valuing the investment someone has made in you. E3 may be saying that Anis betrayed the narrator, since he may have forgotten her, but he is not saying that the narrator betrayed Anis, for she has *not* forgotten him.

That E3 looks to fiction as a guide to how life should be lived is evidenced by his comment on the usefulness of fiction in the questionnaire: “...it helps us to see life from different perspectives. At the same time allow us to correct immorally behaved individuals by introducing similar characters...”. When asked to define literature, E3 struggled to find a satisfactory definition for such a complex concept, but again demonstrated the reciprocity he feels between literature and life: “I am not in a position to define it for its definition is not as simple as that I can define. But I can say literature is life by itself”. Literature, for E3, is “life by itself”, a way of reflecting on existential issues, including our obligations of loyalty and not forgetting towards the people who have been close to us.

11.3.2 “*If there is anything else*”

After the three sentence fragments that began “This story is about ...” the students were invited to add an extra comment. The exact wording was: “If there is anything else you would like to add, please do”, and the lower half of the page was left open for this purpose. Three of the Eritrean and eight of the Norwegian respondents made use of this option. One may conjecture that the fact that all but two of the Norwegian respondents wrote a comment indicates their familiarity with this type of invitation. The relatively few Eritrean students who chose it indicates either that they were unfamiliar with being asked to proffer a comment, or that they felt disinclined to do so. I do not think constraints of time played a significant role here. The students in both groups seemed engrossed in their writing, and when they stopped writing they seemed in no hurry to leave the classroom. In partial support of the conjecture that the Eritrean

students were unfamiliar with this type of invitation, is the response of E9 . He made use of re-plotting, as a genre with which he is more familiar, incorporating the three sentence fragments into a summary of the first part of the literary text. I have ‘extracted’ three themes from his continuous text, and consider them on a par with the other theme statements. He then used the comment option to present his understanding of the text:

In my opinion, they had a problem. Because they were different in religion. People would see them in evil eyes. But they did not matter anything about Moslem and Christianity. According to them love is the main and crucial thing in life. (E9)

Perhaps because he comes out clearly in support of the youngsters and against ‘people’, E9 prefers to write his critical reflection under the heading ‘extra comments’, and to hedge them with “in my opinion”. Some of the Norwegian students who offered other comments are in fact presenting additional theme statements, and I have placed these too in the thematic categories where they belong. Of the remaining comments, several express enthusiasm for the text, and a personal involvement with it. N4, for example, writes, “I thought this was a very sweet story and it made me think of things I did in my childhood with my friends which I still remember”. N7 is perhaps attracted by the personal tone of the story, and was inspired to follow suit: “I really liked this story, it inspired me to write a poem or a story myself =)”.

11.3.3 Thematic categories

The material is discussed under seven thematic categories: ‘friends’, ‘innocence’, ‘together despite difference’, ‘religious equality’, ‘occupation’, ‘disruption’ and ‘loss’. The first three have to do with innocence and friendship. They are treated as a closely related set and their interrelation is discussed in section 11.3.4. Theme statements about religious equality also belong to the beginning of the story. ‘Occupation’ and ‘disruption’ belong to the middle of the story and encompass statements that describe or explain the separation of the narrator and Anis, whilst ‘loss’ encompasses both statements that name the immediate emotional impact of this separation and those that focus on the long-term effects of what went wrong. In addition to these seven categories there are some statements about the story being the author’s memories, and these I discuss not as theme statements but as contributions to an understanding of the genre of “Anisino”.

I have in a few cases divided a single sentence into two theme statements because the sentence expresses two distinct ideas. The second part of the sentence is then introduced by three dots (...) instead of the usual hyphen. The option to add extra comments has, as already noted, been used by several respondents to write a theme statement. In the tables that follow these comments are distinguished by not being indented and not being preceded by a hyphen.

The order of the theme statements within each category is random. I have retained punctuation in all cases, but corrected spelling, except for a few orthographical irregularities where I am unsure what the respondent intended. In Table 13 the theme statements are counted by category and group.

Table 13: Themes identified by the Eritrean and Norwegian respondents

Theme	Eritrean theme statements	Norwegian theme statements
Friends	7	4
Innocence	3	4
Together despite difference	12	3
Religious equality	0	6
Occupation	2	0
Disruption	5	9
Loss	5	8
<i>Total</i>	34	34

11.3.4 Friendship and innocence

There are many theme statements about friendship in both groups. I have placed them in three categories in order to draw attention to the ways in which they differ. The category ‘friends’ deals with friendship in general, and its defining characteristic is that the words ‘friend’ or ‘love’ occur, and differences between ‘I’ and Anis are not mentioned. The next category is called ‘innocence’, and all but one of the statements include the word ‘innocence’ and link it to the words ‘children’ and ‘childhood’. The third category I call ‘together despite difference’ and it is characterised by mention of at least one difference between the narrator and Anis, apart from gender. This difference is either not commented on at all, or said not to matter. Table 14 shows the theme statements in the first of these three categories. In this first category we see that the Eritrean responses are much longer than the Norwegian responses, which are all constituted by a short noun phrase. The shortness and similarity of the Norwegian theme statements can be understood as their recognition of a familiar theme, making it easy for them to generalise from the particularity of “Anisino” to the more general theme of friendship.

Table 14: Theme statements about friends

Eritrean	Norwegian
- universal peer relationship in Eritrea... (E10)	- true friendship (N6)
- Having fun, though it is usually believed that there could never be a real friendship when it comes to the opposite sex, theirs was all about enjoying the time while you still have it on your hands. (E7)	- the value of friendship (N8)
- childhood experience emanating from common experience and adaptation with each other. (E8)	- the beauty of friendship (N9)
- two Eritrean children who had lived in Asmara for many years very friendly. They love each other too much. (E9)	- the value of a good friendship (N4)
- adolescent love that matches the girl and the boy during their early age. (E11)	
- two young students life as student before their separation, Anisino to Yemen. They were friend students who were going to school together. (E6)	
- two beloved one who lived in close by houses. They are real friends right from their child hood. (E6)	

The Eritrean respondents clearly locate this theme in the first part of the literary text, since they describe the friendship before it was disrupted. It is less clear whether the Norwegian respondents are referring to the first part, or reflecting on the whole of the literary text. The two Norwegian respondents who write that “Anisino” is about the *value* of friendship, for instance, might be said to be commenting on the story as a whole, since also the latter part of the story can be read as a reflection on the value of the friendship, and the meaning of its loss.

In the second category about the innocence of childhood, we again see short noun phrases in the Norwegian theme statements, and longer statements in the Eritrean ones. The children’s innocence is understood as their unawareness of the social conventions in the sub-national communities to which they belong. These communities act in a way that demonstrates that for them difference *does* matter. I have therefore included a theme statement that does not use the word ‘innocence’, but which refers to just this quality: “children’s open mind, that adults never have” (N1).

Table 15: Theme statements about innocence

Eritrean	Norwegian
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Childhood. Childhood is the sweetest and unforgettable part of our age. What one does during this age departs from innocence. (E1) - the innocence of childhood, where children no matter their differences get to have one another for a friend and explore the beauty of having not a care in the world. (E7) <p>love, it's about two best friends who love each other very much and who got no other sinful thought than to have fun and enjoy life (E4)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the innocence of children (N9) - the innocence of youth (N8) - children's open mind, that adults never have (N1) <p>A lovely story about the innocence of childhood... (N6)</p>

Innocence is a positive value in all the statements and is seen to be a defining quality of childhood. It can be interestingly compared to the naivety of the monkey in the fable in chapter 10. The monkey, like the children, was unaware of the plans of another member of the animal community, and therefore very nearly became a victim of his own naivety. However he resorts to cunning, and thereby manages to protect himself from exploitation by the crocodile. In both stories the students, both Eritrean and Norwegian, express sympathy with the innocent victim rather than with the more powerful figures of the crocodile or the adults. The innocence of the monkey, which first makes him a victim, does not stop him from regaining control of the situation. In “Anisino”, by contrast, the innocence of the narrator leaves her unprepared and unable to defend herself when she becomes a victim of the adults' intervention. Her innocence leads to emotional invalidity. Thus the simplicity of the animal relations in the fable, where the monkey can have both innocence and control, is in contrast to the narrator here, whose innocence allows others to take control of her life.

Table 16 shows that the category ‘together despite difference’ is important for the Eritrean students, since every third response has to do with the children being together despite their being different. Seven Eritrean respondents wrote a total of twelve statements about the difference between the children. Some just mentioned a difference and said no more about it, as does E9, who writes that they had different faiths. In his other statement on this theme E9 mistakes the Catholic church for a Protestant one. E9 is not from Makael province where Asmara is situated, and this may account for his unfamiliarity with a central landmark in the city. It is also possible that as a member of the Orthodox church he (and the other students) were less aware of the precise identity of the places of worship of other denominations.

Table 16: Theme statements about being together despite difference

Eritrean	Norwegian
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - these two friend were not only differ in their faith but also their nationality too. finally this tells us that is doesn't matter to be friends though they have so many differences. (E12) - two friends of different sex that is male and female ones with different religious faith they had a good relationship between them. (E12) - though they were different believers they used to go the church aimlessly on their way along the cathedral street the would look at each other. (E12) - the two intimate friends and how innocent they were and how they love eachother despite their difference in religion. (E5) - Virtual love. I mean they are opposite in religion both they both believe God is one. (E11) - A good example of Eritrean culture that now we loved each other even if we are of different believers. (E11) - equality, its about equality showing us that we are humans before we are muslim or christian, a boy or a girl. (E4) - Friendship. To befriend with someone, difference in religion does not matter. The only thing is giving each other's heart. (E1) - love. Love does not discriminate any origin, religious background and colour. Love is blind. If you are in love you don't bother about others. (E1) - The daily routine of two Eritrean boy and girl who lived in Asmara many years ago. They were different in their believe (faith or religion.) (E9) - 'Anisino' the boy friend of the writer (may be Rahel). He was a lovely boy. Both the writer and Anisino used to go to school together near the commercial Bank. When they came near to the protestant church, they entered to compound and prayed though he was Moslem. (E9) - is about how love is not able to control by religion, because love an emotional feeling beyond control. (E2) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - a friendship that breaks with conventional borders set by other people (N10) - childhood friendship between a boy and a girl with different backgrounds (N2) - growing up in a country with multiple cultures (N2)

Other Eritrean students say that the relationship succeeds *despite* these differences. E12 mentions both religion and nationality as significant. He has all three theme statements in this category, so this is an issue that attracts his attention. He uses the word ‘nationality’ by which he may have understood Anis to be a Yemeni national, since his parents lived there, but it is more likely that E12 is referring to ethno-linguistic groups, which are often termed ‘nationalities’ in Eritrea (Pool, 2001:7). I am also unsure what E12 means by ‘finally’, when he says that finally differences don’t matter to friends. In the ‘finally’ of the story, the differences do matter very much in that the friends have lost all contact with each other because of them. And yet, the final words of the story “Anisino, I wish you the best wherever you are and thank you for all those good times. You were my best friend”, can be read as showing that the friendship has indeed survived, at least as a strong and influential memory, so in this sense it *is* the final message of the story that difference doesn’t matter to friends.

Only two Norwegian respondents have theme statements in this category. N2, himself the bearer of a hyphenated identity, is particularly aware of this aspect of the literary text, for he has two theme statements about it:

- childhood friendship between a boy and a girl with different backgrounds (N2)
- growing up in a country with multiple cultures (N2)

That the two Norwegian students are in favour of friendship between young people of different backgrounds is unremarkable, given the focus on individuality and choice in Norwegian culture. What I do find remarkable is the amount and strength of support for the relationship that the Eritrean students express. That they support close relationships between members of different communities is in line with the nation-building project, but it is surprising that they condone the relationship when love and the possibility of a sexual relationship are at issue. Wilson interviewed many women in Eritrea and found that all of them, with the exception of the Kunama, said that “preserving the family line [...] was the single most important factor in marriage arrangements” (Wilson, 1991:123). To achieve this preservation of the family line, she says, patriarchal peasant societies have comprehensive control of women’s lives, which leads many women to become withdrawn and passive. At EIT too, everyone can say they are from a village, and many of the students of English are ‘village boys’, as I was told. They presumably carry with them the tradition which makes almost unthinkable marriage between different ethnic groups. How, then, can they support the relationship between Anis and the narrator? I find it probable that in order to champion the relationship it must be accommodated to traditional values, and that this concern prompts the statements about innocence. If the children are innocent, there is no need for their families to fear their friendship. The idea that

their state of innocence could develop into a state of sin, surfaces in E4's statement that the children have "no other sinful thought than to have fun and enjoy life". Anis and the narrator have, she implies, not reached the age of awakened sexuality, or, as she puts it, "sinful thoughts". In so saying she demonstrates that "the attitudes to sex and sexuality created by tradition remained deep in people's consciousness" (Wilson, 1992:132). But at least E4 broaches the subject. Most of the students do not address the fear of a sexual relationship that could explain the reaction of the adult communities to the young relationship. Their comments remain in the domain of commemorating the couple being 'together despite difference'. They talk of love, but without touching on the question of whether the friendship of two thirteen-year-olds is a potential sexual relationship.

The range of terms used by the students to describe the two – 'friends', 'children', 'boy and girl', 'young people' – is indicative of their transitional social age, between the innocence of childhood, where it is acceptable that they be together, and the age of adolescence, where it is not. Although Anis and the narrator are only thirteen, some Eritrean girls are already betrothed at this age. Both E7 and E4 explicitly identify the innocence of the couple as that of childhood. Since the narrator is no longer an innocent child in the eyes of the communities to which Anis and she belong, the Eritrean students must emphasise the (childhood) innocence of the couple to reclaim the relationship from these disapproving eyes.

Statements about being together despite difference and religious equality overlap, but nowhere as confusingly as in the theme statement of E11. I discuss his response as an example of the linguistic challenges that the Eritrean material could present. Here is the theme statement in question: "Virtual love. I mean they are opposite in religion both they both believe God is one". E11 distinguishes between religion as an institution and as belief. The narrator and Anis belong to two different institutionalised religions. But as believers they are united in their belief in a common god. More problematic, however, is the expression 'virtual love' in his response, which could have at least three incompatible meanings. These possible meanings are:

i) virtuous love: an emotion or commitment that is non-sexual and motivated by spiritual kinship; this seems likely in the light of the sentence that follows, but requires the assumption that the writer has meant to use the word 'virtuous', and used the word 'virtual' by mistake.

ii) almost love: it was nearly true love, but there was something formal stopping it. This also makes sense in the light of the sentence that follows. It requires the assumption that the word the respondent meant to use was 'virtually', as in "They were virtually lovers".

iii) unreal love: this is the meaning of virtual that is familiar from the discourse of the Internet and entertainment, where 'virtual' is used of deliberately designed reconstructions, as

opposed to spontaneous and real events. Although this is the literal sense of ‘virtual love’, it gives an improbable reading, in the light of the sentence that follows: “adolescent love that matches the girl and the boy during their early age”, and also in the context of the rest of E11’s response, where love is collocated with expressions from the real world, and used in a normative, positive sense: “A good example of Eritrean culture that now we loved each other even if we are of different believers”. Given the difficulty in choosing between these meanings, I have categorised E11’s theme statement on the basis of his other two statements, under ‘together despite difference’.

11.3.5 Religious equality

As we saw in the previous section, many of the statements about ‘together despite difference’ make reference to religion. In that category the emphasis is on the friendship blossoming *despite* religious difference. As E4 says, human identity is more important than religious identity. The present category is called ‘religious equality’ because it identifies religion, whether Christianity or Islam, as a governing and positive factor in personal relationships. This is a noteworthy category in that it is only Norwegian students who write about it. All the theme statements are positive, identifying religion as an arena for equality and acceptance.

- religious freedom, and how it can interact without causing friction. Acceptance. (N9)
- the understanding of God/Allah (N8)
- the fact that we are all equal, also in the eyes of God (N1)
- how religion can [...] also give comfort and happiness used in a “free-minded” way (as children) (N1)
- children and religion (N2)

A lovely story about ... the true sense of religion (N6)

N8 identifies the theme as “the understanding of God/Allah”, and in my reading the slash juxtaposing the Christian and the Muslim terms equates the two, and resonates with the line in the text, “As children we understood God or Allah better than anybody else”. N2’s apparently neutral theme statement – “children and religion” – when read with the co-text of his other statements discussed in the previous section, is clearly meant to contrast the children’s relationship to religion with the negative use to which adults can put it. Another student, N10, comments on the same line:

“As children we understood God or Allah better than anybody else.” – I love this sentence. Through the eyes of innocence, you see better the true values of religion... or a side of religion that I feel more comfortable with. (N10)

We see that N10 qualifies his understanding by saying that this is an aspect of religion that he is “more comfortable with”. This subjective characterisation of religion is striking. N10 selectively and knowingly constructs religion to his own liking, rather than seeing it as an unquestionable source of values and prescriptions (see also 6.1.3).

Norwegian expectations of religious equality mean that they, unlike the Eritrean readers, do not see the beginning of the story as a complication. The friendship between a boy and a girl, a Muslim and a Christian, is held to be acceptable, desirable, and even idyllic. The Eritrean students, who know that Muslim-Christian relationships, especially between a boy and a girl, are difficult to maintain and often frowned upon, are aware of a tension and the possibility of disruption from the start of the story. They know that Eritrean society is divided along religious lines, and never so fiercely as when it comes to relationships between a boy and a girl. The Eritrean students, therefore, write about friendship *despite* religious difference. They emphasise the strength of a friendship that can override entrenched distances enforced in the name of religion.

Not only is ‘religious equality’ a Norwegian-only category, but as many as six of the ten Norwegian respondents identify this theme. This is not to say that the Norwegian theme statements about religion are only positive. Negative statements are discussed in the next section, where several are critical of the role religion can play in dividing people. This normative response, either approving or disapproving, is also present in the Norwegian theme statements about ‘together despite difference’ and I have re-inscribed it in the title of that category with the word ‘despite’.

11.3.6 *The bad things*

The first four categories deal with ‘the good things’, to borrow a phrase from the text – friends, innocence, being together despite difference and religious equality. In this section I turn to ‘the bad things’ that disrupted the good things. I have sorted the theme statements into two categories, namely those that precede the rupture, and those that are directly involved in provoking it. The first of the two, ‘occupation’, contains just two statements about Ethiopian soldiers.

- How students were worried to go to school absolutely free where the Ethiopian soldier could not give them mind freedom (E2)

... the obstacles of the soldiers in Eritrea, the inability to live together in Eritrea during the colonization. (E10)

The negative effects of occupation, or ‘colonization’, to use E10’s term, is a theme identified by two Eritrean respondents, and by none of the Norwegian respondents. The apparent source for

this interpretation is just one sentence in lines 7-11 of “Anisino”. I have underlined the sentence in the following extract:

We would pass the Commercial Bank, built with bulletproof glass and surrounded by cans and ropes that deformed its beauty and made ugly sounds whenever anybody came close. The Ethiopian soldiers who guarded it would smile at us sometimes, but we would pretend not to see them. Our fun would begin at the market place, *Mercato*.

For E10 and E2 the soldiers are a representation of the occupation of Eritrea, and this occupation is seen as having implications for the development of the story, since it is ascribed damaging effects on personal relationships, making it impossible for people to live together. My own understanding of the literary text was that it was about how tradition and social convention can damage a friendship and scar a sensitive personality, and I assumed that this was the authorial intention. My first reaction to these theme statements about occupation was that the students were using an interpretive strategy that is appropriate to much other Eritrean literature but that here intrudes on an authorial reading. I was therefore inclined to see theme statements that mentioned occupation or colonisation as ‘misinterpretations’, in Rabinowitz’ sense of the term. However I now believe that the theme *is* in accordance with authorial intent. My overlooking the rhetorical design of “Anisino” reflects the cultural assumptions that I bring to the text, which led me to read the sentence about the Ethiopian soldiers as descriptive and atmospheric only. They were ‘background’, and I was not aware that they could be both background and foreground. For there is indeed evidence for the foregrounding of the Ethiopian soldiers in the text itself. The author expresses an unresolved bewilderment as to why ‘I’ and Anis were separated: “All our young minds could ask was, ‘But why?’”. This invites the reader to supply a meaning themselves, and though the most detailed image at the beginning of the literary text shows the children in the Catholic church, to which neither belongs, religious difference is not the only explanation that is suggested to the reader. The passage in which the children pass the bank guarded by Ethiopian soldiers is also a detailed image, which can be used to supply an answer to the question.

Let us look again at the context of the sentence about the Ethiopian soldiers. The previous sentence is negatively loaded with language that shows the reader the distance between the carefree children and the fraught setting: “bulletproof”, “surrounded by cans and ropes”, “deformed its beauty”, “ugly sounds whenever anybody came close”. And the sentence that comes after the one about the Ethiopian soldiers confirms that they are a negative factor, for it is only when the children have passed (and ignored) the soldiers that their fun begins. One can also read the passage about the Ethiopian soldiers as a literary foreshadowing of other negative aspects of life at that time. The sentences about the defended bank and the Ethiopian soldiers

are the only unhappy images in the first part of the literary text, and might also represent other social difficulties that, like the soldiers, could only be ignored for a short while.

There are of course contextual ways of understanding the theme of occupation outside the text itself. Do the respondents share a narrative archetype in which a story that starts off happily will end unhappily (Penne & Hertzberg, 2008:100)? In which case, is the reader primed from the start to look for someone or something to blame? Another possibility is that the context of the response session, immediately following a response session on the drama *The Other War*, has promoted the explanatory potential of this particular interpretive strategy in the minds of the respondents. For what we attend to in a text is influenced by other works in our minds that constitute a “particular intertextual grid” (Rabinowitz, 1997:186).

The next category is ‘disruption’ and Table 17 shows the theme statements that deal directly with the breaking off of the friendship between the narrator and Anis. All the Norwegian statements and many of the Eritrean statements are generalised, inasmuch as they see the story as showing how social convention and religion in any society can disrupt an innocent friendship. The Eritrean respondents identify “tribal and religious discrimination” and “the uncivilised way of thinking” as destructive forces. One Eritrean student, E4, attributes the ruptured friendship to the actions of particular people – “they pull them away from each other”, rather than to more general social factors. Several of the Eritrean students use language that is very critical of the divisive factors in society. E5, for example, writes about “religion and its influences. It clearly shows us that culture, custom and tradition is intolerable bondage of a society”. Is he here critical of religion, or is it the influence of “culture, custom and tradition” on religion that he condemns?

N5, who has all three theme statements in this category, writes that the story is about “how communities use religion in order to enforce a certain set of rules on people”. Similarly N9 talks about “conformity of religion” as a disruptive factor. Both these statements move from the particularities of the story to make a more general statement about the negative role that convention and religion can combine to play. N1, like N9, sees that religion can play both a positive and a negative role in the construction of multicultural societies. N9 clearly values the relationship between the two young people, since the other two brief theme statements that she makes are “the innocence of children” and “the beauty of friendship”. In her added comment, however, she is more expansive. Despite her sympathy for the young people, she is able to account for the response of the adults, without condemning them, by offering the explanation that it is the fear that their children will be lost to them that makes people disapprove of a relationship between children of different religions.

Table 17: Theme statements about disruption

Eritrean	Norwegian
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The tribal or religious discrimination Concerning all ages including the innocent children who were forced to be apart and no longer have their most precious friendship. (E7) - religion and its influences. It clearly shows us that culture, custom and tradition is intolerable bondage of a society. (E5) - religion is an influential factor in society in the way they live, even it can't challenge it easily if though there is passion as well as love. (E2) - revolution of two lovers against the uncivilized way of thinking o[f] human being. (E1) - ruining innocence, when they pull them away from each other they were also taking the innocent love which was inside them. (E4) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - how communities use religion in order to enforce a certain set of rules on people (N5) - the fact that young people with more open minds should be given the opportunity to have a voice and thus hopefully bring about the necessary changes in societies throughout the world “bound” in different religious conflicts (N5) - how religious belief is used to divide (N5) - how religion can set limits for us as human beings, but also give comfort and happiness used in a “free-minded” way (as children) (N1) - how religion can pull people apart instead of gathering them (N3) - adults not letting children be children (N6) - how children can see how simple and easy things can be and how adults seem to complicate them (N3) - the injustice of the world (N8) <p>Considering the reaction of the people surrounding them, I would also add conformity of religion as a point. Because they were of different religious groups, people in their lives didn't see it fit for them to hang out. Somehow fear could enter into that account as well. The fear of losing their children to the other one's beliefs. (N9)</p>

11.3.7 Loss

In this category are theme statements about what happens to the narrator after Anis is sent away to Yemen. The end of the story deals with the narrator's feelings and reflections on what her relationship with Anis has meant, and still means, to her. I expected that this would arouse the interest of the students, and indeed both groups identify loss as a theme in the story, as we can see in Table 18. The Eritrean respondents tend to relate the theme to the specific setting and characters, where the Norwegian respondents describe loss in more general terms. Overall, however, there is considerable similarity between the theme statements of the two groups in this

category, apparently confirming Rosenblatt's claim (1983) that the deepest human emotions are universal, and that we recognise them in a text, regardless of our culture and context.

Table 18: Theme statements about loss

Eritrean	Norwegian
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - regret (remorse) of the girl because she had internal love that she did not describe it before. (E8) - The separation of two young lovers the boy to yemen the lady remains in Asmara, who is expressing her feeling to meet her friend again. (E6) - Departion and how unbearable it is. How difficult and hard it is to depart from the one you love deep from your heart. (E5) - past experiance of a lady to her love who left an impression on her mind. (E1) - Betrayal. One must not betray or forget what one has come across. To make it clear, we should not forget former friends. (E1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the hurt of being deprived something that matters, for no apparent reason! (N10) - to lose a friend, but to be able to remember the good times in spite of the grief. (N1) - our safety mechanisms that we create in order to protect ourselves (N1) - How we react to the things in the world that we do not understand (N1) - how childhood experiences can shape our entire lives, for better or worse (N3) - how experiences in your childhood and youth can catch up with you as an adult (N4) - being afraid to lose something that is good in your life (N4) <p>Things that have happened to you in childhood can mark you for the rest of your life. (N8)</p>

The saddening emotional *experience* of loss is the focus of the Eritrean respondents, as it is for several of the Norwegian respondents. However some of the Norwegian respondents focus on the long-term *effects* of loss, something the Eritrean students do not do. Thus whilst Eritrean respondents recognise the sudden disappearance of Anis from the narrator's life as occasioning "an impression", "regret (remorse)" and "her feeling", a Norwegian respondent talks about "how experiences in your childhood and youth can catch up with you as an adult" (N4). This is an interesting difference, and one that can be related to the students' understanding of how a break-up affects people. For the Norwegian students the story shows how loss affects people in general. There is no mention of the narrator's loss in particular, no expectation that it is a problem peculiar to her. The Norwegian statements do not distinguish between the emotional vulnerability of men and women when a relationship ends. One uses the discourse of popular Western psychology in talking of 'safety mechanisms'. Although the Norwegian statements are

expressed as generalisations, it is in this category that we find most of their statements that use ‘we’ and ‘you’. This indicates that the theme of loss may have a personal resonance for them, and that despite the generalised form that the sentence fragments invite, themes relating to the emotional effects of loss are a point of contact between their own lives and the emotional events of the story.

The Eritrean students, on the other hand, refer to the loss as it is experienced by the girl. E5 is the exception here, and again he stands out for the intensity of his interpretation: “Departion [departure + separation?] and how unbearable it is. How difficult and hard it is to depart from the one you love deep from your heart”. The other men, however, focus on the response of the girl to the loss. Wilson refers to Trish Silkin’s research in Eritrea. Silkin observed that “it is generally acknowledged that women are more vulnerable than men when relationships end” (Wilson, 1991:136). The discussion document on marriage mentioned in 11.2.2 corroborates this observation, when it states that most relationships end on the initiative of the man, and asks, “If a relationship ends without marriage will the man or the woman be most hurt? Why?”.

A special interpretation of the story is offered by E8. The story, he says, is about “regret (remorse) of the girl because she had internal love that she did not describe it before”. I understand him to mean that the problem the narrator experiences in her adult life has to do with her not speaking out when Anis was taken away to Yemen. At first I could not find anything in the literary text to support this reading. I wondered if E8 was bringing something from his own experience, of life or of fiction, to his encounter with the text, what Eco describes as private reading, where readers use the text “as a container for their own passions, which may come from outside the text or which the text may arouse by chance” (Eco, 1994:8). However, if we read “Anisino” as a wake-up call to young Eritreans, then E8 is in sympathy with the author’s intention and has picked up something that no other student has written about: the importance of speaking up and talking about one’s feelings. Although the narrator does not introduce this idea explicitly, E8’s theme statement suggests that he is in sympathy with the idea that it is important to say what one feels, and to try to take control of one’s life. This sympathy may be an idea he has long held, or an idea that he has met in previous encounters with Asghedom and her work.

11.3.8 Memories

Two of the Eritrean students have completed the sentence fragments with comments about memories. This involves stepping back and describing the literary text in terms of its genre, rather than in terms of themes, a perspective no Norwegian respondent has taken.

- The sweet memory of her childhood... and the obstacles of the soldiers in Eritrea, the inability to live together in Eritrea during the colonization. (E10)
- universal peer relationship in Eritrea. Almost everybody has his own memories. (E10)
- teenager memories when she reached adulthood. She recounts her memory to somebody who was close to her. (E10)
- childhood memory. This arises or emanates from the continuous contact between the two people (children) (E8)

In describing the text as memories, the students are probably assuming it to be autobiographical. After all, literature is *libweled*, “what the heart bore”. E10 dominates this category, since all three of his statements refer to memories. In the questionnaire E10 defined literature as “imitating of social life”, and he says that the Eritrean ‘fictions’ and films that he has seen “imitate some virtues and ills of social matters”. The sweet memories of the narrator’s childhood, when Muslim and Christian children could play together, suit his prescription that “the author is also required to write something informative to manage qualitative and prudent nationalist. Then the step must go to united world”. If E10 is to approve of the story, he must make sense of the disruption of this sweet memory in a way that is consistent with his nationalist commitment. He does so by ascribing the disruption of the friendship to the Ethiopian occupation.

11.4 Narrative structure and the response to “Anisino”

11.4.1 Privileging the beginning, middle or the end

In this section I explore how the students responses can be described in relation to three textual ‘locations’ where the students have directed their attention, the beginning, middle and end, looking in particular at the title, the *peripeteia* and the ending. That the theme statements refer to particular parts of the literary text exemplifies a point that Rabinowitz’ made, namely that both writers and readers must make a choice about where to direct attention in their construction of a text (1997:51). He ascribes titles great importance: “Titles not only guide our reading process by telling us where to concentrate; they also provide a core around which to organize an interpretation” (1997:61).

Both Bruner and H. Porter Abbott emphasise the structural centrality of the complication, or conflict, for our understanding of narrative structure. Bruner finds Aristotle’s term *peripeteia* both underrated and invaluable for the understanding of what makes a story a story. *Peripeteia*, he says, is “a sudden reversal in circumstances (that) swiftly turns a routine sequence of events into a story” (Bruner, 2002:5). The English phrase ‘turning point’ refers to the same place of rupture in a story. Stories, says Bruner:

typically begin by taking for granted (and asking the hearer or reader to take for granted) the ordinariness or normality of a given state of things in the world – what *ought* to prevail when Red Riding Hood visits her grandmother [...] And then the *peripeteia* upsets the expected sequence – it’s a wolf dressed in Grandma’s clothes [...] and the story is on its way, with the initial normative message lurking in the background. (2002:6)

The normative message, of course, is that things ought to be as they are at the beginning – the world should be such that the innocent and well-meaning Red Riding Hood can bring victuals and affection safely to her grandmother.

In his *Introduction to Narrative* Abbott identifies another aspect of classical drama – *agon* – as a defining and archetypal feature of narrative (Abbott, 2008:55). He explains that *agon* represents the conflict, or contest, between the hero – the protagonist – and an antagonist. Abbott later discusses the negotiation of narrative, i.e. the reader’s response to the structures of the text, and argues that however varied readings of the same story may be, “one almost invariably finds the same orientation, *an attention to conflict of some kind and how it plays out*” (2008:199, original italics). If this is indeed the defining feature of both the text and the reader’s response to it, one might reasonably expect the readers to focus on this conflict in their theme statements.

Åsfrid Svensen, in *Tekstens Mønstre* (1985),⁹⁸ claims that the organisation of a story reflects what the author deems significant. “The ending in particular is often important, with its resolution or lack of resolution that the author has chosen for problems and conflicts, or the understanding, mood or state of mind that the text ends with” (Svensen, 1985:218, my translation). This same idea is part of Rabinowitz’ understanding of how stories work: “last sentences [...] often serve to scaffold our retrospective interpretation of the book” (Rabinowitz, 1997:62). A scaffolding directs the reader towards a coherent reading of the text, and Rabinowitz, most of whose examples are taken from novels in the Western canon, recognises that the last pages of a text are of especial significance (1997:160).

11.4.2 *Why are so many theme statements concerned with the beginning?*

How then are the students’ theme statements distributed amongst the three locations in the story? The categories about friends and innocence, ‘together despite difference’, religious equality and occupation, as well as the two statements about Ethiopian occupation, are located at the beginning of the story. The category ‘disruption’ is found in the middle of the story, and statements about loss belong to the end of the story. In Figure 2 we see a fairly clear pattern emerge.

⁹⁸ Patterns in the Text

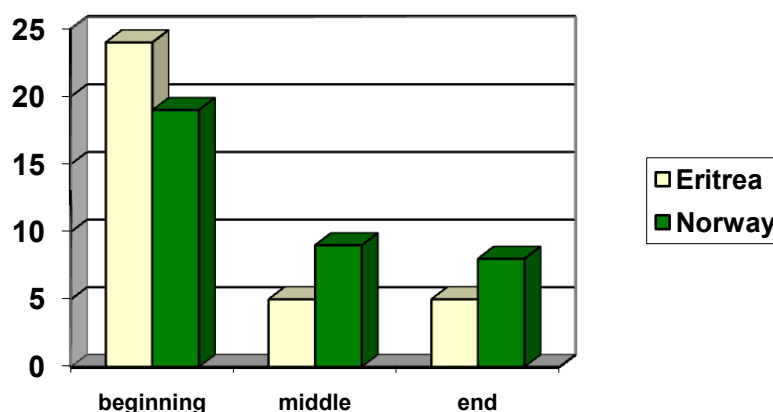


Figure 2: The number of theme statements and comments at each textual location

The figure shows clearly that both groups identify most themes from the beginning of the story, something which is also evidenced in five of the seven categories being located at the beginning. Most of the Norwegian respondents and all the Eritrean respondents notice the beginning, in the sense that they have at least one theme statement located there. The most obvious explanation for the large number of themes that are located at the beginning is that the beginning of the literary text is the largest location, being twenty-five lines long. However, more Norwegian than Eritrean students looked for themes in the middle and the end of the text. Apart from the length of the first part of the literary text, the title may well have played a part here, for the title “Anisino” contains a wealth of information that is available to Tigrinya-speaking readers, as the Eritrean linguist Nazareth A. Kifle explains:

... the suffix -ino is a borrowed diminutive adjective marker from Italian which is used to show affection and love.

The relationship of the narrator to the protagonist then could be of ‘equals’ in terms of age and status which motivates the endearment adjective. It also indicates the informality and casualness of their encounter. (pc 17.06.2008)

Both groups of respondents were required to write their answers after a first reading, but the title of the literary text has probably alerted many of the Eritrean readers to the themes of affection and equality before they read the text for the first time. For the Norwegian readers, who did not have time to puzzle meaning out of the story, the title was probably little more than a sound image alerting them to the possible foreignness of the story. The title may have provided a core around which the Eritrean students have organized their interpretation, by directing their attention to those parts of the text that deal with the narrator’s relationship to Anis and to her affection for him, rather than to that part of the story where this relationship is disrupted. In other words, it points to the ‘orientation’ that makes up the first and longest part of

the story, and perhaps also to the ‘resolution’, in which the narrator writes of her response to the loss of Anis. Had the title been, for example, “Divided”, it would have drawn the reader’s attention to the ‘complication’ in the story, in which the two young people are suddenly and permanently separated from one another. The likelihood that the Eritrean readers used the title, with its implications of affection and equality, as a core around which to organise their interpretation is supported by there being eight of the Eritrean respondents who use the word ‘love’ (or its derivatives), and twenty-seven occurrences of the word in their theme statements, whereas not one of the Norwegian respondents uses the word to talk about the relationship between the characters.

The normative message which Bruner (2000) describes as “lurking in the background” in the exposition of a narrative text is, in my reading of “Anisino”, that innocent childhood friendships should be left in peace, and not disrupted by the imposition of divisive gender and religious norms. Another way of explaining why both groups locate so many of their theme statements at the beginning is that the students collaborate with the authorial text, which asks the audience to take for granted the ordinariness or normality of a given state of things in the world – what *ought* to prevail, as Bruner said (see 11.4.1). This ideal is apparently shared by the young author and her young readers, be they Norwegian or Eritrean.

11.4.3 *Writing about the middle*

In the case of “Anisino” the *peripeteia* that disrupts the childhood friendship of the narrator and Anis is to be found in the following passage:

In those times, we innocently believed that a boy and a girl could be friends, but the adults thought differently. The closer we became, the more people began to talk about us. Soon we were seen as a very big issue, the kind that required a family forum. An immediate decision closed the case. He was to leave for Yemen and not to see me again. We were shocked. All our young minds could ask was, “But why?”. He never even came to say goodbye.

To what extent can the concepts of *peripeteia* and *agon* help us to understand the respondents’ identification of themes? Bruner, as we saw, attaches crucial importance to *peripeteia* in narrative. The *agon* of “Anisino”, in my reading, relates to the conflict in the passage quoted above, between the protagonist – the narrative ‘I’ – and the antagonist – interfering adults, social convention, divisive religion. We might then expect that many of the theme statements relate to this passage. Yet this does not seem to be the case. With so few responses one can only guess at why this might be.

A mundane factor here may be that the Eritreans, who have many theme statements from the beginning of the story, may have already ‘used up’ the three sentence fragments on their response sheets. Another factor may be that the middle is by far the briefest part of the story. It

is told in short, almost breathless sentences, so that students may have sped through the middle, and not returned to it as a location for generating theme statements.

My guess is that there is a tendency amongst the Eritrean students not to write about social difficulties. I find it likely that the embedding national context, reinforced by the institutional setting in which the responses were elicited, encouraged the Eritrean students to under-communicate difference and not to focus on problems. When problems are mentioned, they are sometimes attributed to Ethiopian occupation or to tradition, an understanding of the social context that aligns with the ambitions of the ongoing nation-building project. This is a point for further investigation, rather than a finding that the present material allows.

11.4.4 Writing about the end

The proposition that the ending of a text usually gets most attention (see 11.4.1) is not borne out by the present material, although both Eritrean and Norwegian respondents have written insightful comments about the experience and the effects of loss. However the relatively few theme statements located at the end might be explained in terms of the deviation of “Anisino” from a classic narrative structure, in which the end of the story represents a resolution of the conflict. After the *peripeteia* the story should be “on its way”, as Bruner says. But if this means that more events are to come, and the central upheaval is to be resolved, then “Anisino” is not so much on its way as winding down. The ‘post-*peripeteia*’ of the story is a reflection on the loss of this particular friend and also on the narrator’s lessened capacity for emotional involvement as a result of that loss.

There is something not quite right about describing the narrator’s reflections on the loss of Anisino as a resolution, since no more events occur and nothing is resolved. The literary text does not end, as many short stories do, with a twist, or with an open-ended statement, or an invitation to generalise about the human condition, or a message to the reader. Rather it is the author’s sweetly kept thought that we hear: “Anisino, I wish you the best wherever you are and thank you for all those good times. You were my best friend”. This reads almost like a letter that will never be sent, or the farewell remarks made to the camera on a romantic reality show. Ostensibly written to the lost loved one but with an eye to the audience, the author leaves the reader with a well-worn linguistic formula for encapsulating loss.

The term ‘coda’, usually understood as the very last sentences of a story, is perhaps a useful term here. Bruner talks about coda as “a retrospective evaluation of what it all might mean, a feature that also returns the hearer or reader from the there and then of the narrative to the here and now of the telling” (Bruner, 2002:20). Although disproportionately long in relation to the rest of the story to be easily described as a coda, the last part of “Anisino” is characteristically a

coda in being “deeply about plight”. It is perhaps the privacy of these last sentences that can explain why the Eritrean students have not wished to engage with the *effects* of loss.

11.4.5 Clustering in relation to the narrative structure

Up to now I have considered the number of Eritrean and Norwegian theme statements at each location. But there is another question that can be asked of this material, namely whether each individual student has found themes at one, two or all three locations. Figure 3 illustrates the pattern that emerges when we ask this question.

With so few students no conclusions can be drawn regarding the variation between the two groups. The finding that only four of the Eritrean respondents and two of the Norwegian respondents have found themes in all three locations might suggest that students in both groups have tended to look at parts of the text, rather than the whole text, in making sense of it.

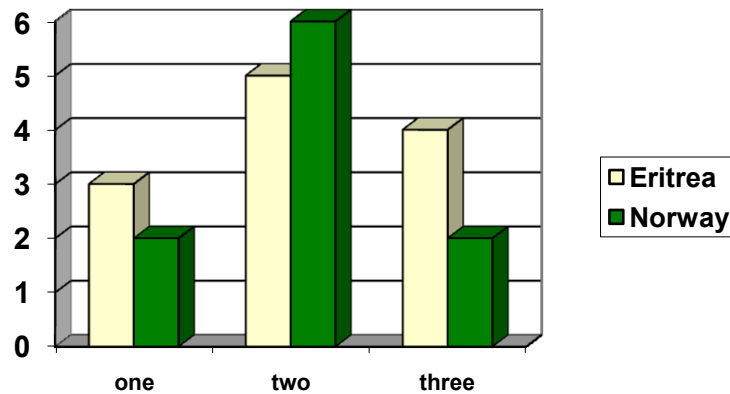


Figure 3: The number of students with theme statements at one, two or all three textual locations

The Norwegian material allows the speculative suggestion that gender may relate to whether a respondent ‘clusters’ responses to the text, since two of the three Norwegian men, and no Norwegian women, found all their theme statements at one location.

11.5 Concluding remarks

The student responses to “Anisino” show that this short narrative is open to the construction of many meanings. Though the theme statements belong to categories to which both the Norwegian and Eritrean respondents contribute, with the exception of the Norwegian-only category about religious equality and the Eritrean-only category about occupation, the distribution of the theme statements varies considerably between the groups. An exception is the category ‘innocence’, which was identified by four or five members of each group, suggesting a value held by both. The Eritrean respondents tend to write more about positive themes from the beginning of the literary text – friendship, innocence, and especially the way friendship can

develop despite differences in religious background. The Norwegian respondents are more concerned with the divisive and damaging uses to which religion and social convention can be put, and the psychological effects of loss. In other words, it seems that the Norwegian students are more concerned with problems, be they social or psychological, than are the Eritrean students. One might therefore offer a more general hypothesis, namely that the Eritrean respondents are more inclined to look for what is positive in a narrative text about Eritrea, and disinclined to write about problems, whilst the Norwegian respondents are inclined to look for and find problems in a narrative, Eritrean or otherwise. Here a strong proviso relating to the institutional conditions of reading is in order. The Norwegian students worked in the literary tradition of HUC, where complex and problem-oriented literature dominates the prose and drama reading lists. Informative, factual, educational, romantic and ‘happy-ending’ texts are barely represented on these lists. The Eritrean students knew that they were writing for a foreigner, and that they were writing about an Eritrean text, which must be interpreted in alignment with the expectations of the interpretive community to which they belong. Indeed their answers to the questionnaire show that they articulate these expectations themselves and use them to judge the literature that they read.

Whether or not this generalisation is valid, we can consider the different emphasis in the responses not only in the light of the institutional conditions of reading, but also in the light of the conventions and preoccupations of the public media in Eritrea and Norway. Newspapers, television and radio in Eritrea, all of which are state-run, in itself an exceptional situation, are adulatory of the nation and of the president, and news coverage is predominantly made up of favourable reports on community construction efforts, graduation ceremonies and other media-friendly events. Problems, if mentioned at all, are consistently dismissed as misinformation or foreign propaganda. In Norway, national newspapers, as well as TV and radio news, contribute to an understanding of the world as chaotic and problematic, where individual and collective agency is often overtaken by events beyond popular control. Both national and local media tend to be problem-oriented, and to offer a site for the airing of thwarted expectations and dissatisfaction. This mediated understanding of what goes on in the world necessarily contributes to the interpretive strategies employed by Eritrean and Norwegian readers. A fuller exploration of this relationship is beyond the scope of the present study.

Looking beyond these general expectations to a consideration of the possible influence of narrative structure in directing the students’ attention to certain locations in the text, there were differences in where they looked for meaning. The idea that the title of a work of literature is an important interpretive guide finds support, since the significance of the title “Anisino” was only

available to the Eritrean respondents, and they commented on friendship and equality to a greater extent than did the Norwegian respondents. The middle – the turning point or *peripeteia* – was commented on by more Norwegians than Eritreans, suggesting perhaps the Norwegians' greater familiarity with Aristotelian expectations of narrative structure. The end of the literary text, which deals with the negative consequences of the adults' intervention in the narrator's life, received relatively little attention. I have considered the possibility that this may be due to the end being less of a resolution, in the Aristotelian sense, than a coda.

In section 11.2.2 I argued that “Anisino” can be read as offering a critique of the under-representation of religious and ethnic difference in the public discourse in Eritrea, and wondered to what extent this aspect of the text has been recognised or negotiated by the students. Clearly the written task itself prevented a broader discussion of this or other issues, but the ‘anything else’ option did open the way for a more general or personal reflection.

As one might expect, the Norwegian students were not aware of this possibility. For them it was a story of friendship on a par with other stories about friendship, since they described the story in general terms. For the Norwegian students it deals with the ups and down of friendship and the negative effects of interfering adults and social convention. Since religious difference is part of the public, literary and private discourse in Norway, the Norwegian students could look favourably on the friendship and disapprove of the factors that disrupted it, without finding it remarkable that religious intolerance be the topic of a literary text.

The Eritrean students did not use the ‘anything else’ option to say that religious difference is an important or under-communicated theme, nor that they had personal or anecdotal experience of this kind of religious intolerance. The seriousness with which they responded to “Anisino” suggests to me that it was meaningful to them, that it engaged them, and that it was perhaps not associated with the predictability of other national literary texts that they had studied. What sense they would have made of it had we explored its significance in contemporary Eritrea I could not ask and do not know. In their theme statements, however, the Eritrean students were more concerned to extol the situation where the children were together despite difference than to condemn the forces that separated them, unlike the Norwegian students, who were more inclined to do the opposite. Though this may properly reflect the Eritrean students' immediate response, it is also a politically appropriate way of negotiating the text and acknowledging that religious differences do exist and that they have significance.

12 The Other War

12.1 An overview

The central concern of this chapter is to explore the responses of the two groups of students to perhaps the most significant single work available in English by an Eritrean author, Alemseged Tesfai's *The Other War*. Section 12.2 starts with my synopsis of the play, and my interpretation of it. I go on to talk of the play in terms of its mandate, and the ideological and social conventions that the text assumes that it shares with its audience. The ideological conventions include an understanding of nationalism, who was in the right and who in the wrong during the Armed Struggle, and what actually happened during this war. Social conventions include the rights of women and the relationship of the individual to the family. I consider also what it means to be a non-authorial audience. The following section, 12.3, is about the play in use. It sketches the play's performance history, and then focuses on the process and challenges of collecting the student texts. The students are described as readers and audience, for they both read and listened to the play, and these terms are used interchangeably.

Turning to the responses themselves, I explore first, in section 12.4, the discursual positions that the students adopt, before turning in section 12.5 to interpret how the students make sense of the text. I look at some general characteristics of the response of the two groups, before using the term 're-plotting' to compare how the students retell the play as a continuous narrative. The bulk of the analysis, however, is organised in terms of Hall's terms 'encoding' and 'decoding', which facilitate a consideration of how the students relate to the ideology inscribed in the play. I explore the extent to which the Eritrean students share this ideology and whether the Norwegian students recognise and accept, negotiate or oppose it. The rest of section 12.5, from 12.5.6 to 12.5.9, deals with how the students make sense of the three main characters – Letiyesus, Assefa and Astier. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the students' response in relation to their embedding institutional and culture and context.

12.2 About the play

12.2.1 My synopsis

Originally written and performed in Tigrinya in 1984, the action of *The Other War* was based on contemporary events. The government of Ethiopia, referred to in the play as the Derg, was at this time involved in a full military war against the self-recruiting army of the EPLF. Ethiopia fought to retain Eritrea as a province, whilst the EPLF fought for full independence from Ethiopia. The 'other war' of the title refers to the Ethiopian strategy of producing interracial children by marriage or rape, who were to be a new generation of mixed Eritrean-Ethiopian

heritage for whom the idea of an independent Eritrea would be untenable.

The play is in five short acts, each set in the house of Letiyesus in Asmara. It opens with Letiyesus, a woman in her late fifties, telling her good friend Hiwot about her journey back from her village. She had travelled there to find out about her son Miki-el, who is fighting with the EPLF. Letiyesus did not meet Miki-el, and nor does the audience, but he is a recurrent point of reference. Letiyesus tells her friend about the informal marriage ceremonies she has seen practised amongst the fighters, so different to the marriage rituals with which she and Hiwot are familiar. She prays that the drought may end, and she talks angrily of the molestation she suffered at the hands of the Ethiopian soldiers at the checkpoints.

After a while Letiyesus learns that while she has been away her house had been taken over by her daughter Astier, along with Astier's second husband, an Ethiopian – “an Amhara” – named Assefa. Letiyesus is enraged at the thought of an occupier of the country occupying her own home. When Astier enters the scene with her two children – Solomie, the teenage daughter of her first marriage, and Kitaw, the son of her second – there is animosity from the outset. Whilst Letiyesus supports the cause of Eritrean independence, her daughter Astier sides with her husband Assefa in describing the Eritrean ‘freedom fighters’ as ‘terrorists’. We learn that Astier's new husband is an apparently solicitous man, in contrast to her first husband who was much older than her, drunken and abusive.

Astier quickly becomes chairwoman of the local *kebele* – one of many small urban units that enforced the policies of the Derg in the local community – and she carries out her duties with a ruthless determination that leads to the ostracism of both herself and her daughter. When Astier's husband Assefa fails to elicit from Letiyesus information about the whereabouts of Miki-el and his fellow combatants, he angrily reveals that his purpose in siring Astier's second child was a strategy in ‘the other war’ to create a new Ethiopian-Eritrean generation. This confrontation prompts Letiyesus to take her granddaughter Solomie and leave to join the freedom fighters. Her granddaughter, however, refuses to go without her little brother, and Hiwot persuades Letiyesus to take him with her by pointing out that in so doing Letiyesus can turn Assefa's strategy to her own advantage. Astier, having turned against the Eritrean cause, is now abandoned by her mother and her daughter and deprived of her son. In the final scene she is also brutally cast off by her Ethiopian husband. As she begs not to be left alone, Assefa knocks her to the ground and leaves her with the play's final words, “Do I care?”.

12.2.2 *My interpretation*

One of Rabinowitz' rules of reading is the rule of significance, which says that readers seek to make the rest of a work consistent with its ending. Which of the themes introduced early in the

play are consistent with its ending and its final image? Letiyesus sets the scene as she recounts her recent experiences, which are firstly the molestation by the Ethiopian soldiers at the checkpoint, secondly the quick, simple and voluntary marriage ceremonies of the Eritrean fighters, and thirdly the people's prayers that rain may be sent to alleviate the drought. Thus she sets a potential agenda for the dominant or preferred reading of the play: the righteousness of the struggle to rid the country of its violators; the ideal of marriage as a voluntary pact between two equal partners; and the threat of drought. Of these three themes, the first two are central to the play, but the drought is not mentioned again.

The action takes place in a woman-headed household, but Letiyesus' first references are to the wider world of the village and the fighters. In this way the audience is reminded of the bigger picture within which the domestic drama is played out, and Letiyesus, through her son Miki-el, is part of this bigger picture. Astier, by contrast, is always lonely. When she comes on stage the first time she is accompanied by her husband and two children, but her attention is directed away from them, towards her mother. Her battle is fought not outside the home, not even *in* the home, but in her body – a closed and self-destructive site of conflict. The play starts with a description of the community of the villagers and fighters and ends with showing us the abandonment of Astier. The fraught cohabitation of the family in Letiyesus' house is resolved when the right-thinking Eritreans leave Asmara to join the community of fighters, and Assefa is outwitted and rejected by the family on which he has sought to impose himself. The play's final spectacle is of Astier, a lonely abandoned woman shut into her mother's house. This movement from community to excommunication is what, in my view, accounts for the play's impact and consolidates its message: the inevitable abandonment of Eritreans who collude with the enemy.

One can read the play as an instantiation of the national narrative template, both in its presentation of the colonising Derg's brutality, and also in the pattern of Astier's marriages, where a period of great suffering under one colonising husband is replaced by a period of greater suffering under the next.

12.2.3 Designing and defending the play

The fact that *The Other War* was created exclusively for reception by members of the Tigrinya speech community in Eritrea means that a large body of shared knowledge is taken for granted (cf. Andrzejewski, et al., 1985:25-26). Although we are here dealing with the English translation, the play was created without any anticipation of it having a non-Tigrinya-speaking audience. The authorial audience was assumed to share the author's pro-Eritrean stance, his condemnation of the Derg and its strategies, and his great admiration for the fighters in the field and their loyal supporters.

Language and shared knowledge aside, *The Other War* is designed for a particular audience in at least three ways: as EPLF-commissioned Agitprop, as the work of a committed revolutionary, and as a re-interpreted text when the play was published in English.

Firstly, Tesfai was commissioned by the EPLF, to which he belonged, to write theatre that promoted their cause. The EPLF had a mandate for all the plays that they commissioned, namely that they develop and reinforce in the audience a particular understanding of the political situation in Eritrea. Tesfai shared with the EPLF an understanding of the Armed Struggle as a righteous war, and he therefore shared the play's ideological agenda. Looking back on this period, Tesfai describes the agenda for writers "in the days of the revolutionary fervour of the armed struggle", and the significance of plays and other cultural products for the success of the EPLF. *The Other War* is one of very few examples of this writing in English, and Tesfai explains the cultural 'brief':

Fighters had to be glorified, the enemy's "invincibility" had to be cut to size, the equality of women was to be promoted, the inevitability of the final victory despite the odds had to be inculcated into the psyche of men and women; in short, art had to serve revolutionary objectives. (Dhar, 2006:7)

However, inasmuch as he can be considered as an individual rather than as a mouthpiece for the EPLF, Tesfai wrote for a particular audience at a particular time, and with particular actors in mind, and the play was meant to exemplify the theory of revolutionary drama which he himself had proposed. The third way in which the play is designed for a particular audience is the subject of Tesfai's afterword, written for the publication of the play in English. He contradicts those who have understood the play to be opposed to mixed marriages. The play, he writes, "had and still has everything to do with governments and colonizers that use sex and marriage as instruments of ethnic cleansing. It has nothing to do with love and lovers, no matter their origin" (Tesfai, 2002:216). Clearly Tesfai is defending the play against those who have understood it to be opposed to mixed Ethiopian-Eritrean marriages. Tesfai's afterword indicates in fact that he does not fully share the social conventions of everyone in the Tigrinya-speaking audience. It also illustrates that he is trying to accommodate incompatible sets of shared conventions, and that he seeks with hindsight to accommodate a non-racist reading of his play.

As I see it, the playwright has to meet the demands of the nationalist project of the EPLF, of his own and the EPLF's concern for women's improved visibility, rights and status and his own integrity as a creative writer. Tesfai's afterword can be read as a reconsideration of the play in the light of its reception and in the light of his own more distanced and nuanced understanding of the polemical vision of EPLF theatre. Tesfai has been an important interviewee for non-Eritrean scholars who have written about Eritrean theatre, myself included (Warwick 1997,

Plastow 1999, Matzke 2002, Dhar 2006). But as the South African author and critic Mbulele Mzamane has said, it is unfair to expect a writer to write a story *and* understand it.⁹⁹ Umberto Eco (1996) goes further, and says that a narrator should never be taken as the authority on how his work should be interpreted, and that readers' reactions can make an author aware of something they did not recognise when they wrote the text. "We have to respect the text, not the author as a person so and so", he says.¹⁰⁰ An author is not therefore authoritative when it comes to his own work. I agree with Eco when he argues that the intention of the empirical author is of interest only because it serves our curiosity as to

how much and to what an extent he, as an empirical person, was aware of the manifold interpretations his text supported. At this point the response of the author must not be used in order to validate the interpretations of his text but to show the discrepancies between the author's intention and the intention of the text. (Eco, 1996:4)

Hall (1980) speaks of the site of encoding a message as always being a place of struggle, and here the playwright is himself that site. Tesfai offers one of many possible interpretations, and he is especially but not exclusively qualified to do so. However the teacher at EIT who had previously taught this text to the students did treat Tesfai as authoritative, as we shall see in section 12.3.4. The playwright lives in Asmara and was known to the teacher and to the Eritrean students as one of the country's most respected men of letters. He had addressed some, if not all, of the students in this study. It would, I suspect, have been inconceivable to them that the author was not the person best equipped and entitled to interpret his own literary creation, both when he wrote it, and afterwards.

12.2.4 The encoding of the independence narrative

How then does Tesfai encode the independence narrative (see 6.2.2) in his text? The word 'Amhara' illustrates this shared convention in a way that deserves special attention. The glossary to the play explains that 'Amhara' is the name of one of the major nationalities in Ethiopia: "For long, it had been the most dominant political group" (1999:217). Warwick notes that the primary concerns of the theatre troupes were "propaganda, education, and using culture to resist *Amharicization* – the process whereby the Ethiopians attempted to impose their culture and language on Eritrea" (Warwick, 1997:224, italics added). Hailemariam explains that the Amhara are accorded a position that differs significantly from the role of ethnic identities in other multi-ethnic African states (Hailemariam, 2002:71). Ethiopia, he says, "was an empire with the Amharic language as the core of the 'cultural area' and it gave little weight to issues of

⁹⁹ Mbulele Mzamane: The unfolding culture of liberation. Paper presented at the 'Policing Expression' seminar, Oslo, 05.05.2009.

¹⁰⁰ This is a curiously uncritical observation, given the extent to which Eco himself claims to be an authority on his own fictional works in his lectures and writings.

ethnic origin and rights”. New regions were taken over by the Amhara and *became* Amhara. Hailemariam explains that “the origin and construction of the Eritrean national identity, therefore, needs to be closely looked at against this background”. In *The Other War* Letiyesus repeatedly refers to Assefa as an Amhara. By describing him in this way rather than as a member of the Ethiopian nation or government, she represents the EPLF understanding of the war as one fought between a dominant group, the Amhara, and a unified Eritrean people.

Another shared convention and a common technique in EPLF plays was to use the family as a metaphor for Eritrea, providing an idealized representation of Eritrea in contrast to the destructive Ethiopian colonizers (Warwick, 1997:226). According to Matzke, house and body are the main symbols in *The Other War*. This instantiates a pattern where “women have always been a signifier for the country in Eritrea, both of which were ‘our territory’ to be protected from the incursion/‘impregnation’ of whoever constituted the enemy. The ‘purity’ of the nation depends on the ‘purity’ of the women as its reproducers” (Matzke, 2003:230). Although Tesfai “objected to the persistent usage of women as national allegories, mainly the woman-forced-to-marry-cruel-husband type of drama which referred to Eritrea’s annexation by Ethiopia” on the grounds that it was overused and shallow (2003:204), his own play is a variation on this same theme.

For the EPLF and the playwright it was important to underline the unity of the Eritrean struggle for independence, and to downplay the extent to which also the EPLF was led by a dominant ethnic group, namely the Tigrinya. Thus the play is an instance of the ideological discourse of its time and place of production and performance. Tesfai also makes use of shared conventions as to the predefined positions available to Eritreans and Ethiopians during the war, and the success or failure of these positions as they are represented by the characters in the play, directs audience response in a particular way. Tesfai furthermore indicates how the play should be read by means of its structure. It begins with Letiyesus condemning the behaviour of the Ethiopian soldiers and ends by showing the dastardliness of a particular Ethiopian soldier, thereby reinforcing a particular set of shared socio-political conventions.

12.2.5 Multiple positions for the authorial reader?

The 30-year war of independence has been woven into the fabric of Eritrean thought and language to such a remarkable extent that concepts such as ‘the Armed Struggle’, ‘the Field’, ‘the Fighters’ and ‘Liberation’ “came with huge, if invisible, capital letters” (Wrong, 2005:10). This makes it likely that the interpretive strategy most readily available to an Eritrean audience will be to read texts as commemorating the Armed Struggle, honouring the Fighters, and as demonstrating the obligation of the audience to continue to build the nation and ensure its

independence. Despite the immediate appeal of such an interpretation, I wonder whether it is indeed so obvious which set of conventions the author shares with today's Eritrean audience. As McCormick says, "the repertoire of the text, like the ideology of the culture [...] is complex, inevitably changing as it is perceived in different historical moments, and contradictory" (McCormick, 1994:77). How then do the repertoires of the text change as they are perceived in different historical and national contexts, and in what ways can the repertoire of the text be said to be contradictory? In this section I explore other positions that *The Other War* offers its audience.

The play tells an indisputably nationalist story, but I have argued that it is also concerned with women's rights, which were seen as an integral part of the EPLF liberation endeavour. In 6.4.1 I described the subjugated position of women in Eritrea, especially in the rural areas. The play enacts social and moral issues, with a view to changing traditional attitudes and practice. However it is arguably the combination of the nationalist and the women's liberation agenda which challenges a unified interpretation of *The Other War*. Inasmuch as the play deals with the negative impact of Astier's first arranged and abusive marriage, it illustrates the oppressive nature of "the feudal marriage norm", to quote from the EPLF Marriage Law (see 6.4.1). However, the working out of this topic in a nationalist play is complicated. For some young women, becoming fighters with the EPLF was not only or even primarily ideologically motivated, but at least partly motivated by the immediate desire to avoid an unwanted marriage, or to escape from an unhappy one (Wilson, 1991:131). The play accommodates a reading whereby leaving an abusive husband and joining the *Ethiopian* revolution was a way out of a wretched marriage for Astier. But in allowing this reading, the play facilitates a similar reading of the reasons why Solomie joins the EPLF. For her too it offers a way out of an untenable family situation in which she experiences indifference and abuse from her mother and step-father. Her motivation for joining the EPLF has as much to do with her oppressive family situation as with patriotic fervour.

Another complicating factor is that the play shows that marriage "based on the absolute will of the two partners" can lead to as much misery as an arranged marriage. Whilst the play shows the disastrous effects of Astier's first non-voluntary marriage, the effects of Astier's second *voluntary* marriage turn out to be equally disastrous for Astier herself and for the unity of her family. The paths to liberation for a woman and for the nation are thus shown to interrelate in complex and at times contradictory ways. One might expect that it is problematic for the authorial audience that the play focuses on the younger women's situation as much as it does, since the double motivation of Astier and Solomie to become politically involved – their

personal as well as national liberation – could undermine the force of a straightforward nationalist reading of the play. When the play was first presented there was in fact some consternation because audience sympathies could be divided between Letiyesus and Astier (Matzke, 2002:231).

Today's critics and audiences are sometimes said to thrive on inconsistencies and open texts that allow them to find and fill the gaps with their own meanings. As Rabinowitz says, "the academy puts high value not on coherence per se, but rather on the activity of applying rules of coherence to works that are not evidently unified" (Rabinowitz, 1997:146). He argues that valuing this activity assumes that the work *is* coherent, and that apparent inconsistencies in its construction are intentional. Matzke provides an instance of an interpretation that attempts to convert what I see as real rather than apparent inconsistencies into coherence. She argues that the play is a subtle piece of EPLF propaganda. Of its treatment of the ideas of sexual and racial purity she says that "initially, the play seems to validate these beliefs, only to deconstruct them in the penultimate scene" (Matzke, 2008:29).

12.2.6 Non-authorial readers

When the play is read more than twenty years after its original performances, non-authorial audiences probably know both more and less than the authorial audience. For them, both the Armed Struggle and 'the other war' are historic events that have achieved resolution, and been superseded by newer conflicts. For its 1984-1986 audience the play and their response to it were a constituent part of the process towards independence. A young contemporary Eritrean audience cannot be expected to share the mood of the authorial audience. For although the extremities and spirit of the 1980s are still kept to the forefront of public consciousness through the efforts of the ruling PFDJ, other quotidian and political concerns also vie for attention.

For Norwegians the war is not only distant in time, but also in place and context. As a group the Norwegian students know less than the authorial audience about the events to which the play refers. Most of them had by their own account no knowledge of Eritrean history before they took the course in African literature. They do not share with the authorial audience an understanding of the military campaigns, the EPLF, the Derg, and the Tigrinya/Eritrean institution of marriage. Shared conventions that the play takes for granted are potentially problematic for Norwegian readers. Kramsch has said that "understanding a text's silences is the most difficult task of the foreign language reader, for the decision of the author to leave things unsaid is based on his or her confidence that the readers will be able to read between the lines" (Kramsch, 1993:128). On the other hand, through their extensive exposure to Western drama – and here I am thinking not so much of theatre as of films and television dramatisations

– it is likely that the Norwegian students come to the text with many years experience of dramatised war and dramatised family relations. Most of these dramatisations, I assume, have been Scandinavian, American or British. The Norwegian audience is therefore far removed from the authorial audience of *The Other War*, both in what they don't know, and in what they do know.

12.3 The play in use

12.3.1 Earlier performances

It is important to emphasise that *The Other War* started life as an oppositional work, encoding a position diametrically opposed to that of the Ethiopian state-controlled media in Eritrea in the 1980s. In the Ethiopian narrative, EPLF rebels disrupted the countryside as they fought for a lost cause, against the indisputable moral, political and military superiority of Ethiopia. *The Other War* went on tour in those parts of Eritrea that were accessible to the EPLF to counter this Ethiopian representation, and performances attracted huge crowds. The play was usually performed at night to avoid Ethiopian air fire. I am unsure as to the extent of its performance since independence, but have been told that a televised version has been shown. It seems that for nearly everybody who knows the play in Eritrea, it is oral literature, in the sense that it is “mainly known to people through actualisation in performance” (Finnegan, 1992:22).

The EPLF promoted a collective ethos that was very wary of allowing personality cults to develop, and it was only when *The Other War* was videoed that Tesfai was credited as its creator (Plastow, 1999:58).¹⁰¹ This video of the play was shown in-country and also distributed in the transnational Eritrean community (Matzke, 2008:24). Through its printed publication in *Contemporary African Drama* (2003), alongside plays by Ama Aidoo and Wole Soyinka, and also through its promotion as “Play of the Week” on BBC radio, *The Other War* has attracted international attention. It was successfully translated into English when Tesfai supported the endeavours of two non-bilingual translators (pc). All in all, its breadth of audience makes *The Other War* exceptional in the history of written Eritrean literature.

12.3.2 Recording

I chose to record the play and present the recording in class, along with the written script, and there were several reasons for this. Most obviously, the play was originally intended for performance, not for reading. Furthermore, I hoped that a recording would arouse more interest, at least for the Norwegian respondents. A recording also ensured a similar presentation of the

¹⁰¹ An informant told Matzke that “to proclaim that one had written a song or drama was considered as boastful and therefore deplorable. The pronoun ‘I’ was only used to say “I do this and I do that” (Matzke (2003: 179).

play for the two groups, and it simplified the administration of the response session as synchronised reading ensured that all the students would ‘read’ the play at the same speed, and have the same amount of time available between each act to write a response. The five speaking parts, four women and one man, were taken by five amateur actors, myself included. The sound quality proved adequate for the classroom settings in which it was later played. I noted that “We all did our best”, but that the pronunciation of Eritrean names was a bit muddled (log 05.02.0X). We all tried to read our lines with expression and emotion, raising and lowering our voices, making dramatic pauses and trying to simulate concern, anger and frustration. I observed a similar style in an extremely popular Eritrean television series showing in 2007. It would seem, however, that a more ‘speechifying’ praxis has had wider acceptance. In his field study of Eritrean theatre Warwick wrote that “the acting style tended to be very static and slow, with all dialogue conducted via long speeches – an Eritrean peculiarity still very much in evidence during my visit in 1995”(Warwick, 1997:228). Matzke describes this style as not peculiar to Eritrea alone, but characteristic of Ethiopian theatre as well.

12.3.3 Eliciting the student texts in Norway

I describe the Norwegian response session first, as it took place before the sessions in Eritrea, and set some precedents which were followed in Eritrea. The students listened to the first act and followed the written text. To kick-start them into writing I asked them to speak their immediate thoughts after Act 1. A few students volunteered a sentence or two, reflecting on the act they had just heard. I acknowledged these ideas, but they were not discussed or elaborated. On the basis of their ideas, I wrote the following instructions on the board:

After Act 1: Write your thoughts about it. If you like, you could focus on the conflict in the family.

After Act 2: Write your thoughts about it. If you like you could focus on the power struggle in the family, and why Astier has become an Amhara.

After Act 3: Write your thoughts about it. If you like, you could focus on Assefa and the way he changes.

After Acts 4 and 5¹⁰²: Write your thoughts about these acts, and the play as a whole.

Being myself involved in Eritrea during the period when this material was collected, I became aware that students were likely to have adopted my Eritrean (rather than Ethiopian) perspective, even though I presented the play itself in what I perceived at the time to be neutral terms. I tried to give no impression of what I would deem an appropriate response, and indeed I had no clear perception of what would constitute such a response. However, had I been equally fascinated by Ethiopia and visited Ethiopia concurrently with teaching the course in African literature, I

¹⁰² Acts 4 and 5 were listened to consecutively, since Act 5 is very short.

assume that my attitudes and anecdotes would have resulted in the students' coming to the play with different expectations. I presented the following contextualising information briefly, and as neutrally as I could at that stage in my own understanding, immediately before the students listened to the text:

- a map. I pointed out Eritrea's long coastline, its mountainous terrain and its big neighbours.
- a very short presentation of the history of Eritrea, mentioning the Italian and British colonial period, the federation with Ethiopia, the run up to the Armed Struggle and what sort of war it was. I also mentioned Eritrea's increasing marginalisation in international society since the 1998-2000 war.
- the dramaturgic setting in which the play was first performed
- an explanation of the Tigrinya/Amharic words that occur in the play

Key terms from the presentation were written on the board and left there for the duration of the session. The students had the text of the play in their course compendium on African Literature, but they had been asked not to read it in advance, advice which they said they had followed. I wanted their full attention and a 'fresh' response to the play. The students responded after each act, writing for ten or more minutes each time. This was a long session, and there were some signs of fatigue during the last writing period. Several students said that they would have written more and 'better' if they had had more time.

In addition to this response session, there were two other ways in which the Norwegian students could revisit and comment on the play: a discussion forum in their learning platform Fronter and a home exam. I uploaded the responses that the three graduate assistants at EIT had written to the play and initiated the online discussion by asking, "Do the Eritrean graduates highlight different aspects of the play than you did?". Nearly all the students visited the forum several times, but only three participated actively. I make reference to their comments later in this chapter.

In the obligatory mid-term home exam most of the students chose the following writing task: "Compare and contrast how the texts "Girls at War"¹⁰³ and *The Other War* present the effects of war on the civilian population". In contrast to the students' first encounter with the play, this week-long home assignment gave them the chance to work with the texts over time and to search out points of comparison and contrast. The writing task focused attention on the effects of war, rather than on the reasons for war, and it focused on the civilian population, rather than

¹⁰³ A short story set in the Nigerian Civil war. It is taken from an eponymous collection of short stories by Chinua Achebe, first published in 1972.

the fighters. Restrictions of space, and the fact that there is no comparable material from the Eritrean students, mean that I make only supplementary reference to this material. Where it is necessary to distinguish between the various writing tasks, I refer to the classroom response session as the students' 'first response'.

12.3.4 Eliciting the student texts in Eritrea

The first of the two sessions working with *The Other War* made use of the recording of the play. In addition each student was given a photocopy of the text. The students' written response to the first three acts was collected on one day, their response to the last two acts and to the play as a whole two days later. The recording was played act by act, as it was in Norway. My impression was that the students did synchronised reading. I did not ask the students for an oral response before they started writing, but initiated their writing with similar phrases to those that the Norwegian students had suggested. I tried to make clear that they were not bound to make use of these suggestions. The following phrases were announced and written on the board:

After Act 1: the conflict in the family

After Act 2: Why is it so difficult for Astier and Letiyesus to have a good relationship?

After Act 3: What sort of man is Assefa? Why does he act the way he does?

After Acts 4 and 5:¹⁰⁴ Write your thoughts about these acts, and the play as a whole.

The phrases for Acts 2 and 3 were altered and this at first glance might seem to make the two sets of student texts less comparable, since the phrases must be assumed to have had some influence on what the readers wrote. However, *not* to have altered them would have led to greater disparity in how the students understood the writing task. I reworded the question about Act 2 because I realised that the term 'power struggle', suggested by a Norwegian student with reference to the dynamics within the family, might well be understood in Eritrea as a question about the macro-political situation at the time of the play. As to Act 3, the rephrasing of the question about Assefa was based on a conversation I had with one of the graduate assistants. When I showed him the phrases and questions with which I intended to elicit the students' response he almost angrily dismissed my suggestion for Act 3. "Assefa does not change", he told me. "Assefa was always a conniving, evil man". I had not until then seen that I was taking an ideological position by understanding Assefa as a man who changed. Having been made aware of this, I settled for a more open-ended invitation to the students to comment on the character of Assefa.

The students wrote a response to Acts 1, 2 and 3 intensely in the time available, but there was less of the enthusiasm I remembered from our work with "The Monkey and the Crocodile"

¹⁰⁴ Acts 4 and 5 were listened to on two separate sessions.

and “Anisino”, and they became restless towards the end of the allotted time. However the texts that they wrote express enthusiasm for the play, as we will see. Students also listened to the fourth act, but a written response to this and the last act was completed at a second session two days later.¹⁰⁵ The two-day break between the two response sessions was unforeseen, as was the fact that some of the students present at the first session were not present at the second.¹⁰⁶ A different classroom was made available for this session. As there was no electricity, I asked two students to read the dialogue aloud, instead of listening to the recording of the last act. They read with very little dramatic inflection. Some of the students did not seem to be following the text closely, but they all wrote their response diligently, and insisted that I give them more time than I had envisaged.

After Act 1 I learned from the students that they were familiar with the play, both through its television performance in Tigrinya, and especially because it had been a central text in a course on Eritrean literature taught the previous year by Mr M, a teacher from India. As one student wrote:

The other war is a play in which it is written by an Eritrean author Alemseged Tesfai. And I have seen it first on Eri-tv, when I was a kid and also before few years. But I have studied it also the previous year, in one of the subject (Eritrean Literature); so, the play is familiar to me. (E5)

The students had, they said, spent sixteen lessons studying *The Other War*. When I learned this I realised that their texts might be to some extent a reworking of their earlier classroom experience with the play.

It is reasonable in hindsight to ask why I had not enquired beforehand whether or not the students had studied the play. This information would have been available had I asked the right question of the right person. However it is important to bear in mind that information was not generally or systematically available. Planning other joint projects in advance through email proved effective, but planning this research through email had proved ineffective, perhaps because it was not perceived as a collaborative project in which the Department of English at EIT had ownership. Knowing whom to ask, and indeed what to ask, is very often easier in hindsight. In the reality of the institutional setting, it was not clear to me which courses the students had taken, and who had taught them, since timetables and records were not readily available. Teachers knew only their own timetables term by term, which they were given on small slips of paper, as far as I could see. In addition to administrative discontinuities, the

¹⁰⁵ Twenty students were present at this second session, including two who had not been present at the first session.

¹⁰⁶ The intervening day was a public holiday, when there was no teaching, and many students had left the campus and not yet returned. My limited experience suggests that erratic student (and staff) attendance was common, despite the alleged military enforcement of discipline.

teachers were, as previously mentioned, on short-term contracts from India, meaning that there was a considerable staff turn-over. The extreme workloads of the graduate assistants, and the unforeseen circumstance that first one, and later a second graduate assistant whom I had hoped to involve in this research left the country without notice, meant that I made under-informed assumptions about which literary texts to prepare. Furthermore I deemed it necessary to have a set of the literary texts with me when I left Norway, since I did not want to burden the very limited copying facilities on the Eritrean campus, and paper and printing ink could be in short supply in the shops in the city. In fact, it did not occur to me not to continue working with the students' response to *The Other War*, even when it transpired that they had studied it already. I had foreseen that the students might well be familiar with the text through broadcasting. Familiarity in itself, whether through study or media exposure, is in my view no reason for discrediting the students' responses, as long as it is taken into account.

I therefore immediately questioned the students to secure an impression of how their teacher had approached the text, before going on with Act 2. After the session I arranged to meet the teacher in question. In my log I recorded my attempts to secure information on the students' previous classroom experience of *The Other War*. This excerpt illustrates some of the challenges of working at EIT, whether as researcher or teacher:

Mr M was prepared to let me see the [teaching] notes, which he said were 5 or 6 pages long. Unfortunately, he had no hard copy of his notes. As to an electronic copy, he had written them on a college computer, but a virus had destroyed all Word documents stored in the English department.¹⁰⁷ He thought he had given a copy of his notes to a senior colleague for safekeeping. When asked, this colleague thought this might well be the case, but he had no idea where the notes were now. It was said that the students had been given a copy of these notes (adapted from log 07.03.0X).¹⁰⁸

I talked at length to the teacher in question as well as to the teacher who had designed the course in Eritrean literature, hoping to gain an understanding of the extent to which the students had been told what to think about the play, and the extent to which they had been encouraged to think for themselves. Mr M said that the students had contributed significantly with information about the historic setting of the play. He seemed happy with that, impressed by the students' insightful and extensive contribution. He remarked on it in a laughing way, as if this was an unexpected but welcome experience. He said that his contribution had been to tell them about

¹⁰⁷ EIT was not online, and had no virus protection. Documents were transferred by pin, and the same pin was plugged into machines elsewhere (in Asmara) that were online and that could be infected by viruses. This was the second fatal virus infection and system breakdown I know of in an eighteen month period.

¹⁰⁸ It transpired that the students had taken their notes home in the long vacation, and left them there. Some of the students offered to find them and deliver or send a copy to me, but this did not happen.

how the author had found his main characters. I recognised this information as coming from the authors' afterword in *Two Weeks in the Trenches* (2002). Mr M did not give the impression of having a clearly articulated understanding of the Eritrean independence struggle, nor of the history of political theatre in Eritrea. I found it hard to envisage how one could teach the play for 16 lessons, without library resources and without involving the students in any individual written work. I asked if the students had performed the play, but no, the teacher had read it to them. I guess that the notes to which he referred were more in the nature of a synopsis than an interpretation and that, possibly, the students had been required to copy them.

The students also told me that the play had been the topic of the end of course exam, where they had been required to write an essay on Astier. This suggests that Mr M was working within the literary tradition of character study and plot, rather than, for example, asking about the play's social and political content and context (see also 7.4.3). It was not possible to find these exam papers, but even had I succeeded in doing so, I would not have been able to copy them or take them with me. My impression was that both the teacher and his colleague who had designed the course in Eritrean literature valued the play. The playwright himself was prestigious and popular on campus, and he had held orientation talks for newly arrived Indian teachers. He was talked of with respect as an educational pioneer and a man of letters.

Another issue is the extent to which the students' response to the play is comparable to that of the Norwegian students, who wrote their response to the whole play 'there and then' in one session. I did not observe a disjunction between the Eritrean responses written in the first and second sessions, and I attribute this at least in part to the fact that the students knew the play and probably already 'knew what they thought'. It was a greater problem that the play was part of the syllabus, and that the students had already 'done it to death', a probable factor behind their restlessness at the end of the first session, and their lack of enthusiasm, as compared to their enthusiasm for "The Monkey and the Crocodile" and "Anisino".

12.4 Discoursal positions

12.4.1 Hosting

My analysis of the students' texts involves an investigation of the discoursal positions and the interpretive strategies that they make use of in their encounter with *The Other War*. In chapter 10 I identified the discoursal positions of owners and visitors. Whilst an owner can more or less do what he likes with his own text, a host does not have such a free hand. Hosting is a discoursal position in which the writer shows the reader around a literary text with which he is familiar. It is a position taken only by Eritrean students, and I find three ways in which these students position themselves as hosts. One way is by *contextualising* the play for a reader who

is assumed to be less familiar with it. Another way is through expressions of *pride* in the author or the play. A third, more pervasive, way of hosting is demonstrated when students show a *facility with the discourse* of the text, and use it in their own construction of meaning. This third way of hosting is discussed as part of a more general review of the students' discourse choices in section 12.5.1. In the present section I look at hosting in terms of contextualising and expressions of pride.

Let us take contextualising first. Kramersch says that narrative beginnings typically make assumptions about what the reader knows, and adjust the information they provide in relation to these expectations (Kramersch, 1993:178). The student texts are, in a sense, narratives that make assumptions about what I, their reader, know. E10's narrative, for example, provides the information that when Letiyesus left her house, she gave her house key to Hiwot, and he explains that "this is peculiar to Eritreans". Other contextualising comments explain attitudes to mixed marriage, situating these attitudes in the past: "According the Eritrean custom especially during the armed struggle, seeing an Eritrean woman marrying to an Amhara (Ethiopian soldier) was definitely forbidden and shameful" (E8). Similarly E1 comments that the play "deals with mixed marriages practiced between the Eritrean woman and the Ethiopian soldier which has a great impact in the minds of Eritreans". One student, E5, provides information on the reception of the play, information that he probably would not expect me to share.

he [Assefa] is the most disliked character by all Eritreans. [...] All Eritreans love this play, because it is about their past experience, the troubles they met during those days (during the colonization) and they always look at it passionately and with great interest. The family of mother Letiyesus is an example of all other Eritrean families who were in trouble; and as an example it shows clearly the sense of nationalism Eritrean people had, the sacrifices they made for their independence and about how they challenge all the adverses faced to them. (E5)

E5 assumes that there is a shared response to the play, for he writes of the strong identification which "all Eritreans" feel with the struggling family. I understand these comments as contextualising the play for me as a non-Eritrean reader, and as such they are possibly a continuation of the hosting which was part of the classroom discourse established when the play was studied with Mr M.

Whilst only four comments, from four different students (E1, E2, E5, E8), add information external to the play, it is possible that the re-plottings offered by many of the Eritrean students were partly intended to clarify its political context. In that case they also function as hosting, especially when they describe the action of the play as an instance of the problems faced in the country at that time. E1, for example, writes:

The Ethiopian regime used to encourage individuals to marry Eritrean women either by their agreement or coercion. This was to make the Eritrean people Ethiopian at heart. They wanted the Eritrean people to be dominated by the Ethiopians. But this system did not work. (E1)

Re-plottings are discussed in more detail in 12.5.2.

A couple of contextualising comments made by Eritrean students may encode a critical distance between the characters and the attitudes of a contemporary reader. They imply both that they are aware of how an authorial reader was expected to read the text, and that they themselves do not feel obliged to adopt the position of an authorial reader completely. Thus E7 says of Letiyesus that “her son was fighting *for what he believed in*” (italics added). This expression, whilst acknowledging the integrity of Miki-el’s motivation, allows E7 to air the possibility that there were other things that one could believe in. Similarly, when E3 describes Assefa as “an Amhara – the enemy of every Eritrean *then*” (italics added), he is describing this attitude as historically appropriate and not one that the reader necessarily shares today.

The other way in which the Eritrean students position themselves as hosts is through expressions of pride in the writer or the play. E1 told me that he was concerned that Eritrean literature reach a wider audience, and this idea finds expression in his comment, “I admire Alemseged Tesfai, the writer, for his contribution of this play to the world”. There were other comments that expressed pride and admiration in the playwright. E9 is a particularly enthusiastic example: “‘The OTHER War’ is composed by Alemseged Tesfai. He is one of the greatest Eritrean writers. Alemseged compositions are very very fantastic and enjoyable”.

When students introduce the play they sometimes demonstrate both aspects of hosting, in that they express pride in the play or the writer at the same time as they contextualise it (or him) to the reader. E2, for example, values the fighter-writer combination that Tesfai represents:

Alemseged Tesfai is one of the Eritrean soldiers (fighters) who contributes a great contribution in Eritrean struggle for independence. He is one of the early fighters who fights against their enemy strongly. Not only a fighter but also he is one of the famous Eritrean Writers. He has written many books in Tigrinya and also some translated books and plays. “The Other War” is his famous play written in Tigrinya and in English. (E2)

An interesting voice here is E5, who, whilst valuing the play, cautiously reminds us, as Beyene Haile does (see 9.2.3), that there are other stories to tell. “Though there were so many other bitter experiences which are not listed here, but I don’t want to fail from appreciating the author Alemseged Tesfai for his great and interesting work.”

12.4.2 *Visiting*

Visiting is a discursal position in which writers in various ways indicate that they are encountering an unfamiliar text. Not surprisingly, visiting is only to be found in the Norwegian

responses. I identify three related ways in which students show that they are visiting an unfamiliar text: hedging, distancing and questioning. Hedging involves offering an interpretation or opinion, with a proviso about its validity, while distancing expresses an unwillingness to commit oneself to a position. N8, for example, writes, “As a person he *seems* to be a peace maker even though he is a representative for the enemy in the household. The strongest enmity, however, *seems* to be between Letiyesus and Astier” (italics added). Here “seems” indicates that N8 has found some evidence for her opinion in the text, but not sufficient to be certain that her interpretation will hold true for the duration of the play. N10 provides another example of hedging when he writes, “Her son-in-law is *apparently* on the other side of the war from her son” (italics added). This second example shows N10 to be very much of a visitor, since he looks to the play for evidence as to where Assefa and Miki-el stand politically. For the authorial audience it is enough to know that Assefa is Amhara. None of the Eritrean students are in any doubt as to where Assefa or indeed any of the characters stand politically.

Distancing, by contrast, indicates that one is deliberately not adopting the position that the text expects of the reader. Thus N3 writes “the enemy (in her eyes) has been brought in by her own flesh and blood”. By adding the phrase “in her eyes”, N3 allocates the characterisation of Assefa as an enemy to a particular character. In so doing she admits the possibility of other ways of understanding Assefa, both by other characters within the play and by the audience. The expression “her own flesh and blood” can also be understood as being governed by the expression “in her eyes”. N3 is here indicating that it is Letiyesus who sees Assefa and Astier in these terms, and that she herself distances herself from the perspective that Letiyesus offers. Later in the same response N3 uses quotation marks to distance herself from the discourse in which Ethiopia is an occupying power: “I interpreted this as Assefa’s plan to ‘infiltrate’ and ‘destroy’ Eritrea from within”. Thus N3 uses both parenthesis and inverted commas to pick out the ideology of the text and to distance herself from it. A similar example of distancing is shown by N6 who writes of Assefa that “he has tried to win Letiyesus over with a (false) friendliness”. The use of parenthesis suggests that N6 is aware of an interpretation of Assefa’s friendliness that the play offers, but she does not accept it without question. The text invites the authorial audience to regard Assefa as a deceptive man who only *pretends* to be friendly towards the family of his wife. By putting the word ‘false’ in brackets N6 avoids committing herself to this interpretation.¹⁰⁹

So much for hedging and distancing. There are also some instances of questioning. Asking

¹⁰⁹ An alternative possibility is that N2 is using parenthesis to indicate that Assefa’s friendship is so obviously false that this is redundant information.

questions, and admitting to not knowing the answer, is a visitor's position, found only amongst the Norwegian women in this study. N7 says, "The one question I am left with is; what will happen with Astier? Should Letiyesus have taken her with her? I don't know". Other questions query how a particular character should be understood, and these are discussed under the respective characters in sections 12.5.7 to 12.5.9. The finding that the Eritrean students do not ask questions about the text may reflect an academic literacy in which stories have an authoritative meaning, and questioning this meaning is discouraged. It may also reflect the more general political climate in which one does not ask questions, and an educational context in which the teacher provides a synopsis of literary works that students are expected to accept and reproduce (see 7.4.3). Another possibility, given that all the Eritrean students had read and worked with the drama, is that they had achieved an understanding of the play that answered any questions they might earlier have had. There may well be a gender factor at play here, too, since it is only the women in the Norwegian group who ask questions.

12.5 Interpretive strategies

12.5.1 Ideology, discourse and decoding

Questions that underpin this part of the analysis include what ideological assumptions the students bring to their decoding of the text and how they judge and allocate motives to the characters.

A dominant decoding accepts and reinforces the position offered to the authorial audience by reiterating the ideological language of occupation and liberation with which the text is shot through, by agreeing that Assefa and Astier behave despicably and Letiyesus behaves nobly, and by accepting the condemnation of the Amhara encoded in the structure of the play. As we have seen, the opening references are to the group molestation of a respectable Eritrean woman, while the final scene shows the desolation of an Eritrean woman who so failed to see how her body was a part of enemy strategy that she actively sided with the molesters.

The material shows that all the Eritrean students make use, more or less, of the same ideological discourse as the play, and thus offer a dominant reading. Of the many quotations that could be cited in support of this observation, E12 can serve as an illustration. In his discussion of what he terms "the armed struggle for independence of Eritrea" he writes:

Here in this play the main and foremost theme is to know the plans of the enemies (Amhara) the way the[y] have been using to *treat* or *tame* the *united* people of Eritreans whiles they were trying to *force* them on wars parallelly by making racial mixing with the Eritrean *unarmed* people or civilian then their enemies that the Tegdelti would not be able to *get help* of their people and the to *win* the whole war. (E 25, emphasis added)

E12 reproduces the discourse of the play, encoding the enemy as Amhara and the action of the enemy as to “treat”, “tame” and “force” the Eritrean people. The action of the Eritreans is to “get help” and “to win”. The student describes the Eritreans as “the united people” and their fighters are “tegedelti”. To Assefa they are “wembedie” – bandits.

The Other War inscribes the independence narrative and seeks to reinforce this shared convention with the audience, and if necessary convince and convert them. Some students demonstrate an awareness of the play’s purpose. E11 is the student who most clearly focuses on how the playwright has formed his message, using the verb phrases ‘constructs’, ‘shows’, ‘developed the action’ and ‘wants to convince’. He writes, for example, “Here Alemseged wants to convince us that how the Eritrean mother is strong to her aim”, and again, “some soldiers look like honest but they are cruel. So Alemseged construct the cruelty of the Amhara and some Eritrean daughters and the bravery of Eritrean mother”. No other students show this awareness of the author’s construction of the play.

It is not straightforward to distinguish an oppositional and a negotiated decoding. An *oppositional* decoding will reject the position offered to the authorial audience, but may be more or less defiant, replacing the independence narrative with either pro-Ethiopian or neutral terms. It may also address the ideology of the play explicitly. None of the Norwegian students offer such a reading in their first response, but later, in reply to my prompt in the discussion forum, N6 offers an explicitly oppositional decoding. When I asked, “Is this in some sense a racist play?”, N6 wrote:

I see “The Other War” as very one-sided: it shows only the Eritrean perspective. The political issue lies underneath everything, and the writing is very coloured by the author’s perspective. The Eritreans are “good”, while the Ethiopians are “bad”. Letiyesus doesn’t give Assefa a chance, and her prejudices are confirmed. She expects Assefa to be cruel, and when he “drops the act”, it is seen as him showing his true nature by the Eritrean graduates, rather than as a reaction to his living among people who are not welcoming him (except, of course, Astier). So yes, Letiyesus is in one way racist, but does she have a reason for it? Is it right for Eritreans to mistrust their occupiers in this play? (N6)

A *negotiated* understanding of the play neither accepts nor rejects the position offered to the authorial audience, but develops an understanding of the play in other terms. For the purposes of the present material I regard as a negotiated decoding those responses that do not relate the plot and characters to the political struggle but to the psycho-social relations between the characters. Such a focus neither accepts nor rejects the nationalistic encoding of the play.

Some students retell each act, and therefore I look firstly at what they select in their retellings. I then look at how the students understand the play as a whole. This involves looking at dominant decodings, which are, with one exception, written by Eritrean students; and at

negotiated decodings, which are without major exception offered by Norwegian students. Lastly, I look at some of the issues that relate to how characters are encoded and decoded. Let us first consider how the students retell the play.

12.5.2 Dominant and negotiated re-plottings

Paraphrases differ in accuracy, emphasis and perspective, and which features are considered essential will depend on the reader's purposes. "Perception involves simplification, which in turn involves some organizing principle, some hierarchy of attention and importance" (Rabinowitz, 1997:20). In this section I explore paraphrase as 're-plotting', to use Smith's term (see 3.4.1). The idea of re-plotting, rather than of paraphrase, gives credit to the critical decisions the students make about what to include and what to leave out. That such critical decisions carry implications for how the play is understood, can be seen by comparing two re-plottings of Act 1, the first by an Eritrean student, the second by a Norwegian student. Both are men.

The first act of the play "The Other War" is about the arrival of Letiyesus to her house from the village and the strange events that welcomed her and as the same time about her response to that. Soon, as she arrive her house she starts to tell her friend Hiwot about all the troubles faced her on her way. Hiwot her intimate friend tells her about the arrival of her daughter Astier and she awares her also not to talk or act in a bad way, as her son in law Assefa, too is with her daughter. But Letiyesus is not able to control herself and she is really upset by that news. She don't want to see Mikiel's house become a shelter for an enemy and as a result she is not able to hide her feelings. Astier tells her mother that she is not happy by her hospitality and asks her if she ever wrongs her. But Letiyesus deny everything and tries to assure her daughter that she is happy by their arrival, but unfortunately she fails to convince her. (E5)

For E5 Letiyesus' return to her house from the village is not a neutral event that just happens to start the play, but what the first act is actually, at least in part, about. Her experiences in the village were strange but they "welcomed her", whereas her experiences on the way home are summarised as "all the troubles faced her on her way". This re-plotting places positive value on the Eritrean village and contrasts it to the hostility of the Ethiopian-dominated capital city. Then E5 describes the two ways that Letiyesus could respond to the news that her son-in-law and daughter have moved into her house. One is the controlled way that Hiwot recommends and warns ("awares") her to adopt. The other is the animosity that Letiyesus in fact shows. Several of the Eritrean summaries make reference to showing one's feelings or losing control of one's feelings. According to the playwright himself (pc), it is typically Eritrean to show one's feelings, and typically Ethiopian to contain them. Perhaps this stereotype is shared by the student readers. References to showing or hiding one's feelings may also reflect a focus on the behaviour itself – showing or not showing feelings – rather than on the *causes* of behaviour, namely the complexities of the characters' emotional lives. In any case, the reason E5 gives for

Letiyesus' animosity is political. She does not want to see the house of Miki-el (the hero) used to house Assefa (an enemy). The play does not mention who owns the house, but by describing the house as "Mikiel's house" E5 assumes a convention where the son owns the house in which his mother lives. This reinforces the affront of occupying a hero's home in his absence, a reinforcement not readily available to most Norwegian readers, who would assume that the mother, by virtue of being the more senior generation, owned the house in which she and her son lived. E5 finishes his re-plotting by saying that Letiyesus "unfortunately" fails to convince Astier that she is welcome. Since Letiyesus' efforts to do so seem half-hearted at best, I don't understand why E5 uses the adverbial "unfortunately". This is a word that falls through the cultural fault line of my non-understanding of Tigrinya. The various occurrences of "unfortunately" in the Eritrean students' texts are, for me, unexpected.

Let us now compare E5's re-plotting with that of a Norwegian student, N10, who starts his reflections on each act with a heading. For Act 1 he has taken "conflict in the family", and this is the organising principle of his response:

ACT ONE 1: Conflict in the family

Letiyesus arrives at her own home and is annoyed to find her daughter, son-in-law and their baby boy there. She is however, most welcome to her granddaughter. We hear that Letiyesus also has a son. He is not present at the house and he is evidently a part of EPLF. As a mother she seems quite affectionate towards this son. The son-in-law Assefa seems like he wants to make a good impression even though he fails, both with the impression and language. "Me-as ... Metu ... Gebu...", he is corrected by Astier: "Me-as Atikhin" and manages still to pronounce this wrongly "Good! Ma-as Atikhin." Her son-in-law is apparently on the other side of the war from her son, working as a cadre for the Derg.

We see the sceptical and sarcastic behaviour of the mother i.e. where they that Assefa and Astier speak "Anchi Manchi, Anchi Manchi." Letiyesus also shows no interest at all, as mentioned, for her grand child (Kitaw) which make her seem cynical. (N10)

In contrast to E5, N10 makes no reference to Letiyesus' experiences in the village, outside the home. Already in his first sentence he introduces her reaction to the arrival of her daughter's family. N10 is immediately interested in the emotional relationship Letiyesus has to the members of her family, ranking her relative affection for Astier, Miki-el and Solomie. N10 is apparently using the re-plotting to work out his interpretation of this relation: the mother "seems", the son-in-law "seems" and he is "apparently on the other side". It is as though N10 expects to learn more and is here acknowledging that his first impressions are limited by his understanding of the setting, and contingent on later developments in the drama. N10 spends several lines on Assefa's failed attempts to speak Tigrinya, even quoting directly from the play. In this way he highlights an aspect of Assefa's position as an outsider, something that E5 does not mention, perhaps because he takes it for granted, or at least needs no substantial evidence,

such as ignorance of Tigrinya, to underpin his assumption that Assefa is an outsider. N10 returns to the importance of language in his exam paper, where he even underlines it as a central theme: “In *The other war* the emphasis is on the importance of language, and we feel the hostility towards Assefa throughout the story when they say that he speaks ‘anchi manchi, anchi manchi’”. N10 uses his understanding of language as being “often connected with a sense of cultural identity” to make sense of the war itself.

Returning to the re-plotting in N10’s first response, we see that in his last paragraph N10 makes value judgements about Letiyesus’ behaviour. She is “sceptical and sarcastic”, and she “seems cynical”. The space N10 gives to Letiyesus in his summary suggests that N10, at this stage, is expecting Letiyesus to be the main character. His criticism of her behaviour, combined with his presumably broad experience of drama (see 8.4.1), indicate that he expects Letiyesus to be the character whose attitudes and behaviour will contribute to the dramatic action of the play.

We have looked at how N10 and E5 re-plotted Act 1. Let us now compare them with how E7 and N6 re-plot the play, focussing on the first two acts. In Act 2 these students concentrate on Astier, and they share a perception of her as both a victim and an avenger. First E7:

When Astier was only a teenager or so her parents married her off wealthy but elder man – Zecharias. It was an arranged marriage and so like almost all the Eritrean girls – Astier went on with the arrangement without a single protest of her own. Soon enough her elder husband turned out to be drunkard and had made a habit of biting [beating] his wife day and night, using and misusing her any way he saw fit. All these treatments left her with a physical and emotional scare (bruise). (E7)

E7 re-plots Astier’s story, and in so doing expresses her own opinion of arranged marriages. Her choice of the phrase “soon enough” implies that violence is to be expected when a young girl is made to marry an older man “without a single protest of her own”. Similarly, the damaging effect of the first marriage on Astier is phrased as “all these treatments”, and presumably includes the violence of the marriage and the non-consultative process by which her husband was chosen for her. E7 knows the play already, and her understanding of Astier is informed by her familiarity with Astier’s fate at the end of the play. Rather than confronting the problems of how to understand Astier’s behaviour, E7 concentrates her disapproval on the tradition of arranged marriage.

It is interesting to compare E7’s response to that of N6. For one thing, there is a difference in tone that is quite striking. Where E7 describes Letiyesus as “deeply enraged by the Ethiopian soldiers at the check point, they savagely mistreated all the villagers”, N6 comments that “Letiyesus’ son in law represent the occupiers, who have offended Letiyesus earlier that day at

the checkpoints”. The difference between being “deeply enraged” and being “offended”, between naming the soldiers as Ethiopian as against referring to them as “the occupiers”, and E7’s description of their behaviour as “savage mistreatment”, all serve to underline E7’s involvement in the action of the play. Compare for example the quotation above to the more distanced and analytical re-plotting of the same act offered by N6:

We learn more about the background of Astier and Solomie, and develop more sympathy for the characters. They have both been abused, Astier by her first husband and Solomie by Astier. Zacharias was chosen for Astier by her parents, and she blames them for her turbulent marriage with the abuse. Perhaps the reason why Astier has turned towards the Amhara is because this goes against her mother’s wishes, and perhaps this was also one of the reasons why she married Assefa in the first place. (N6)

N6 sees the dramatic functions of Act 2 as being to provide background information about Astier and Solomie, and to engage the audience’s sympathy for these characters. This interpretation is not easily available to an Eritrean reader, who knows how the play ends and that the authorial audience cannot end up being sympathetic towards Astier. The fact that the background that N6 learns in this act serves to develop her sympathy for Astier, makes it unlikely that N6 will arrive at an understanding of Astier as a traitor. However she does not condone Astier’s behaviour either, for she describes her treatment of her daughter as abusive, and her treatment of her mother as spiteful. N6 does not comment on the ethics of arranged marriage. It is Astier herself, not N6, who in N6’s account blames her parents for her violent marriage. Instead N6 ventures a psychological motivation for Astier’s choice of Assefa as her second husband, namely that she does so because she thereby asserts her ability to oppose her mother’s wishes. N6 uses her re-plotting to explore, and not to judge, the complexities of Astier’s experience and behaviour.

In re-plotting, the students have stayed close to the text, as it were, and picked out what they deemed most pertinent to an understanding of the action. I will now look at comments that take a step back and place the play in a larger context.

12.5.3 Dominant decodings

Let us look at how various students review the whole play, starting, as usual, with the Eritrean students, whose decoding is consistently dominant. They typically place the story in the bigger, political scheme of things, and they view the political underpinning of the play with historical hindsight. Here are some examples:

Here in act three we learned that how brave the Eritrean women and men fought against Amharas (Ethiopian army). As a result they got their independence by destroying to the Ethiopian regime (Dergi) decisively. (E9)

From my point of view we know that we can[not] expect mana being given from colonizers. First they use the subject as their instrument but finally they don't care about the people who served them. (E8)

But the play only wants to show during the Derg regime, the Amhara ethnic group dominated the other race which is condemned by a humanitarian organizations and other (E1)

By situating the action of the play in the Armed Struggle, and by describing the struggle itself, the students can be seen to fulfil the functions of a host. The perspective they offer would be shared knowledge for an Eritrean reader, but crucial contextual information for a visitor to the play.

In Eritrea there was a bitter struggle for independence that get a great contribution of the whole society. It took almost around 30 years to get Eritrea it independences and in the same way asked a great scarification [sacrifice] of number of fighters. The struggle “war” with Ethiopian was known throughout the world. (E2)

The politically-charged language with which these four quotations are shot through complies with the text's prescriptions as to how the play is to be understood. The historical perspective that E2 offers is encoded in the discourse of the play. It articulates the interpretive strategy that the play invites its readers to use, so that E2's response can be understood as interpretive guidelines written for a reader who is not familiar with the dominant decoding of the play.

In section 12.2.4 I discussed the significance of the term ‘Amhara’ in marking out a position for the authorial reader. The Eritrean students tend to talk of Assefa as an Amhara, rather than as an Ethiopian.

At that time the people of Eritrea was so resistant against the Ethiopian colonization. That is why the Amharas were fighting against us by intermingling with us. Here Kitaw is the son of Amhara and Eritrea. (E10)

E2 is particularly clear in contrasting the Amhara with Eritreans, describing them as a group and a nation respectively – the Amhara people versus the nation of Eritrea: “Even though the Amharas were grinning and smirking, she knows and understands all their wishes to Eritreans”. E2 describes the Amhara as unpleasant and unreliable – they grin and smirk. Letiyesus is able to see right through their behaviour, because “she knows and understands all their wishes”. And it is the Eritrean people, not a particular ethnic group but the nation itself, that is the object of Amhara conniving. E2 provides other examples:

Alemseged also show the great nationalism and patriotic contribution of Eritrean woman and able to challenge for the Amhara terrible aim. He describe the feelings by representing Letiyesus (...) (E2)

It is interesting that E2 comments on the play's focus on women. Eritreans are represented by three women, Ethiopians by one man (if we discount the baby boy). E2 is in fact the only

student, Eritrean or Norwegian, who recognises *The Other War* as being about Eritrean women, and not, as the others apparently assume, about Eritreans in general.

Another insightful comment is made by E6, who adds a reflection, carefully introduced by the disjunct ‘actually’. E6 can see the strategic value in the policy of ethnic homogeneity. For even though he condemns the strategy of intermarriage as a trick, he recognises that it is in fact effective.

Actually the system they used to rule the Eritrean land was the right one. Because if we see Solomie at the end of the play likes her brother Kitaw although he is from the Amharan side. [...] I think this was the trick which Assefa and his followers used to rule the land comfortably without any disturbance, because one can[not] fight against his or her brother if they are intermingled. (E6)

This ability to think through the play to its consequences, rather than to read it as a demonstration of Eritrean invincibility, sets E6 apart from the other Eritrean students, and also from Matzke’s reading of this same event as demonstrating that race is a social construct (Matzke 2008). Elsewhere E6 says, “Actually this play is a real story which clarifies the all the problem which was foild on Eritrean mothers”. By describing the play as a real story he shows that the play has significance and value for him because it represents historical events. His response indicates therefore that while his loyalties are undivided, it is the realities of the historical situation that give the play meaning.

Although Mr M told me that his most important contribution to the students’ understanding of the play was telling the students what the author had said in his afterword (see 12.3.4), this information did not feature prominently in the responses. Only E1 and E3 refer to the idea that the playwright was opposed *not* to interracial marriage but to loveless and manipulative marriage. Of these, E3 is the only student to enlarge on this issue:

The writer of the play, Alemseged, wrote it based on an incident that he witnessed when he was employed in Ethiopia. He is not against mixed marriages based on love between individuals. He does not oppose this idea. Alemseged wanted to remind individuals of any nation that their love may have negative impact if it is not taken seriously. (E3)

E1 and E3 use the phrase ‘mixed marriages’ to describe something that E says is “normal and very acceptable”. However E2 appropriates this same phrase to condemn the Amhara and their policy:

So generally Alemsegeds play “the other war” is about the Amharas mixed marriage with the Eritreans to destroyed the Eritreans seeds and fighters easily and on the other hand the play is about the Eritrean women showing their objections... (E2)

There is one example of a Norwegian dominant reading, inasmuch as N9 sees the play as providing

a look into the anguish, rage, and uncertainty of Eritreans, What they had to deal with when the Ethiopians took over. It is a story of power struggle, family relationships and a battle for survival. (N9)

By naming the Ethiopians as those who “took over”, by understanding them to have created problems that the Eritreans “had to deal with” and by describing their struggle as “a battle for survival”, N9 aligns with the encoding of the play. N9 chose to write about the play in the home exam, and again she would seem to have accepted the independence narrative as the terms in which she interprets the play. Thus for her Kitaw’s name, which means ‘punish them’, “rings true” when the Amhara are punished. And Astier’s sad situation at the end of the play is seen by N9 as being the self-destructive consequence of her distancing herself from her family.

Kitaw’s name has a particular meaning in Amharic, namely ‘punish them’. In the end, that name rings true, but to the opposite effect of what was originally intended, since his grandmother brings him to the Wembedie, Assefa’s nightmare. This dissolves the whole family and leaves Astier with nothing but remorse and regret that the people she pushed away are no longer there to pull her back in. (N9)

N9, alone amongst the Norwegian students, uses the Amhara term for the freedom fighters – ‘Wembedie’ – and this is of course would be incompatible with a dominant reading, *if* N9 has understood the word properly. It is more likely that her understanding of the political parameters of the play is uncertain, as is also evidenced by her condemnation of the Ethiopians for fighting. She says that the story describes “one woman’s wrong decisions to join the fighting side...”, as though she does not realise that the EPLF are also a ‘fighting side’.

12.5.4 Negotiated decoding: not taking sides

Let us now consider the other Norwegian students, none of whom had access to the afterword, and who therefore had no extra-textual information about how the author himself negotiated his text. Nor did they have any guidelines from their teacher. The material shows that they negotiate the text in two ways. They describe the political and military setting in terms that allow them not to take sides, and they see the focus of the text as being the psycho-social relations between the members of the family. Although these two forms of negotiation usually occur in the same student texts, I distinguish them here, considering first ‘not taking sides’, and in the next section looking at how students make sense of the conflicts in the family.

Not taking sides means not espousing the position offered by the text that the Eritreans are the unjustly treated party, nor rejecting it in favour of the unity narrative (see 6.2.2). N1 reflects in her exam paper on her distance from the events of the text:

Media and history itself might give us a slight idea, but we must remember ourselves that we just see it from a distance. The consequences of war can only be fully understood if one is in the middle of it. [...] Each and every one of them can tell different stories about the same war. (N1)

Similarly N5 uses the home exam to step back from the text and ask:

Is everybody involved in a war a victim? Can it be said that the machinery of war when set in motion is the only one to be blamed? Or is it that the machinery of war feeds and grows on actions of individuals blinded by the possibility of taking power and being superior to others? Do men and women share the same faith in war times or do they encounter different realities although living on the same spot? (N5)

Both these students, who are amongst the oldest in the Norwegian group, distinguish themselves from the other students in responding with this level of generality. N10 also approaches a more general understanding of the play in his exam paper, but he makes the mistake of ascribing his own distanced position to the author:

They [the authors Achebe and Tesfai] do not say that every single person participating in a war is a horrendous human being, they say that people do what they can to survive and they take what precautions and actions they deem necessary. They do not glorify the “winning” part of a civil war, as there is none. (N10)

N6 does not make this error, but describes the conflict in discourse that is incompatible with a dominant decoding. In her first written response she writes:

It is clear that there are two fronts in the house: Letiyesus and Solomie against Assefa and Astier. Kitaw is not participating, yet he is somehow in the centre. Letiyesus won't accept him because of his father, he represents the possible future for her family/ her country. (N6)

Hence N6 can draw a conclusion that runs directly counter to the one that Tesfai says he intended his authorial audience to reach. For while Tesfai said that the play “has nothing to do with love and lovers, no matter their origin” (Teskai, 2002:216), N6 concludes:

The suspicion Assefa directs against Astier towards the end perhaps shows that regardless of the bonds between two representatives of each people they can never trust each other completely. (N6)

N6, whose comments have consistently shown a willingness to engage with the intricacies of the literary texts, reiterates this interpretation in the exam:

I think this union between an Eritrean woman and an Ethiopian man is used by the author as a symbol of the union of the nations: It results in suspicion, chaos and suffering. (N6)

N4 also avoids taking sides when she writes, “There is obviously a struggle of what side is the right side, and what side is the wrong side to be on,” and she sees the play as representing a general problem, not as the portrayal of a righteous war against oppression:

The members of this family betray each other by joining the “wrong” groups and the conflicts end in a tragic way. I liked this play because it shows us problems and conflicts that occur in other parts of the world as well, such as political beliefs and views on who should run a country. (N4)

When the Norwegian students read the text without taking sides, they often combine this interpretive strategy with a corresponding strategy for understanding the structure of the play. This they interpret as being built around Astier as the main character, rather than seeing the conflict between Letiyesus and Assefa as the central structural device. Thus for the Norwegian students the violence of her two marriages is the structural pattern that allows for a coherent reading. N6 says of Assefa, “He threatens her and hurts her, bringing her back to the marriage she once had long ago where she was used or misused daily”. Similarly N10 concludes his response by writing, “As for Astier, she is once again alone, twice scorned”, and N2 writes, “Towards the end Assefa is becoming the person that Astier has tried to escape from. [...] Again Astier becomes a prisoner in her own home”. An alternative, but still negotiated structuring is suggested by N3, who sees Astier’s political activity as being determined by her experience in her first marriage.

She was ruled by an iron hand, but when she got out of that marriage she changed for the worse. She brought her experiences with Zecharias with her into the politics and ruled with the same iron hand she detested. (N3, exam)

The Eritreans, by contrast, find coherence by seeing Astier’s fate in terms of the ineluctable consequence of her mistaken choice of second husband.

12.5.5 Negotiated decoding: a family in conflict

For the Norwegian students, the focus of attention is a family in conflict, and the political setting does not have the significance it so clearly holds for the Eritrean students. The Norwegian respondents’ negotiated decoding focuses on why people do what they do, and this sites conflict in the family rather than in the nation. N2 considers relational conflicts within a family as more important than the larger nationalist issues that impinge on the family, for he says, “All in all I think that this story is mainly about the conflicts that are going on inside the family home”.

N1 uses the concept of betrayal as a thematic guide in making sense of the conflicts in the play, and she argues, “In a war situation one might feel that betrayal reaches levels, which are more serious and devastating than they never have experienced before”.

In *The Other War* all the characters are feeling betrayed in one way or another. Letiyesus feels that she loses her daughter to the enemy. Assefa, her son in law, is presented to us as rather paranoid at times, not able to trust anybody. Solomie, who is Astier’s daughter, finds herself in a situation where her mother has lost interest in her. There is no room for her in her mother’s new life. Astier on her hand, is maybe the person feeling most betrayed of them all. [...] Feeling betrayed by her family, her love for her husband gets stronger. Maybe it is so because she is in a desperate search for security, and a new place to belong. At the end the man she loves leaves her, not caring about her sacrifice and suffering. The final betrayal. (N1)

N5 discusses the play in terms of the relational strengths within the family. He argues, for example, that “it could be said that the fact that Letiyesus and Solomie have each other to turn to and draw strength from each other helps them not to let go of the dream and go under”. However he was also already aware of the political background to the conflict in his first response to the play. “It could be said that at the bottom of the conflict lies the fact that the mother, Letiyesus, and the daughter, Astier, belong to two different groups which are at present in great opposition”. After reading the responses of the graduate assistants, N5 became aware of the potency of a political reading:

What strikes me as obvious is the fact that they have a more politicized understanding of the play. They seem to identify the conflict between the two ethnic groups from the moment Letiyesus and Assefa first meet in the opening act. This, with the political issue being beyond any doubt a major theme, I could not foresee after reading Act I. [...] I must admit that I did not give much thought to Assefa being the enemy until later on when his character changed, when I also began to realize more clearly the political aspect of the story. What I am still wondering about is the character of Astier who seems to me has been used by both her husband and mother, experiencing a double betrayal. So, to me it is not just a clear cut story about the conflict between two ethnic groups and one outsmarting the other, but also about personal tragedies and families falling apart in the aftermath of war. (N5)

It is the weight given to the political motivations of the characters that distinguishes, in N5’s own estimation, his interpretation from the Eritrean responses. For him, Assefa is “perceived by the mother as an enemy”, and in this he is typical of the Norwegian students. For all the Eritrean students Assefa is not just perceived as the enemy, he *is* the enemy. N10 is the student who comes closest to the Eritrean students in acknowledging the importance of politics, in family as well as in public relations, for he remarks, “In times of turmoil, even political ties are thicker than blood”.

It is said that family is the fundamental and indissoluble social unit in Eritrean society, and I have wondered why the Eritrean students did not pay as much attention to the dissolution of the family in the play as did the Norwegian students. There are two families at issue – the family where all the members are blood relatives: Letiyesus, Miki-el, Astier, Solomie and Kitaw; and the constituted family: Assefa, Astier, Solomie and Kitaw. If we think in terms of these two different types of family, is it not likely that the Eritrean students see the dissolution of the Assefa-headed family as a liberation? From a male perspective, at least, the marriage is legitimised by neither love nor tradition, but only by military expediency. For the Letiyesus-headed family it is only the treacherous daughter Astier who is lost, and she has already been sent away from the family many years before. Otherwise the family gains a baby boy and has hopes of being re-united with the absent heroic brother. Furthermore, joining the EPLF in the field represents participation in a bigger and greater community than a single family, and the

prospect of belonging to this community resolves and gives meaning to the turmoil which the Letiyesus-headed family has lived through. Thus whilst the Norwegian students bemoan the break-up of the two families, the Eritrean students probably see the play as offering a morally correct and triumphant resolution, combining two small vulnerable families into a far stronger social unit that in turn participates in the communality of fighters which is described in the opening scene of the play.

In the next sections I look in detail at how the students describe and judge three characters in the story – Letiyesus, Assefa and Astier. I introduce these sections with a brief review of the how the characters are encoded by the playwright, and the positions these encodings make available for the authorial reader.

12.5.6 Encoding and decoding characters

Tesfai's mandate as playwright for the EPLF was to promote the independence narrative. Thus the pro-independence characters Letiyesus and Solomie are right-minded, while Assefa is the enemy whose "invincibility has to be cut to size", as Tesfai explained (see 9.3.4), and although Astier thinks that in being married to the enemy she has achieved a powerful position, the play shows her to be terribly mistaken. It is Letiyesus and Solomie who have the final victory. Though the play does not name her as such, Letiyesus is one of the *adetat*, a term of honour used of mothers who willingly supported their children when they joined the EPLF, and who remember as martyrs those of them who died, women who gave their children and everything else they had to the struggle (Hepner, 2009:141). The roles of hero, villain and traitor are handed out in advance¹¹⁰ and I make use of these prototypes in discussing the students' reception of the play. The EPLF favoured an unequivocal encoding, which would make a dominant reading straightforward (Matzke, 2008:27), but when Tesfai was asked to draw characters that were either just praiseworthy or just blameworthy, he resisted this aesthetic, insisting on allowing the characters complex motivations. The play does not present its heroes as only good and its traitors as only bad. Astier, in particular, is a complex traitor. Letiyesus has idiosyncratic turns of phrase, and the characters have a personal as well as a political history that motivates their attitudes, prejudices and decisions. Tesfai's women are "not mere sexual or maternal objects, but active, politically, socially and domestically engaged subjects of the drama" (Plastow, 1999:57).

How then does an Eritrean audience respond to the challenges that the text presents in the allocation of the roles of hero, villain and traitor? Do they confront the complexities of the

¹¹⁰ I am indebted to Jon Smidt for this observation (email 14.02.07).

characters, or do they ignore them in favour of a consistent dominant reading? And how readily do the Norwegian students accept the roles allocated by the text? Two Norwegian students, N7 and N6, express the idea that the characters are ethnic representations. N7 thinks that Miki-el represents Eritrea and Kitaw represents Ethiopia, and N6 concludes that Astier and Assefa are representative of their respective nations. Typically, and this is also true of N7 and N6, the behaviour of an individual is understood to be based not on their ideals or ethnicity but on their earlier experience. In section 12.5.1 I outlined what would constitute an oppositional decoding. An oppositional reading of Letiyesus might see her as an unsympathetic, even racist, character. Especially her refusal to acknowledge Kitaw, solely because he had a non-Eritrean father, might well be emphasised. Assefa might be seen as a nice man who tries hard to make things work with his recalcitrant mother-in-law, but whose good intentions give way to frustration and violence. In an oppositional reading, Solomie might be seen as ‘brain-washed’ by the racism of her grandmother to become a bigoted fighter. Astier would remain the most complex character, but a possible anti-nationalist reading would understand her not so much as a political player but as someone whose endeavours are guided by her wish to escape from the traditional woman’s role of chattel by means of her self-chosen marriage, by working outside the home and by zealous political activity. I take those readings that see the three main characters as representatives of the prototypical roles of hero, villain and traitor as dominant decodings, and those that focus more on psychological than political factors as negotiated readings, even though the play itself encodes both. An oppositional reading, then, will involve an explicit rejection of Letiyesus as the hero, Astier as the traitor and Assefa as the villain, and may even suggest that these roles be redistributed.

12.5.7 Letiyesus

A dominant decoding, I have claimed, understands Letiyesus to be a heroic role model for patriotic Eritreans. The Eritrean students are in fact overwhelmingly positive towards Letiyesus. She is courageous and strong-willed, says E7, iron-willed, says E10. Letiyesus is brave, “a true Eritrean woman and heroine” and “a true Eritrean mother”, writes E1. Several students express the idea that it is her support of her freedom fighter son and his comrades that inspires their admiration. As E5 puts it, “Letiyesus is not a simple mother. Her heart all her conscience is with her son – Miki-el and the comrade who are fighting for the Eritrean independence”.

E2 is again enthusiastically patriotic, and writes that Letiyesus is “brilliant”.

She is the finest supporter to the fighters, [...] and also her son Mikiel is one of those fighters [...] Letiyesus has a very patriotic character of woman who supports and loves for the fighters where

her own son, Mikiel, had jointed too. She has an enormous feeling of nationalism caused by the people where jointed to EPLF fighters for struggle against the Amharas. (E2)

We also meet the same idea of cunning that we saw in “The Monkey and the Crocodile” (see 10.5.4) as a virtue of necessity in the face of a scheming enemy, when E11 says of Assefa, “He seems to be cunny but Letiyesus was cunny more than him”. It is interesting to note that Letiyesus’ treatment of her daughter Astier, which, as we shall see, is the subject of much comment and disapproval in the Norwegian responses, does not meet with disapproval from the Eritrean students. To the extent that it is referred to at all, it is Astier’s unwillingness to listen to her mother’s advice that is mentioned. Like her co-students, E4 is very condemnatory of Assefa and neutral about Astier, just describing what she does, and reiterating the reasons Astier gives for the choices she has made. This might suggest that she recognises the complexity of Astier’s situation, and that she understands the reasons for her choices. However E4 is also neutral when she writes about Letiyesus, and unlike many of her fellow-students she nowhere expresses admiration for her. Given that Letiyesus is encoded as the hero and Astier as the traitor, can we understand the fact that E4 neither condemns Astier’s behaviour nor condones her mother’s as a negotiation of the encoding?

The Norwegian students, in clear contrast to the Eritrean students, understand Letiyesus as a multifaceted character, whose motivation and behaviour can be construed in several ways. None of the Norwegian students comes close to taking Letiyesus as a role model for good motherhood. Several of them seek to explain her behaviour in relation to her personal insecurities and loyalties. N4 identifies her concern for her own reputation: “I feel that Letiyesus is reluctant, and worries more about what other people will say”.¹¹¹ N3 points out her need for security: “Her home was supposed to be her safe haven”. Similarly N7 comments on the domestic disruption that Astier brings: “Also, the homecoming of Letiyesus’ daughter and her family is a disturbance in Letiyesus’ life and it comes as a surprise”. N7 goes into more depth, explaining Letiyesus’ rejection of Assefa as defensiveness of her fighter son:

When Astier says that Letiyesus won’t miss her son, Miki-el, anymore now that Assefa is there, he will be like a son to her, she steps on Letiyesus’ belief of Miki-el as the perfect son, the perfect soldier and a man that fights for the right reasons. (N7)

Another student, N1, consistently focuses on the motivation of the characters. A few years older than most of the other respondents in this study, N1 has personal experience of the complexities

¹¹¹ It is interesting to note a comment made in a quite different context by Yonathan in Hvistendahl’s study: “Ja, for folk er sånn i Eritrea – liksom – hva skal andre si om oss, [...] hvis vi gjør det der”. (“Yes, because people are like that in Eritrea – like – what will other people say about us if we do *that*” (Hvistendahl, 2000:179, my translation).

of family life. She is not inclined to characterise the individual members of the family, nor does she allocate approval or blame. For her the characters behave as they do as an expression of their past and present relationship to the other characters. In making sense of the way Letiyesus, Astier and Solomie behave towards one another she says:

In the relationship between these 3 women there are a lot of disappointment and anger and grief. The grandchild is blaming her mother for her difficult childhood, and her insecurity. The mother, blames her own mother (the grandmother) for her unhappy marriage and for sending her away from home. The grandmother blames her daughter for not being true to her family and country. Because of this grief these 3 women suffer, they have their own “power struggle”. (N1)

Similarly N1 sees patterns in the way the women resolve their disappointments:

The grandchild turns to her grandmother for comfort. The mother turns to the enemy for love and support, and fights with him as an Amhara. The grandmother gives up her daughter, and her comfort is her granddaughter and her son who is not living with her. (N1)

N1 is typically non-judgemental in her response:

Her son-in-law may be a nice man, but the fact that he is an Amhara “blinds” her in a way. She sees an enemy, not a person with human qualities at all. Neither good or bad. (N1)

N6 and N10 remark on what they see as Letiyesus’ prejudice against her son-in-law and her grandson. N6 can identify the point at which she stopped sympathising with Letiyesus:

Immediately, I took Letiyesus’ side in the conflict (probably because I was first introduced to her and see her point of view), but when she wasn’t interested in her grandson, I started doubting her good nature. (N6)

N10 is particularly critical:

What I find intriguing here is also Letiyesus’ ability to see her daughter’s flaws in parenting, when they can be compared to the ones that she herself has overlooked. “Aren’t you giving her enough reasons to hate you for yourself?” she asks her daughter, when accused of having turned Solomie against her. Letiyesus was previously astounded regarding what “drove her daughter to betray her own country and people. (N10)

Letiyesus has no reason to be astounded, in N10’s view. She has given her daughter more than enough reasons to look for better options, even though these involve turning against “her own country” – N10 is the only Norwegian to make use of this phrase – by marrying her off and then for years ignoring her pleas for help. “Letiyesus said that her husband sacrificed himself to build ‘a shelter’ for his daughter, but we don’t feel that she is welcome to use this shelter”, he comments. N6 and N10 also agree that Letiyesus’ decision to leave for the field with Kitaw does not command their respect. N6 observes that when Letiyesus “realises that she can use this against him, she seems more enthusiastic about Kitaw/Awet”. N10 is also critical of this aspect of her behaviour. He develops his response in the discussion forum, where he comments on the

similarity of the graduate assistants' responses to the play, and compares them to his own interpretation:

another thing they have in common which I found a little strange is that noone mentioned the fact that Letiyesus used the child as an ulterior motive herself. There is a flaw in the character of Letiyesus, and that is deceit and a political agenda involving underage-freedom fighters. The deceit lies in that she lies to the people around her when she says that all her children are equal in her eyes. The fact that she kidnaps Kitaw, as a mean to get Assefa renders her less of a hero in my opinion. (N10)

Reading the Eritrean responses has made N10 aware that whilst Letiyesus is perceived as a hero, the most damaging claim made against Assefa is that he has engendered a son in order to eradicate Eritrean ethnicity. For him there is not much to choose between them, for Letiyesus is deceitful too, and uses her grandson for her own ends, to promote the Eritrean cause, rather than respecting his rights as an individual in need of protection. In the time between his first immediate response and his participation in the discussion forum, N10 has moved from a negotiated to an oppositional understanding of Letiyesus. She has flaws that "are clearly visible to us as readers, at least when we look at it from a western point of view, with no full understanding of the culture that applies to the native countries". And he states three ways in which Letiyesus is flawed:

... she thinks more highly of her son than her daughter. She did marry her daughter away against her daughters' will to a man who used and misused her as he saw fit. She does not like her grandson because he has got an Ethiopian father. (N10)

N6 makes the same point: "I found a great irony in this act by Letiyesus, because in fact she is doing exactly what she accused Assefa of doing: using a child as a weapon".

12.5.8 Assefa

Let us now turn from the hero to the villain. Is Assefa perceived primarily as a representative of the Derg? Did he marry Astier solely as a part of a military strategy, or is he as a man of more complex motivations? In a nationalist perspective, Assefa is both an occupier of the country Eritrea, and an occupier of the Eritrean family into which he has married. He thus represents both the military war and 'the other war'. An authorial audience shares the playwright's understanding of Assefa's role in the play and condemns him on both counts. His charm and consideration are seen as pretence, a strategy for winning Letiyesus over. When this strategy fails, Assefa shows his real face. Rabinowitz stresses the importance of entrances and endings (see 11.4.1), and in this respect we can see how the authorial reader is invited to perceive Assefa. After Letiyesus has set the mood with her account of the molestations she has suffered at the hands of Amhara soldiers, and described the simple marriages between Eritrean fighters,

Assefa enters with Astier, an unwanted son-in-law, talking ‘anchi manchi’, a disparaging way of describing Amharic. His position as an intruder and an outsider is immediately encoded. Our final image of Assefa is of him brutally threatening Astier, a paranoid, vengeful man with no concern for his Eritrean family, but only for the damage they have inflicted on him. The structure of the play and the comments of Letiyesus and Hiwot invite us to share the convention that all Amhara in Eritrea are unscrupulous and potentially violent.

A dominant decoding assumes that Assefa is deceptive and malicious from the outset, and sees his move to violence as simply the substitution of one strategy for another. The crux of a dominant decoding of Assefa is that he does not *become* evil as a response to the treatment he receives in Letiyesus’ home, but was evil from the outset. There are many examples of this position in the Eritrean responses:

In this act Asefa seems an honest and helpful man but he is in the contrary. He is cruel. (E9)

Previously, Assefa seemed to be a good and friendly man by hiding his real character. But finally, when he was sure that he would not get any information about the struggle, he started to reflect his real image. (E8)

Assefa cunningly tries to get information about Miki-el. He manipulates Letiyesus *the cunning man*, He pretends to help Letiyesus (E1, italics added)

E8 uses ‘real’ twice here, a word many others in the Eritrean group also use to distinguish who Assefa actually is from the way he presents himself in the first two acts of the play.

The two Eritrean women in the study both use poison to express their idea of Assefa. Indeed they both use more metaphoric language than do any of the men. Since they are the only women in the Eritrean group, I may only conclude that E4 and E7’s facility with poetic language reflects their proficiency in English – they are said to be amongst the brightest students in the class – as well as their preferred style or literary aspirations.¹¹² E7 writes of Assefa “barking and pouring his poison out”, and says that he is “just like a serpent underneath a beautiful flower, he is the sort of a man who tries to be what he is absolutely not”. E4 writes that Assefa “is a sweet covered poison [who] gets his real behaviour out”. The fact that both women use the image of poison suggests that this may be a conventional metaphor for deceit. E4 also writes that “Assefa who was covering behind curtains to charm his mother-in-law, is very animal like shouting and screaming at her”. This image – covering behind curtains – contrasts the domestic setting with Assefa’s savage, animal-like behaviour.

¹¹²We remember that the student, poet and war veteran Habtewald Msana Zere talked of skill with words as a requirement for oral poets (see 9.2.2). A striking and personal response that makes deliberate and extensive use of literary metaphor was offered by a man student who is not part of this study because he was not present at all the response sessions.

The other way in which students can condemn Assefa is by taking him to be representative of the oppressive Derg regime. Assefa is bad, and he is bad because he is Amhara. As E7 says, “We can just easily call him a typical Amhara – that should describe him perfectly”, for Assefa, she says, was “one of the lords of the time”. E11 says that “Letiyesus knows that even if an Amhara laughing they are cruel, their plan were hidden”, and E2 expresses the same idea: “she [Letiyesus] understood everything about the Amhara. Especially Assefa’s trick”. The idea of Assefa as a representative of the occupying soldiers is more generally expressed by E1, who writes that “Assefa is a representative of the cadres who oppressed innocent civilians during those times”. E1 also describes Assefa as “cunning, cruel and arrogant”. Two of these epithets also occurred in the description of the crocodile in “The Monkey and the Crocodile”, who was cunning and cruel. Arrogance is in general an attribute that I have found many Eritreans to be particularly disapproving of.

Some Norwegian students share with the Eritrean students an understanding of Assefa as bad from the start. Thus several of the Norwegian students see Assefa as deceitful, concealing his motives in the hope of sneaking his way into Letiyesus’ confidence. This is the opinion of him that N7 formed already by the end of Act 2: “Assefa is acting like the nice, perfect son-in-law, I think this is to get Letiyesus on his side so he can have more power over her later”. N9’s understanding of Assefa is consistent with the dominant decoding she has offered elsewhere.

Assefa has been playing nice in order to convince Letiyesus to join their side, but she will not be convinced. When Assefa begins shouting, he does so out of frustration, because Letiyesus will not give him a smidge of hope that he will be able to overtake the power of that household. His true colors start to come through and his agenda is halted. (N9)

But do all students who see Assefa as deceitful share a dominant decoding with the Eritrean students? One could argue that a negotiated reading can also see Assefa as a violent and dislikeable man throughout, but only a dominant decoding will ascribe these traits to Assefa’s ethnicity, or see them as part and parcel of the Derg regime.

An oppositional reading may involve seeing Assefa as a well-meaning, conciliatory man who moves from courteousness to violence because of the unfriendliness that he meets in Letiyesus’ family. Several of the Norwegian students are uncertain as to how Assefa should be understood. The most oppositional reading is offered by N5 who accepts Assefa’s early behaviour as genuine: “We are also introduced to Assefa’s caring, kind side; as person willing to make an effort to make the new family situation work out for everybody”. N8 describes Assefa not as intrinsically cruel and evil, but as a man who becomes these things when he is thwarted. Hence the illusion that Assefa is a consistently kind and caring man is not deliberately produced by Assefa, but a delusion from which the family suffers.

Assefa comes through as a kind, reflected man who cares about family and family ties. He seems to like/want peace and quiet, and he gives the illusion that he wants people to respect each other. But that image breaks when he cannot get mother Letiyesus to do his bidding [...] The scary thing about him is that he is a man of power. And when a man of power gets cornered, you never know what he might do. Still, the contrast from polite to angry in Assafa is enormous and might be the biggest shock and fright for the family. (N8)

N8 struggles to make sense of Assefa's character. She asks:

Is he kind or is he in fact trying to get information about the whereabouts of Miki-EI and his comrades? When Solomie pours hot water on his feet and he in turn slaps her, is this merely a reaction to her cruelty or is it showing his true character or dominant nature? (N8)

And N8 pinpoints the interpretive dilemma that Assefa presents to the reader in Act 2: "As a person he seems to be a peace maker even though he is a representative for the enemy in the household". N1 also wonders whether or not Assefa is deceitful:

In act three there is a new kind of power struggle. Assefa and his wife on one side and grandmother/granddaughter on the other. Maybe we in this act finally begin to see Assefa's true face? (N1)

N2 describes his changing understanding of Assefa in the course of the play:

We see that Assefa changes through the play. At least we are meant to believe it. He does change, but his political views and feelings have always been there. They were hidden from us through his false politeness in the beginning of the play. Towards the end we see these views clearly through the way he treats Astier. I am left with the feeling: "Once an Amhara, always an Amhara. (N2)

N2 recognises that he has arrived at a position at the end of the play that is formed by the ideological encoding of the play. "I am left with the feeling...", he says, and in so saying he provides a comment on the play's immediate impact, apparently acknowledging that he is not making a considered response to the issues that the play raises.

The playwright could take for granted that his contemporary audience perceived Assefa as a political player, as a representative of the Amhara. His Eritrean audience knew that there were many Amhara in the country, and that Assefa personified a military strategy that he was not alone in perpetrating. A Norwegian audience more than twenty years on does not know this, and perceives Assefa as an individual exercising choice. On the whole the Norwegian students see Assefa less as a political player than as a lonely man on an impossible mission. N4 can thus write, "It seems that Assefa sees himself almost as a missionary when he says that his roots are firmly planted in Eritrea and no power can ever pull them up". Similarly N5 can say of Assefa, "He is very polite during the first meeting with Letiyesus, asking about her journey and how she is feeling, and there is nothing that foreshadows the things yet to come". This is an instance of how misinterpretation can arise when respondents do not share the conventions of the authorial

audience. It also means that N5 is able to see the human cost of the situation, for Assefa as much as anyone, whether or not this was the authorial intention:

The washing of feet is in my opinion a significant moment since it seems Assefa cannot trust anyone with this except his own wife – a nice metaphor for his position in the family and the general position of Ethiopians in Eritrea. (N5)

12.5.9 *Astier*

I have argued that Astier presents a more complicated challenge for a dominant decoding than do the other characters, because she does not only fill the role of traitor, but claims for herself the role of victim. Her marriage to an Amhara cadre and her activities as head of the *kebele* make her a traitor to the Eritrean cause. But when she tells her mother (and the audience) about her wretched first marriage to an abusive husband, she invites us to allocate her the role of victim. In this section I first review how the Eritrean students understand her role in the play, and then consider how the Norwegian students do so.

One impassioned Eritrean student said in class, “I feel sorry for her but I hate her for what she did”. Although I entreated him to write down his thoughts, neither he nor any other Eritrean students expressed this view in writing. This gives cause for reflection on the many constraints and conventions that constitute the institutional conditions of writing and reading at EIT. That Astier betrayed ‘her own people’ is mentioned twelve times by the Eritrean students (and only once, we remember, in the Norwegian responses). E9, for example, says, “she stood against her own people”, and E4 explains that “she take them as her people and her own people as the enemy”. E8 accepts that there are either ‘us’ or ‘them’, and that one is either with ‘us’ or against ‘us’. Astier has reversed the only loyalties that the play allows, and is therefore contemptible. She reinforces this interpretation through her use of ideologically-charged language.

Astier was against her own people. As soon as she came to power she started to punish the innocent people mercilessly, and her mother was opposing her strongly. But she could not listen to her mother’s advice. She was utterly turned to an Amhara like Assefa. (E8, italics added)

The last sentence here might either mean that Astier has herself become an Amhara, in the sense that since she behaves like one, she has turned *into* one; or it might mean that she has completely aligned herself with an Amhara man, who is this Assefa person, as it were. She has turned *towards* him and his values and accepts them as her own.¹¹³ Not only is Astier faulted for choosing the wrong side in the conflict, she is also faulted for another transgression of loyalty, namely loyalty towards one’s parents. Astier acts in defiance of her mother’s advice, and she continues in her behaviour despite her mother’s protestations.

¹¹³ There are only seven prepositions in Tigrinya, and the linguistic fault lines between Tigrinya and English can sometimes, as here, lead to an enriched range of interpretative possibilities.

Although not as severe in her judgement as E9, E8 is also critical of Astier for failing both her country and her family. But for E8 it is Astier's mother who should be shown respect, not her two husbands. Even for this woman student, it is not straightforward how she should relate to Astier's wretched marriage. Whilst she is critical of the custom of arranged marriage, especially when there is a large age gap between husband and wife, she cannot express sympathy for Astier. For if Tigrinya cultural values site the family as the source and guardian of moral codes and conduct, conflicts, if they occur, should be sorted out within the family. One's elders are to be respected and not to be confronted with the ill-advised decisions they have made about their children's lives (see H. Pool, 2005).

Some of the Eritrean students also condemn Astier's personality. E2 says that Astier "became and grew up so cruel". Astier, who is chairwoman of the *kebele*, punishes women who are late to a meeting, and in E1's eyes "this makes her cruel and bad fellow". E1 acknowledges that Astier has been made cruel, that she became cruel in the course of her growing up. Here, presumably, he is referring to her marriage, and her abandonment by her family. But regardless of the reasons for her cruelty, he condemns her collaboration with the occupying forces. E1 expresses the collaboration with a Tigrinya expression similar to the English 'hand in glove' (and the Norwegian '*som hånd i hanske*'): "Working together with the Amhara cadre's. She became like gloves and hands with the Amhara members. She revolve against her own family, her own people".

When E1 writes that Astier 'revolve' against her family, we see the rich 'fault line' between Eritrean and British English, to use a term that Kramsch introduces (1993). To me, 'revolve' connotes 'evolve' and 'revolt' as well as 'revolve'. Astier has evolved – grown away from her own family in a long process that cannot be reversed. She has 'revolved', suggesting a continual turning movement, in this case away from her family. And she 'revolts' – a violent and willed rejection of what her family and 'her own people' stand for. E2 also uses 'revolve', when he writes that Astier "revolve against her people in general and against her own mother, Letiyesus, in particular". Again E2 condemns Astier for turning against both her people and her family, and, in particular, her own mother. E2 ascribes a motive to Astier, namely that she behaves as she does so as to punish her mother – "to hurt her heart".

... she is becoming more ignorant and a blind who can't see and choosing her way to destruction. When she was appreciating for Assefa and thanks to him. He didn't open her eyes to the world, oppositely Assefa closed her eyes to her nation, where she became a cruel creature that revolve against her people in general and against her own mother, Letiyesus, in particular. In order to hurt her heart, Astier betrayed her own country and people. (E2)

All in all E2 provides an interpretation of the play in vivid language and with considerable involvement, and his decoding is fervently nationalistic. He even adds information about Astier's first husband that is not in the original text, saying that he "left her and jointed to struggle with fighters after he got divorce with her". In this innovative reading Astier's behaviour is even more outrageous, for she has not only left her husband for the enemy, but her husband is re-presented as a noble freedom fighter.

A less condemnatory tone is adopted by E6, who sees Astier as being misled or deceived by Assefa, rather than seeing her as wilfully rejecting her own family. E6 understands the play as a confrontation between Assefa and Letiyesus, who represent opposing positions in the war for Eritrea. For E6 Astier is not an independently-thinking traitor, but a woman who has listened to the wrong person – her Amhara husband rather than her mother: "Her Astier is field [?] in great problem because of miss understand Assefa's real behavior and not heard her mothers warning".

Let us now turn to the negotiated readings of the character of Astier that are offered by the Norwegian students. Unlike the dominant readings of the Eritrean students, who see Astier as representative of those who collaborated with the enemy and became traitors to their nation and their family, the Norwegian students tend to relate to Astier in the tradition of naturalist theatre, treating her as a realistic and rounded character, and creating an inner life for her to explain why she acts as she does. They fill in the incoherence they perceive in her behaviour with psychological explanations, sometimes supporting them with tropes from the field of popular psychology. Occasionally psychological explanations are proffered as assertions. "Astier has thought that she can run away from her past and start a new beginning" says N2.¹¹⁴ "Assefa was her 'knight on shining armour'", says N8, "and thus everything that came with him is all that she sees as good in the world". This interpretation offers an unexpected application of a commonplace Western metaphor. The figure of a knight is used in popular English-language discourse to conjure the idea not so much of a warrior as of an honourable and romantic rescuer. Here the phrase would seem to combine both military and chivalrous associations. It fits strangely well the Eritrean setting. Assefa does indeed represent both military and chivalrous enterprises, at least as Astier perceives him. By using this expression, however, N8 shows how ill-founded was Astier's perception, for the Assefa of the play does not appear to the audience as a knight in shining armour, but as a low-ranking officer who fights without

¹¹⁴ Using the WebCorp linguistic search engine (<http://www.webcorp.org.uk/>) on 04.05.2009, I found 74 instances of expressions involving running away from the past. The relatively high incidence of this phrase, and the contexts in which it occurred, support the claim that the phrase is a well-established expression to describe how people respond to extreme experiences. <http://www.webcorp.org.uk/>

armour in the battlefield of the home.

Psychological explanations, however, are typically offered not as completed interpretations but as suggestions. N7 uses questions to suggest two alternative explanations for Astier's behaviour. Astier either experienced herself as empowered when she left her violent husband, or she is trying to impress her mother, who favours her son Miki-el over Astier:

Maybe Astier wants power so badly because she had none when she was married to Zecharias? She got the taste of power when she left him and maybe she can't get enough. Or *maybe* she is trying to be as good as Miki-el in her mother's eyes by fighting and being strong? (N1, italics added)

It is interesting to note that N7 writes that Astier left her first husband, but the audience is not in fact told that Astier left her husband or how their separation came to pass, but only that Assefa has become her second husband. N7 reads into this gap that Astier had initiated the break with her first husband, and in so doing draws on her experience of Norwegian society, where almost half of all marriages end in divorce, and where it is taken for granted that a separation can be initiated by either party. N7's second suggestion, that Astier is trying to win respect from her mother, stands in marked contrast to the readings of the Eritrean students, for whom Astier's behaviour is a sure-fire way of *losing* Letiyesus' respect. In fact N7's interpretation illustrates unfamiliarity with the basic tenets of the dominant reading, in which the roles of hero and traitor are already handed out. No one can hope to redeem themselves in Letiyesus' eyes by taking the role of traitor, but N7 is not part of the authorial audience, and the conventions that they share with the playwright are not available to her. By interpreting Astier's behaviour solely in terms of her psychological response to earlier experiences, N7 overlooks the political encoding of the play. Rather, N7 could be said to understand Astier in terms that Almås (1997) finds to be typical for young people, when he says that their main project is to find out who they wish to be. To some extent the Norwegian students' understanding of the choices Astier makes reflects the understanding of family structure that Sogner (2003) describes as typical of contemporary Norwegian society, where people pick and choose from the characteristics of the traditional family to fulfil their own needs (see 6.4.2).

N7 offers the possibility that Astier's behaviour is motivated by her 'wanting power', a concept, I would argue, that reflects contemporary discourse in Norway about interpersonal relations. The keywords for the discussion of Act 2 were 'power struggle in the family'. In both popular and literary media in Norway, marriage and relationships between women and men in general are often described as a power struggle. N7, as we saw above, makes frequent use of this term to make sense of Act 2, but it occurs in many of the Norwegian student texts, and not only in Act 2. N4 demonstrates how it can be applied to both domestic and political settings: "I

believe that this play shows us the power struggles and conflicts within a family as well as within the country”. However the Norwegian students tend to use the term to describe the various relationships within the family. N4 goes on to say, “I believe that the issue of Astier’s first marriage is one of the roots to the power struggle and conflict between Letiyesus and Astier”. By contrast, the Eritrean students use ‘power’ only in its political sense, with reference to the strength or ability to enforce something on an enemy.

As with “The Monkey and the Crocodile” (see 10.3.4), it is only Norwegian students who use questions to make sense of the text. Like N7, N1 uses questions to explore Astier’s behaviour: “His wife seems blinded by her love for him, to be able to see what is going on. But can you blame her? She feels abandoned by her family and her own people”. It is not clear whether N1’s question is real or rhetorical, perhaps it is somewhere in between. We see that N1 is cautious about providing a definitive interpretation. Astier *seems* blinded, she says, and rather than stating that she should not be blamed, N1 asks whether it is right to blame her. The implication here would seem to be that one should not apportion blame, but rather that one should understand a person’s behaviour in the light of their experience. This is something N6 does as well. Power is a term used to describe a person’s position within a family, as here, where Astier’s behaviour is described in terms of her changed position within her family’s power structures. As N6 gets to know the characters more, they become more real to her, and her understanding of their background creates sympathy for them, as though they were real people. Thus she wonders whether

Perhaps Astier mistreated Solomie because she saw her as Zacharias’ daughter, not first and foremost her own. Astier seems to put Kitaw’s needs before Solomie’s – because he represents her new life which includes a position of power, while Solomie represents her old life where she was suppressed? (N6)

Again we see that N6 hedges her answer with ‘perhaps’ and ‘seems’, and also by presenting her interpretation in the form of a question. Psychological explanations are clearly more open to debate than are political ones. Thus N9 discusses Astier’s marriage not in terms of family or national loyalty, but in terms of what personal benefits or disadvantages the marriage brings her:

Astier claims her marriage to Assefa is much better than her first one to Zecharias. In my mind, I think they may be kind of similar, because it seems that Astier is being beaten by Assefa as well. (N9)

N5 goes so far as to commend the courage it took for Astier to escape from her first marriage, and he is forgiving of the difficulties that arose subsequent to her choice of second husband:

The complexity of her character aside, the fact is that she takes a courageous step slowly and most probably unconsciously severing the ties with her family members placing her faith completely in Assefa. [...] In the process of doing so they fail to see what the consequences of their choices might be; a rather difficult task anyway, let alone when being a part of a war-torn society. (N5)

I have argued in 12.2.5 that *The Other War* may encode slightly incompatible sets of conventions, and that it is not therefore a text with an unequivocal encoding. Whether the audience, like Matzke, sees the author as deliberately manipulating shared conventions about gender and race, or whether, like me, they do not, an interpretation that recognises the inconsistencies in the role of Astier – the villain designate – makes it difficult to blame her outright, even though she is the character encoded as the political and family traitor. The Norwegian students, with the exception of N9, are aware of this difficulty, as is at least one of the Eritrean students, the man who expressed his interpretive dilemma in an urgent comment in class: that he felt so sorry for Astier, even though he condemned her for what she had done to the nation.

12.6 Discussion

12.6.1 Gender and identification

One of the broadest comparative studies of reception (Kovala & Vainikkala, 2000) did not find gender to be a reliable predicative variable across nations. However, one of the aspects of reception they did find to be gendered *within a particular country* was which characters respondents identified with. Kovala and Vainikkala do not define what they mean by ‘identify with’, but I understand them to mean that readers identify with characters when they find aspects of the characters’ circumstances, personality, reasoning or behaviour that are similar to their own. In the following I discuss the possible relevance of gender to how students identify with the characters in *The Other War*.

I have earlier argued that the play invites and expects its audience to identify with the EPLF cause. The question here is whether it also invites its audience to identify with the individual characters. In fact it is not straightforward for the students to identify with any of them. Clearly, when Astier is perceived variously as a traitor and a victim, neither role attracts readers to identify with her. But also when she is perceived by some of the Norwegian students as a strong woman, who has plausible psychological motivations for behaving as she does, neither men nor women identify with her. Letiyesus represents a generation that is older than the respondents. One of the Norwegian respondents, N1, describes her as ‘elderly’, and several of the Eritrean

students mention her age. E2 says that Letiyesus “look like old one but not too”.¹¹⁵ I suggest that Letiyesus’ age, combined with her position as head of family, mother and grandmother, contribute to making it unlikely that the respondents, be they men or women, would identify with her. However the only indications of identification with *any* of the characters in the Norwegian students’ responses do in fact relate to her. N7 has thought herself into Letiyesus’ situation when she writes that she “takes control over her life again and does what I think she should have done earlier in the play, she leaves with Solomie and Kitaw”. Also N6 identifies for a while with Letiyesus, but finds this an unattractive position as she sees more of her: “I took Letiyesus’ side in the conflict (probably because I was first introduced to her and see her point of view), but when she wasn’t interested in her grandson, I started doubting her good nature”. As to the Eritrean students, their attitude to Letiyesus is one of respect rather than of identification.

It is perhaps surprising that Solomie, a teenage schoolgirl, loyal to her grandmother and a staunch EPLF supporter, is not given more attention. Could this be because she is, after all, younger than the students? Yet one of the Eritrean women, E7, consistently describes Solomie as a woman, not as a girl, suggesting that she, at least, sees her as someone who is to be taken as seriously as the other characters. Perhaps the lack of interest in Solomie in Eritrea reflects the reception of the play amongst the general public, for whom, I have been told, Letiyesus is seen as the main character. It may also reflect how the play was taught, where apparently Astier was a main focus of attention. In both cases, Solomie would not be regarded as an independent agent with her own dramatic path through the action of the play, but rather as either a junior and subordinate partner for Letiyesus or as the dramatic means whereby Astier is shown to be a callous and domineering mother. Another possibility is that limitations of time restricted the students’ chance to engage more closely with the characters. All the same, in her relatively short response, the Norwegian woman N9 includes three sentences that have Solomie in subject position, suggesting that for her Solomie *is* a relatively significant character.

If we turn to the male characters, the options for identification are minimal. On the one hand we have the positively-charged character of Miki-el, who is talked of but neither seen nor heard, and Kitaw, who, though he appears on the list of characters that prefaces the play, is a speechless baby. His part could as well be played by a doll (though in the film of the play it was taken by a live baby (Matzke, 2003:227)). The only male character who speaks is Assefa, who, as we have seen, is presented as an Amhara and therefore branded as ‘the other’ from the

¹¹⁵ This reference to Letiyesus’ appearance suggests that E2 has in mind a dramatisation that he has seen, rather than the script that he has just heard and read.

outset. For the Eritrean group, identification with Assefa is ruled out by the conventions that the play expects its audience to share, and which are reinforced by contemporary in-country political rhetoric. That men tend to identify with a male character, if a factor at all in the Eritrean students' response, is totally overruled by a nationalist dominant decoding. For the Norwegian students, Assefa comes to be seen as a two-faced man who is part of a strategy for the systematic misuse of women, as well as being an individual who is abusive to his mother-in-law and wife. It is no surprise that the Norwegian students do not identify with such a man. In fact the Norwegian students, regardless of whether they are men or women, do not identify with any of the characters, male or female.

12.6.2 *Factors that influenced the decoding*

Rabinowitz says that the success of a play is to some extent dependent on a successful prediction of the social conventions shared by the text and the authorial audience. *The Other War* invites an authorial audience to sympathise with the EPLF and condemn those who work against their cause. That the Eritrean students endorse this position and provide a dominant decoding of the play is in itself is unremarkable, given both the political and the institutional context in which the student responses were collected: the all-pervasive and unified representation of the Armed Struggle in Eritrea's media, the continuing and vociferous identification of Ethiopia as aggressor, and the state control of higher education, where political acquiescence is required. I dare claim that no Eritrean student can be less than fully aware of how national literature about the Armed Struggle is meant to be read/decoded, and hence *any* alternative reading by an Eritrean student can be seen as a rejection of the dominant ideology, and thus as an oppositional reading. Such oppositional decodings are not expressed by any of the Eritrean students. It is not possible to know whether they, in reproducing the discourse of the play, are endorsing it or simply saying what they are required to say. For an Eritrean student not to take sides, for example, or to suggest that there is a 'conflict', rather than an 'occupation'¹¹⁶, is oppositional both in Hall's sense and in the view of the government, where even giving expression to the historical fact that not all Eritreans wanted Eritrea to become independent of Ethiopia is a punishable offence.

Assumptions about the rightness of the Armed Struggle and the heritage of the Martyrs are not woven into the fabric of Norwegian thought and language; they are not accommodated in a national narrative template, as they very readily can be for the Eritrean students. It is therefore

¹¹⁶ The only resident foreign journalist in 2005 in Eritrea was from the BBC. He was thrown out of the country, apparently because he described the stand-off over the Eritrean-Ethiopian border as a 'conflict', whereas it is, in the dominant ideology, an Ethiopian *infringement* of the 2003 UN ruling which demarked the border.

somewhat unexpected that none of the first responses of the Norwegian students reject outright a dominant reading of the text as a whole. They negotiate the text, picking out the family conflict for attention. N6 is the only student at any point to argue that the play itself is one-sided, and she does so only after this position has been introduced to her. In addition, a few other students also criticise Letiyesus, but not the play, for bigotry. Does this mean that the Norwegian students do not reject the dominant encoding because they simply do not *recognise* it? That they take the play on its own terms? McCormick argues that if a reader accepts *xyz*, then the text makes perfect sense to them, and seems realistic. A reader who doesn't share or accept *xyz* can point out how the text is constructed ideologically (McCormick, 1994:75). But can they? In her discussion of the text's repertoire (see 2.4.2), McCormick promotes the didactic perspective that the historical and ideological conditions of a text's production should be part of what is taught in the literature classroom.

Drawing attention to the ideological 'not saids' of a text, those values and assumptions that it so takes for granted that it need not speak, can help readers to perceive interconnections between social conditions and reading and writing practices, and to determine whether they want to take up the position the text encourages them to adopt or resist it. (McCormick, 1994:98)

Unlike McCormick, I deliberately did not point out the ideological 'not saids', and the background information that I gave the Norwegian students was intended to aid their understanding only of the text's historical, not of its ideological context of production. Following McCormick, one might predict that students, both Eritrean and Norwegian, would take up the position the text encourages them to adopt, since their attention was not drawn to the ideological 'not saids'. McCormick observes that reading the text, at least for the first time, as it insists on being read, is often the most enjoyable way of reading it (1994:89).

The disapproval of the Norwegian students, such as it is, is based on the lack of humanity in Letiyesus' response to her grandson, not on her nationalist motivations. **For a Norwegian reading to count as an oppositional decoding it would have to name and confront the ideology of the text.** When the Norwegian students create meaning in terms of interpersonal relationships rather than in terms of the pro-Eritrean and anti-Amhara values that the play encodes, they offer a negotiated decoding. They may not be deliberately eschewing an oppositional decoding: they may not have seen it. Readings based on interpersonal relationships can simply be the way they negotiate an unfamiliar text, using an interpretive strategy familiar from other plays and other genres. Such a strategy may well be strongly reinforced in the media experience of many young Norwegians, especially women. Typical of their experience are, I believe, the many reality programmes in which participants are removed from their everyday contexts, and where the negotiation of interpersonal relations constitutes the dramatic action. Swidler (2001, see 4.2.1)

emphasised that most people in the West can choose from an excess of cultural repertoires to develop an individual understanding about what makes life meaningful for them. Yet the students in Norway seemed to share much the same cultural repertoire in their understanding of the characters' interpersonal relations.

A variety of factors may have come into play here, some arising from the research situation itself, others relating to more stable cultural factors. The students had a short time in which to write their responses, and they wrote them after listening to each act of the play. Although the last writing session asked them to look at Acts 4 and 5 *and* the play as a whole, the framing of the writing task encouraged students to engage with the particularities of the play, rather than to step back and comment on the drama as a whole. The discursal position of visitor, which many of the Norwegian students assume, is expressed in their caution in criticising the text. In the discussion forum and in the exam papers they tended not to present themselves as visitors. They were, after all, visiting for the second time, and provided more confident critical evaluations of the play.

Another probable factor is that my pro-Eritrean position was evident to them from our first contact, already before the course in African literature started, and from my undisguised fascination with all things Eritrean during the first month of teaching. This would have made it hard for the students to develop an oppositional understanding of the play. There is furthermore a curious, though somewhat speculative, inverted parallel. The Eritrean students have been influenced by *their* teacher, whose exam question on Astier suggests that he was more interested in character development than in the nationalist issues that the play raises. This must have influenced what *his* students deemed an appropriate written response to the play, too. So whilst I probably swayed some of the Norwegian students towards a pro-Eritrean understanding of the play, implicitly disallowing an oppositional reading of it as nationalist propaganda, the teacher of the Eritrean students presumably influenced his students to emphasise a non-political, character-driven understanding of the drama. In other words, both I and Mr M quite possibly influenced our students towards middle ground, the Norwegian students being less provoked by the ethno-political polarities of the play than they might otherwise have been, and the Eritrean students being inclined to write less polemically about these same polarities than they might otherwise have been.

The Other War proved to be a text which all the Eritrean students knew already, both as a central text in the national canon and as part of their degree syllabus. Canonical texts studied at undergraduate level, also in Norway, tend to come parcelled in the significance that literary history has ascribed to them. It is a bold student indeed who questions the significance for

women's emancipation in Norway that literary history has ascribed to Ibsen's Nora, when she walks out of the doll's house that her marriage has become. Similarly, Eritrean students know that Astier's decision to seek marriage to an Amhara husband has become a significant representation of misjudgement, because *her* decision endorsed 'the other war', which the course of history has shown to have been unsuccessful.

But what of more stable cultural factors that underpin the Norwegian students' negotiated position? A consideration of how nationalism is understood in Norway is pertinent here. Gullestad distinguishes between national identification – a feeling of belonging to a national community – and what she terms 'strong nationalism', which she describes as an understanding of one's nation as distinct and with a right to self-determination (Gullestad, 2006:130). Gullestad observes that whilst Norwegians conceive of their own nationalism as 'morally good', and link it to the positive values of peace, nature and childhood, nationalism in other regions, such as Yugoslavia, is disapproved of, both by the general public and by Norwegian scholars (Gullestad, 2006:132). In other words, the nationalism of other regions is readily perceived by Norwegians as nationalistic. Steven Grosby offers a stringent definition of what it means to say that people's relationship to the nation is nationalistic, namely that they perceive their own nation as being in opposition to all other nations, and furthermore that they attempt "to eliminate all differing views and interests for the sake of one vision of what the nation has been and should be" (Grosby, 2005:17).

How do these understandings of nationalism relate to the Norwegian students' apparent acceptance of Eritrean nationalism, as it is expressed in *The Other War*? If we conceive of nationalism as a continuum, with national identity to the left, nationalism in Grosby's sense to the right, and political self-determination somewhere in between, the Norwegian students regard the nationalism expressed by the play as being somewhere in the middle of the continuum. It is not identified with the nationalism of the far right, which, if Gullestad is right, would have attracted their disapproval.

It is possible to see the Norwegian students' acceptance of Eritrean nationalism as 'good' in the light of their lack of involvement in party political organisations, which would provide a site for debating questions of national development and strategy (see 6.3). Another pertinent feature of Norwegian society, also discussed in chapter 6, is the idea of '*likhet*' – equality and sameness. In 1984 Archetti explored the related concept of consensus, comparing political life in Norway with the Latin American political culture where he was brought up. Although the anthology in which his article appears has been criticised for an outmoded essentialised understanding of culture, Archetti can perhaps contribute to an understanding of why the Norwegian students

don't seem to notice or mind the pro-Eritrean and anti-Ethiopian stance of the play. Archetti's observation was that to be objective is central to Norwegian ideology. Arguments are what matter, not subjective values or personal sympathies (Archetti, 1984:49), and it is an ideal in Norway to distinguish one's response to a person from one's response to that person's arguments. In Norway, says Archetti, there is a strong tendency to set boundaries for what a conflict entails and to define what problems are irrelevant to it (1984:50). He argues that consensus is valued and sought, but the political corollary is that there is also a sense of resignation about the possibility of achieving an oppositional result or an alternative regime (1984:51). Archetti's conclusion can contribute to an understanding of the Norwegian students' acceptance of the play on its own terms.

12.7 Concluding remarks

The two groups of students read the same text, which was presented in the same way, but there was a great difference in their familiarity with the play and its historical significance. Ivanič (1998) showed how students always present themselves, as well as their topic, when they write academic texts. I have found a clear difference in the way the two groups do this. The Norwegian students position themselves as visitors, hedging their responses and questioning the text, whilst the Eritrean students position themselves as hosts, explaining the text, its background and its significance for their presumptive reader, and expressing pride and admiration for the author and the play.

The whole point of theory, according to Hall, is to make questionable or 'not-obvious' what powerful dominant discourses try to present as incontestable common sense. Rabinowitz's concept of an authorial, and, by implication, a non-authorial, audience, and Hall's theory of encoding and decoding, inform the analysis of how the students made sense of *The Other War*, bringing to the surface the ideologies that made only certain interpretations acceptable in the interpretive communities to which the students belong.

One of the central questions that the study of *The Other War* set out to answer was which ideological conventions the text shares with its contemporary Eritrean and Norwegian audience. The Eritrean students decode the play in line with its encoding of Eritrean nationalism. They see the play as demonstrating the rightness and success of the Eritrean struggle for liberation, and they accept the allocation of the roles of hero, villain and traitor. They do not, however, share all the social conventions that the play offers, for they pay relatively little attention to the issue of a woman's right to a self-determined life, which, I have argued, is also, though confusingly, encoded in the play.

All the Norwegian students negotiate the text, and they do so by using at least four

overlapping strategies, though not all of the students combine and make use of these strategies in the same way. These strategies are: to see the Eritreans and the Ethiopians as two sides in a conflict, without coming down in favour of the Eritrean side; to express an interpretation and appraisal of the action and characters without using language that reproduces the dominant ideology of the play; to emphasise interpersonal relationships and the individual's need for security and self-realisation over strategic and patriotic motivations; and not to judge the characters as either good or bad. The few instances of more oppositional readings in the Norwegian group did not occur in the first response to the text, but later on, in the discussion forum and in the exam.

The students in Eritrean partake in a culture where all Eritrean theatre serves to promote a political agenda. Some Norwegian students know theatre as a place where existential and social values are challenged; for others, their experience of filmed drama leads them to expect entertainment and sometimes emotional involvement, rather than social, let alone political, involvement. This, combined with the institutional conditions of reading, the context of the research situation and, most importantly, the political and social contexts of the two groups, resulted in two very different sets of decodings. Were the twenty-two student texts to lose their national tags, as it were, I dare claim that they are so different, idiosyncrasies of L2 English aside, that it would be possible to sort them correctly into two piles, one Eritrean and the other Norwegian.

13 Summing up

There is a rich theory of reader-response criticism and reception which draws heavily on introspection and erudition. Yet relatively few systematic studies have put these theories to work. This study is an attempt to do so, in that it asks how Eritrean literature in English is read in Norway and Eritrea. It has offered an exploration of the literary and cultural assumptions which two groups of students brought to their reading of three pieces of Eritrean literature. The students were studying English at institutions of tertiary education in Norway and Eritrea, and the material on which my analysis is based is their answers to a questionnaire and to assignments that they wrote immediately after reading or listening to the literary texts. The third part of this thesis – Response – is concerned with what and how the students wrote about the literary texts, describing them in a comparative perspective in relation to the two national groups, and in a contextualising perspective, each individual and each group understood as making use of their contexts in their response.

Part One assembles the theoretical framework needed to make sense of the student texts and my own activity in interpreting them. This includes an investigation of what reading is, of different academic literacies, including the different ways in which writers position themselves in their texts, a critical review of research that the present study can build on, and a discussion of what it means to talk of national cultures and contexts. The concepts of national cultures, interpretive communities, discursal positions and authorial readers have been carrying beams in the construction of this theoretical framework.

In the second part, 'Context', I have described the political context, with a focus on how national identity is constructed and maintained, as well as the social practices and linguistic and educational contexts of Eritrea and Norway. One chapter in this part is an analysis of the questionnaires, describing the students as readers and writers – the *student* context, as it were. Part Two includes a chapter on the literary context in Eritrea, based on observation and informal interview, as well as academic reading. It describes the space of the literary in contemporary Eritrea and provides an overview of Eritrean literature in English.

There is no doubt that the culture of the nation to which a person belongs, however fraught the concept of **national culture**, is part of how we understand each other and what we expect of each other. National culture can be thought of, with the help of Goetz's (1973) image, as webs of significance deliberately woven on a nationalist warp. This warp, as Barth (1980) has made us aware, allows for the creation and maintenance of ethnic and national identities from disparate components by generating boundaries predicated on difference rather than on

similarity with other insiders. It can also, as we have seen for the Norwegian case, be built on commonly held principles about how individuals within a nation should relate to one another.

The concept of national cultures can invite a form of deductive thinking, namely the idea that people behave in a certain way *because* they are Eritrean or Norwegian. In Part Two I skirt such an invitation by describing the cultures of the two nations in terms of the embedding contexts in which the students live and in which their texts arose. After sketching the geographic and demographic contexts, I considered in somewhat more depth their different recent histories, the different ways in which their national identities are constructed and maintained, the position of and possibilities available to women, the relative importance of the family and the individual, ideals of similarity and equity expressed in the Norwegian idea of *likhet*, the Eritrean ideals of self-reliance and exceptionalism, and, not least, the different systems of government and political control. I have described the language situation as it relates to education, with the dominance of Tigrinya in Eritrea, and the greater dominance of Norwegian in Norway, and I have looked at the constraints involved when the students wrote their assignments in English. Looking at the broader educational and institutional contexts there are striking disparities of literacy, access, transparency and choice. The classroom is the immediate context for the collection of the material, and particularly important to an understanding of the students' response. Within the classroom students in Eritrea are encouraged to reproduce the right answers and to evidence their commitment to the nation-building project, whilst students in Norway, at least sometimes, are encouraged to demonstrate critical thinking and creativity.

I have sought explanations for the response of the students in Norway in studies published over the last thirty years that have investigated social attitudes towards various aspects of Norwegian culture. Given the heterogeneity of Eritrean nationhood, the country's political instability, and restrictions to documentation and research, there is far less material relating to Eritrean culture. Explanatory propositions based on the Eritrean material must therefore be more tentative than those arising from the Norwegian material. Yet the importance of making propositions about how the values and experience of students in Eritrea relate to the cultures to which they belong is all the more important, for the same reason.

This study has been concerned with **how the students' utterances are embedded in the larger context of their political, social and educational contexts**. Class and ethnicity have not been analytical categories, and gender and age have not been systematically explored. Culture and context, on the other hand, have proved conceptually valuable in accounting for tendencies in the two interpretive communities, and in making sense of the response of the individual students. Shadish et al. (2002) advise making clear over what time span a knowledge

claim is assumed to hold true, and I cannot make claims beyond the particular cultures and contexts that pertained in the two nations at the time of the research. But I believe that conjecture is a legitimate research outcome, and that the contexts and the cultures to which the students belong, with the partial exception of their frequently reformed institutional contexts, *are* stable over time, though always in a process of adaptation.

I review the methodology in this study with a view to commenting on what constitutes **an appropriate and productive qualitative approach to comparative studies of reception**. Many comparative studies in the field of education and social science involve quantifiable data, and many of them aim to reproduce the same research design for the different people or groups or institutions to be compared. Although these studies pursue the ideal of parallel design, a comparative investigation of how people make sense of their lives should not be predicated on such an ideal, which can, if too vehemently pursued, lead to the internal invalidity that marks some of the earlier comparative research reviewed in chapter 3. Rather, one should weigh the ideal of parallel design against the greater necessity that the study be meaningful to each group of informants, and then make explicit any adjustments one has made. In this study the questionnaire was very similar for the two groups, and the assignments have been similarly when not identically worded, but the realities of the two institutional contexts led to many minor adjustments. The apparently unproblematic idea of using the same literary texts was not as straightforward as it first seemed. Apart from their being read differently because of individual and cultural differences between the students, the two institutional contexts and academic literacies mean that the words on the page are *not* just words on the page. Their format, co-text and the circumstances of their presentation all contribute to the context of their reading. Not least, for the students in Norway the words on the page were presented as someone else's literary texts and genres, whilst for the students in Eritrea the texts were presented as their own. By contrast, the assignment required the Eritrean students to give their own opinion, that is, to respond with someone else's sort of assignment. Since English was the second and in some cases the third language for all the students, they all wrote in someone else's words.

The choice of **student texts as material** was motivated by pragmatic considerations, but it also had to do with comparative design. Interview, a dominant method in contemporary educational research in Norway, would have increased the disparity between and within the two groups. It is a form where a subject or group of subjects are expected to proffer information and opinion, usually in asymmetrical interaction with an interviewer, and as such it would have been considerably more familiar to the Norwegian students than to the students in Eritrea. Furthermore, all but one of the Norwegian students already knew me, whereas none of the

Eritrean students did. Writing, on the other hand, was familiar to both groups and allowed for a less reflexive and a more reflective response. The written texts provided a lot of material in a short time, something that was an important consideration given the constraints under which it was collected. I had expected the students to be serious, and indeed both student groups demonstrated a consistent willingness to respond in writing, but I had been very unsure whether the students in Eritrea would be able to respond in intelligible English. In fact their texts were far more legible and coherent than some of the English teaching faculty had led me to expect.

“The sincere and innocent reader is much too easily bounced into emptying his mind by any literary highwayman who says ‘I want your opinion’, and much too easily laid low because he has nothing to produce on these occasions”, complained Richards (1929:318). From a non-normative, reader-oriented perspective, however, students have more than enough to say, when literary judgement as such is not required of them. Yet the questions I put did limit the answers I got, and therefore also the questions I can ask of these answers. Despite valuable local input I can with hindsight regret not having known more about **which questions and assignments** would have been appropriate in Eritrea. I forestall the objection that what the students wrote was so circumscribed by the assignments and by the lack of time the students had to answer them that it could not provide the insights that characterise good humanistic research. The pertinence of such an objection, at least for Eritrea, must be weighed against the constraints of security and access under which I worked. A task-based methodology makes research in unstable situations at least possible, and it allows for a breadth that ‘slow’ methods do not.

Ways of knowing, and how we talk about what we know, involve **a mesh of epistemological and ethical issues** (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Epistemological issues have shown themselves to overlap with ethical issues to a considerable extent in designing this study, but also during campus and classroom interaction, and in writing up and accounting for my findings. Fine et al. advise that the issues do not end here, but that one should tell potential readers how *not* to misread and misuse one’s work, for “the likelihood of our analyses being misappropriated is much higher than the likelihood of our analyses being deployed for ends of which we would approve” (M. Fine, Weis, Weseem, & Wong, 2000:126). This is, of course, particularly important where the consequences of misuse may do harm to the research participants.

The Norwegian institution that protects the interests of research participants, NSD, has been a guarantor for ethical legitimacy in Norway. I experienced the research situation in Norway as relatively uncomplicated, once the students had evaluated their participation in the project and deemed it useful. In my opinion none of them has given or had attributed to them opinions or experiences that are demeaning or potentially embarrassing.

When it comes to Eritrea, it was better to have ethical guidelines from Norway and to know I deviated from them, than to rely solely on my intuition, which could be compromised by instrumental concerns. The challenge has been to balance expectations of what counts as good and ethical research with the constraints of Norwegian ethical practice that I discuss in chapter 5. It must be said that these expectations have proved somewhat inappropriate and inadequate in Eritrea, for they were not designed for the circumspection, suspicion, censorship and surveillance that is a pervasive fact of life there. But again the students in Eritrea did not, in my judgement, say anything that can be detrimental to them. Again I have found the people I have spoken with in Eritrea well aware of what it was appropriate to tell me. In-country Eritrean informants have without exception spoken loyally of the nation-building project, whilst in-country *non*-Eritrean informants have tended to be considerably more critical. Once back in Norway, the complexities of ways of knowing, and how we talk about what we know, continued to inform what I wrote. Out-of-country writers and informants have tended to be critical of the nation-building project, sometimes extremely so. I must emphasise that these critical voices, referred to primarily in chapter 5, are from sources in Europe and the USA, not within Eritrea.

There is also an ethical concern related to what Wole Soyinka calls the post-colonial affliction of the external eye, of which this study is yet another instance. But the problem of a non-Eritrean studying Eritrea, what Biodun Jeyifo (2007) more generally calls the falsehood of research displaced from its true centre, is countered by two factors. Firstly it serves, perhaps, the greater good of publicising a powerful but under-researched literature. Negash argues for continued research on Tigrinya literature, not only because of its importance for an academic and general readership, but because the artists themselves deserve far more attention than they have received (Negash, 1999:203). Secondly, I do believe that it is a good thing that any research be carried out in Eritrea, despite all the things that can't be said and done, because there is so little of it. The economic, material, academic and political conditions for research by people who live in Eritrea are very limiting. Also for drop-in researchers like myself, issues of security and mobility are more extreme as I write in 2010 than they were a few years previously. But already by the end of 'my time' in Eritrea people on business visas could travel outside the capital only on successfully completing an application process that could take days or even weeks. Since then the withdrawal of the UN peace-keeping forces, inflamed relations between the countries of the Horn, the recently UN-imposed weapon embargo, and an upsurge of violence amongst young people in the cities, means that Asmara is no longer the remarkably safe city for foreigners that it was until very recently.

A final ethical issue is the fact that I have been met with generosity and have not been able to

answer in kind. The Eritrean staff and students of EIT went out of their way in order that I might carry out a research project which had little perceived benefit to them. I reciprocate by criticising aspects of the national culture and the contexts in which they live. Yet this criticism must be raised, for I respect the integrity of the people I have met and worked with, and am critical of the political constraints and the abuses of power under which they, as students, teachers, administrators, journalists and writers, must work and survive.

In the course of this study **other questions** and possible approaches to a comparative study of reception have arisen and invited exploration. These include the broader study of a particular genre, such as the fable; an exploration of the students' media practices in relation to the range of interpretive strategies available to them; a further exploration of the idea of literary locations, and possible cultural and gender differences in where students look for meaning; a comparative study of the reception of Norwegian literature in the two nations, including an investigation into how students negotiate the discursive positions of hosting and visiting, the relative assertiveness and uncertainty they bring to their reading, and the interpretive strategies available to them.¹¹⁷

Finding out about **the space of the literary in Eritrea** was not one of my original concerns, but proved to be a crucial contextual domain in which other questions could be meaningfully asked. I am indebted to the work of Negash (1999) and Matzke (2003), without which this would have been a lonely venture. My discussion of Eritrean literature in English was based on an understanding of literature as non-universal, culturally specific and socially condoned texts, and concentrated on showing which factors have underpinned the writing and publishing of such texts in Eritrea. In describing them I posit a set of genres, including the liberation testimonial and the political novel. I conjecture that these genres have arisen as vehicles of a nationalist aesthetic in working partnership with oral literature, or as appropriations of Western genres. The literature of emergent and very young nations is typically concerned with promoting a new, non-feudal, non-exploitative, independent national identity. It is concerned with matter rather than with form, and it reports how things should be and '*libweled*' – what the heart bore. It is an aesthetic of content and common purpose, not of universal themes, durability and unique voices. Emergent nations have little use for applying the quality criteria of mainstream contemporary Western literary aesthetics, and it sometimes seems that a relationship of mutual disdain pertains.

¹¹⁷ English language performances of Henrik Ibsen's *The Doll's House* in Asmara in 2009 could have made such a study feasible.

The purpose of Eritrean national aesthetics, as promoted by the EPLF and later the PFDJ, was and is to persuade or remind the audience of the righteousness of the Armed Struggle and of the sacrifices required and made to create an independent nation. It finds expression in performed theatre and written text, as well as in sculpture, paintings and murals. This nation-building project is now totally controlled by the state, which commissions or determines everything that is published in Eritrea, in books, online and in newspapers. A negotiation of this aesthetic has seen the publishing of English translations of Eritrean poetry, their purpose being to show the skill of the poems and the beauty of the Eritrean languages, rather than to contribute to the nation-building project. Here, as in the non-translated written literature, Tigrinya texts dominate. The most important literature, however, is not written, but oral – the sung poetry, the proverbs and the tales that are part of the living tradition of performed literature in Eritrea. Because oral literature is performed, and is in languages I do not understand, it has been only, and very partially, available to me through secondary sources. I hope, however, that I have shown that despite the circumscribed conditions for writing and publishing that persist in Eritrea, the country has a fascinating and rich literature. Students on some courses at EIT are encouraged to do fieldwork, and studies of the production and reception of oral literature would be a worthwhile endeavour that many of them would be well placed to do.

Turning to the students in Norway and Eritrea, I sought to shed light on their earlier **experience of literature**. Reading literature is a separately learned, conventional activity (Culler, 1997), and it quickly became apparent that I was dealing with two distinct sets of conventional activities. The students in Norway reported finding fiction useful because it expanded their horizons and gave them an opportunity to learn about different cultures and other new insights. For some it was a source of identification, for others an aesthetic experience or a chance to experience something beyond one's everyday concerns. The students in Eritrea also mentioned affective involvement, entertainment and new experiences as the uses to which they put reading fiction, but first and foremost they read to learn or be reminded of practical and moral wisdom for use in their own lives. They expected literature to contribute to a moral society and their own moral integrity, whereas this was not mentioned by any of the students in Norway. The two groups also differed in how they defined literature, the students in Norway being apparently more familiar with the concept of genre, the students in Eritrea being more inclined to describe literature with a simile or striking image. The students in Norway had a broad literary experience, a finding quite in line with their being voluntary students of English and the more general national context of literacy and universal education in Norway. The students in

Eritrea had a particularly strong relationship to poetry, and for some of them this was what they had understood literature to be, before they started studying English at EIT. The students were most similar when it came to what sort of language- and literature-related activities they found useful and enjoyable.

In this study I have articulated an **approach to the three literary texts** that the students responded to. I see these texts as produced, proliferated and performed in particular sociocultural contexts, where they are intended to serve political and educational functions. I identify the various authorial readers as an audience to be awakened and educated, in three different ways. The fable “The Monkey and the Crocodile” inscribes a reader who is willing to be entertained and able to learn from the story. “Anisino” is, according to the author, deliberately written so that young Eritreans will identify with the story’s central experience of friendship despite gender and religious difference. It is therefore a text in which the authorial and the actual readers clearly overlap, and it is democratic and liberational in its aspirations. *The Other War* had as its authorial audience the largely illiterate people of pre-independence Eritrea. In English translation it has become a new text that has lost much of its liberational force, since its audience in Norway and Eritrea do not share the social conventions of the authorial audience. The students in Eritrea already know how ‘the other war’ ended, and for them the text has become instead a canonized object of study. For the students in Norway it builds on a distant, historic event, one of innumerable wars that happened before many of them were born.

What then *did* the students find in the three texts? When it comes to “**The Monkey and the Crocodile**”, students in both groups identified a message about friendship, whilst the students in Eritrea were more likely to identify and comment on how one should turn a threatening situation to one’s own advantage. The students in Eritrea expressed certainty in identifying the message that the fable held. Some knew a version of the story already, and all were familiar with the genre. They valued the fable for what they could learn from it, and their facility in identifying this lesson offers an alternative to the idea that a well-educated reader is one who can see many interpretive possibilities in a literary text. One could instead argue that well-educated readers can see one interpretive possibility clearly and can articulate its relevance to their own life and to communal values and wisdom, something the students in Eritrea demonstrated to a greater extent than did the students in Norway. Since the fable has no author, the students in Eritrea could position themselves as its owners, in that it can be rightfully owned by anyone who understands its message. The students in Norway positioned themselves as

visitors, expressing interest and uncertainty. As a group, though not as individuals, they suggested a greater range of possible messages.

The short contemporary text “**Anisino**” appealed to both groups of readers. The students in Eritrea knew the author and the setting, and recognised the emotional issues raised. The students in Norway could relate the story both to a socio-political vision of an egalitarian society where religion does not determine whom you can love, but also more personally to themes of childhood innocence and the experience of loss. The title was significant in directing the students in Eritrea towards the theme of affectionate friendship, whilst the students in Norway were more likely to identify themes at or after the *peripeteia* of the story, suggesting that they were perhaps more familiar with Aristotelian expectations of narrative structure than were the students in Eritrea. Another way of describing the same phenomenon is to say that the students in Norway were more likely to focus on what was problematic, while the students in Eritrea were more likely to focus on the happy childhood.

A reading of “Anisino” as a critique of the underrepresentation of religious and ethnic difference in the Eritrean public discourse was simply not available to the students in Norway, where debate about religious and ethnic difference is an everyday component of the mediated public domain. In their theme statements the students in Eritrea emphasised the period when the children were together and happy despite the differences between them, which may be a way of negotiating the text and acknowledging that religious difference does have significance for people’s lives and the choices available to them. Although it would have been unwise for them to express religious intolerance or to claim that ethnic difference was important in Eritrea, their enthusiasm for the text might indicate that it was meaningful to them in a way that more prescriptive national literature was not. Another reason why “Anisino” engaged both groups of readers may have to do with it offering them young, disempowered characters with whom both groups could identify.

The Other War was the literary text to which the two groups of students responded most consistently and most differently. It was very familiar to the students in Eritrea, who knew performances of it in Tigrinya and had studied it at length in English the year before. They recognised it as a prestigious work of nationalist literature, and acted as hosts, expressing pride and crediting ownership to the author. On the assumption that they knew more than the reader, some students fulfilled the role of host by providing orientation about the background to the play. None of the Norwegian students provided such orientation

Despite the playwright having given the characters complex motivations, the students in Eritrea produced a straightforward dominant decoding, condemning the characters that were

allocated the roles of villain and traitor, and admiring the female protagonist who represented loyalty to the EPLF and a free Eritrea. They recognised and reproduced a national narrative template that was not available to the students in Norway, who, for their part, could respond to the action and the characters, despite an unfamiliar setting. They did not take sides with particular characters, but tried to explain the characters' behaviour in terms of their present and past social situation, and the psychological needs these had engendered. This gave the play an affective actuality for them that it perhaps did not have for the students in Eritrea, for whom the sufferings and sacrifices of the Armed Struggle have doctrinaire status that precludes at least the *writing* of other interpretations.

I had expected that nationalist literature that comes out of context to a non-authorial audience would be decoded with some caution, if not condescension, presumably because the reader thereby can resist the manipulated political response that it might otherwise elicit. This expectation was not met, for the Norwegian students engaged with the characters and the action of *The Other War*. Richards too found to his surprise that his informants' appreciation of a poem was little influenced by what he called their "doctrinal adhesions". This meant that they were "very little disturbed by even a direct opposition between their own beliefs and the beliefs of the poet" (Richards, 1929:271). My findings are similar in that the students did not seem to be concerned by what I see as the partisanship with which the characters and action are represented. McCormick contends that "when we read texts from a different ideological formation, whether distant in time or place, it may be easier to read 'symptomatically', that is, to look for the symptoms or signs of the power and contradictions involved in that culture's ideology" (McCormick 1994:75-76). Whether or not it is easier to read such texts symptomatically, the students in this study did not, until they were specifically invited to do so.

It is possible to make some **more general comments about how the two nationally defined interpretive communities are similar, and how they differ**. Their response to the three texts suggests that the two communities make use of different interpretive strategies. The Norwegian students are able to respond affectively to texts with an unfamiliar setting, and they do so by using a strategy with which they have considerable facility, namely by describing the text in terms of the characters' emotions. It is a strategy independent of time and place, and one which does not necessitate an understanding of the story's social and political contexts. The students in Norway tended not to engage with the social and political contexts of the literary texts. Thus, whilst they recognise the unfairness of how the adults treat the young people in "Anisino", they do not refer to the political issues that underpin and structure *The Other War*. There may well

be a significant gender difference here, but the present material does not allow for such generalisations.

The Eritrean students, by contrast, have several distinct interpretive strategies. The most striking is the implementation of a national narrative template, in which long-suffering and resilient Eritrea is put upon, time and again. It was used directly in *The Other War*, and by adaptation in the fable, where one character is understood as a representative of an exploitative power, outwitted by the resourcefulness of the other. This template, however, must compete with an interpretive strategy developed through encounters with oral literature, where the reader reads or hears a story to identify its moral wisdom and collective values. Yet a third strategy came into play when the students met a text – “Anisino” – whose time and setting was very similar to their lived lives. Although there was some use of the first two interpretive strategies here too, the Eritrean students showed an affective involvement with the characters and with the innocence of childhood in much the same way as did the students in Norway.

When it comes to discursal positions, the more general finding was that the students in Eritrea are fairly consistent in being both collective and assertive in their response, assuming that their reader is in agreement with them. The students in Norway are more likely to point out the individuality of their own response, and the possibility of there being other ways of understanding the same text.

How ‘ordinary’ readers make sense of literature also tells us about how they understand the expectations and conventions of their ‘ordinary’ lives. Yet the academic socialisation of tertiary level students of literature is often concerned with spotting what a student once bemoaned as ‘hidden clues’, be they genre conventions, metaphors, symbols, themes or turning-points. Alternatively, or additionally, students are taught to place a literary text in the bigger biographical and literary landscape, within a teleological narrative of literary history. Both these approaches, but especially the former, perpetuate academic literary socialisation as a distinct and often exclusionary activity, and contribute to maintaining a distance from and a disdain for ‘ordinary’ reading. McCormick describes classroom situations where “once something is called ‘literature’, it appears to take on a status that automatically makes it inaccessible to students, one that forces them to become dependent on a teacher as a conduit for discovering its ‘true meaning’” (1994:197). The study of literature in academic institutions would benefit, I believe, by being more aware of its educational potential, as a place where the reader/audience can observe, experience, explore and learn not only, and not even primarily, about literary devices

and the narrative of literary history, but about how other people live their lives, and how we want to live our own.

As participants in their respective cultures and contexts, each student in this study developed an individual response to each text. What they brought to the literary texts was their ordinary lives embedded in their many contexts, their understanding and practice of the academic literacy of a particular institutional context, and their individuality. In putting these to use, the students in Eritrea and Norway have demonstrated how they make sense of literary texts and the world beyond the texts, whether familiar or not. As a member of a *group* in a particular nation they enacted a common academic literacy, and demonstrated the repertoire of interpretive strategies they share, and which are an expression of the political, social, educational and institutional contexts to which they belong.

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APPENDICES

To students of Contemporary African Literature, Spring 200X

Information on the research project: Student reception of Eritrean literature in Eritrea and Norway: a comparative study

I am doing research about how Eritrean and Norwegian students understand literature, and I am hoping that you are interested in being part of this project. The project is supervised by Dr. Rita Hvistendal from the Institute for Teacher Education and School Development at the University of Oslo. It started in August 2006, and will be completed in June 2010, but your participation is requested for the spring term of 200X only. If you would like to read more about the research, a full description of the project is now in the archive in your classroom in Class Fronter.

I would be very grateful to every one of you who decides to participate, as I am actually dependent on your input in order to be able to say something about the way Norwegian students understand Eritrean literature. And by 'Norwegian students' I mean students studying in Norway, regardless of nationality and age.

What will the research require of you?

You will be asked to read three, maybe four, texts from Eritrea. Three of these texts are very short, and the other text is a short play. You will be asked to write an individual written response to each of these texts, and you can write as much or as little as you like. We will look at most of the Eritrean texts in class, as part of the syllabus in "Contemporary African Literature", but you may be asked to write a response to them in your own time. They may also be included in the exam assignments.

Apart from the written responses, I ask all participants in the research to complete a questionnaire about their experience with and opinions about literature.

Finally I ask for four or five volunteers to participate in two group discussion about the texts. The two group discussions will be organised after classes on Wednesdays, and I foresee that they will take about half an hour each.

Do you have a choice?

Yes. It is entirely up to you whether the texts you write in class or out of class will be part of this research. I undertake to give feedback on the language and structure of all the texts you write, regardless of whether you

allow me to use your texts or not. This is my way of thanking you for any inconvenience that the research might cause you. Please note that you can withdraw from this research project at any point, and that you are not required to give a reason for so doing.

What will happen to the texts you write?

All texts and transcriptions will be kept in my office, and on my computer, protected by a password. Only I will know who has written which text. On completion of the research, and no later than 31.12.2010, the list of names and numbers that identifies you will be destroyed.

The written texts and questionnaires will be written out as digital text, and the spelling standardised.

The group discussions will be recorded and then transferred to my computer, and protected with a password. I will delete the original sound files as soon as they have been transferred to my computer. They will then be transcribed. If you wish, you may see and comment on the transcriptions, and withdraw any comments that you do not wish to be included in the data analysis. The sound files will be deleted completely when the research is completed, and no later than 31.12.2010.

In my thesis I will comment on your texts, and compare them to the responses of the Eritrean students. Furthermore, some of the texts will be presented to two focus groups, here in Norway and in Eritrea. Each of the two focus groups is made up of three newly-trained teachers, and I am interested in their comments on your texts. They will, of course, not know who has written the texts.

This research is part of the international research tradition that guarantees confidentiality. This means that information identifying you will not be disclosed under any circumstances. I will only use numbers, not your names, when I refer to what you have written. The research project has been reported to *Norges Samfunnsvitenskapelig Datatjeneste AS*, an organisation that protects the rights of research participants.

In order for you to participate in this research, I need your individual, written consent, so I ask you to fill in the slip below.

Thank you so much for your help.

Juliet Munden
Tlf: 62517657 (w)
62596521 (priv)
40460280 (mob.)

Juliet.Munden@hihm.no

Samtykke

Jeg har mottatt skriftlig og muntlig informasjon og er villig til å delta i studien ”Student reception of Eritrean literature in Eritrea and Norway: a comparative study”. Min tillatelse forutsetter at materialet aidentifiseres ved slutten av prosjektperioden, og senest 31.12.2010, og behandles med respekt.

Underskrift:

Sted:

Dato:

Jeg er også villig til å delta i to gruppediskusjoner om eritreiske litterære tekster. Mitt samtykke forutsetter at materialet aidentifiseres ved slutten av prosjektperioden og senest 31.12.2010. Det skal behandles med respekt, og mitt samtykke forutsetter at jeg kan be om å få lese en transkripsjon av lydopptakene, og kommentere eller evt. trekke egne utsagn.

Underskrift:

Reading literature



Research questionnaire (part 1), Hedmark University College, Norway

In this questionnaire I am interested in finding out about your reading experience, and your opinions about literature. A similar questionnaire to this one has already been answered by students in Eritrea.

Please note that this is not a test, so there are no right or wrong answers. If there are some questions that you do not want to answer, for whatever reason, just leave them out.

Each questionnaire has a number in the top right corner. You will have the same number throughout this research. This is so that I can match the information you give me here with other texts you write. I will only use the numbers, not your names, when I refer to what you have written.

Thank you very much for your help.

Juliet Munden
December 200X

1. Your background

a) Which secondary (*videregående*) school did you attend? _____

b) How much English teaching did you have after the obligatory 5 hour course in the first year of *videregående*? Or if you didn't study in Norway, how much English teaching did you have altogether in your last three years of secondary education?

c) When did you take the foundation course (*årsenheten / grunnfag*) in English? _____

d) If you have spent at least six months in a country where you spoke English on a daily basis, could you say something about how long you were there, and what you did?

Appendix 2: Questionnaire, part 1 and 2 (Norway)

- e) How often do you communicate in English with other students outside the classroom?
(Please do not include those times when the purpose of the communication is to practice English or prepare for class together.)

nearly always usually sometimes occasionally very seldom

- f) Which languages do you speak fluently, apart from English?

- g) How old are you? 21 or less 22-24 25-27 28 or more

2. *Your formal education in literature*

2.2

Please think back to the foundation course in English (årsenheten) and give some examples of what was on the syllabus

A: if you cannot remember the exact title, just write it as well as you can.

Ca, Cb and Cc: *how* you studied the text. Put just one cross for each title.

<i>A Title</i>	<i>Ca Did you read the text yourself and study it in class?</i>	<i>Cb Did you read the text on your own, but not study it in class?</i>	<i>Cc Did you learn about the text in class, but not read it yourself?</i>

- 2.3 Which of the three ways of studying literature do you prefer? Ca Cb Cc

- 2.4 Please name one of these titles that you have particularly enjoyed: _____

4.2 Please **explain why you think fiction is useful or not useful.**

5. *Combining the study of literature and research*

This section is about the module in Contemporary African Literature that you have taken. Please consider the following statements, and mark the answer that is best for you.

5.1 My understanding of **what Juliet's research is about**, i.e. why she has collected data about me and about my response to Eritrean literature is

very good good satisfactory rather poor poor

5.2 Participating in this module has increased **my general understanding of what research into literature** can involve

a lot quite a bit a little no I don't know

5.3 **My response to the Eritrean texts** was different to my response to the other texts on the course because I knew that my response would be part of Juliet's research data.

yes no I don't know

5.4 I think **I would have learned more** about African Literature in this module if Juliet had not been using the students as research respondents.

agree agree on the whole neither agree disagree on the whole disagree
nor disagree

5.5 Finally, please add any comments you may have to these questions, or to other research-related aspects of the course.

THANK YOU AGAIN FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION IN THIS RESEARCH

Juliet Munden,
15th April, 200X

Reading literature



Research questionnaire, Hedmark University College, Norway

I would like to ask you to help me by answering some questions. I am interested in finding out how Eritrean and Norwegian students understand Eritrean literature. This questionnaire is the first stage in my research.

Please note that this is not a test, so there are no right or wrong answers. I am interested in your opinion, and your experience. If there are some questions that you do not want to answer, for whatever reason, you are free to leave them out.

Each questionnaire has a number in the top right corner. You will have the same number throughout this research. This is so that I can match the information you give me here with other texts you write about literature later on. However, this research is part of the international research tradition that guarantees confidentiality. This means that information identifying you will not be disclosed under any circumstances. I will only use the numbers, not your names, when I refer to what you have written.

Thank you very much for your help.

Juliet Munden
October 200X

1. Your educational background

Firstly I would like to ask you a few questions about your educational background.

- a) Which secondary school did you attend? _____
- b) In which zoba is this school? _____
- c) When did you start Grade 1? _____
- d) When did you complete Grade 11? _____
- e) When did you start the freshman year at EITTE? _____

2. Literature at EITTE

2.1. Have you studied literature as part of your programme at EITTE? Yes No

If you answered **no**, please **go to page 3**. If you answered **yes**, please **continue here**.

2.2

If you answered yes, please give some examples of what you have studied.

In column A you write the title. If you cannot remember it exactly, just write it as well as you can.

In column B you write what sort of literature it is - play, poem, novel, short story etc.

In column Ca, Cb and Cc I am interested in *how* you studied the text. Put a cross for just *one* of the three alternatives.

<i>A Title</i>	<i>B What sort of literature is it?</i>	<i>Ca Did you read the text and study it in class?</i>	<i>Cb Did you read the text on your own, but not study it in class?</i>	<i>Cc Did you learn about the text in class, but not read it?</i>

2.3 Which of the three ways of studying literature do you prefer? Ca Cb Cc

2.4 Please name one title that you have particularly enjoyed: _____

Can you say something about why you enjoyed it?

2.5 Please name one title that you have *not* enjoyed: _____

Can you say something about why did you not enjoy it?

4.2 Finally I would ask you to **explain why you think fiction is useful or not useful.**

5. General information

I will finish with a few questions about you and your background.

a) May I ask how old you are? 21 or less 22-24 25-27 28 or more

b) When you talk to your fellow students outside of class, how often do you speak English with them? Please put one cross only.

nearly always usually sometimes occasionally very seldom

c) Which languages do you speak fluently, apart from English?

Thank you again for taking the time and trouble to answer this questionnaire. Your answers will be part of the data for my Ph. D research at Hedmark University College in Norway, where I am a lecturer in English literature and teaching methods.

The Monkey and the Crocodile

One day a bored crocodile was lying in the calm waters of a river.

"It's such a beautiful day, I think I'll go up onto the riverbank," he said to himself. So he crept out of the water and lay down in the shade of a palm tree.

Up in the palm tree sat a sweet little monkey eating dates. He wasn't at all happy that the ugly crocodile had chosen to settle down under his tree. And the crocodile was dangerous too! The monkey sat quiet as a mouse so that he wouldn't be seen. But as luck would have it, a date slipped from his hand and fell onto the crocodile's back. The crocodile looked inquisitively up at the monkey. Dates? They weren't food for a crocodile!

"Hi, you up there! Thanks for dropping a date down for me. I don't suppose you could give me a couple more", he asked. Sure enough, the monkey threw down a few more.

"From now on, we'll always be friends", said the crocodile. "But listen here, dear friend, since you're so fond of dates you really ought to go over to the other side of the river. The date palms there are just fantastic."

The monkey felt a bit ashamed - he couldn't swim! And in an embarrassed voice he told the crocodile so.

The crocodile winked with his ugly eye and said: "No problem! Just sit on my back and I'll get you safely across the river in no time at all."

So the monkey jumped down and sat on the crocodile's back, and into the river they went. Halfway across the crocodile stopped. "My dear monkey friend," he said, "You've come to the end of your journey."

The monkey was afraid and wanted to go ashore. The problem was he couldn't swim!

"And now", said the crocodile, "you must die, For the witch doctor has told my wife that she has to eat the heart of a monkey in order that she can get well again. So now I'm going to take your heart".

"But my dear friend," cried the monkey. "Don't you know that we monkeys always leave our heart up in the trees when we come down to the ground? If your sick wife is to have my heart, we'll have to go to the date palm back there."

The crocodile was glad that the monkey wasn't afraid. Far from it, he was happy to give his heart without making a fuss. He swam happily back to the bank of the river with the monkey on his back. The monkey leapt up the date palm, light as a feather.

Safe at last, he thought to himself. Then, taking the largest date he could find he threw it down to the crocodile and said:

"My false friend, I give you this - my heart. And now, leave this place, and never ever come back again."

Appendix 4: "The Monkey and the Crocodile"

The Monkey and the Crocodile

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"My false friend, I give you this - my heart. And now, leave this place, and never ever come back again."

Retold by Leif Mevik, translated by Jan Watering



“Anisino”

2 I was thirteen or so when I met him. His name was Anis Mohammed. He lived about ten minutes away from my house. His parents were in Yemen, and he lived with his grandparents. Often he would wait for me outside his house in *Mercato*, and we would walk together to school. We had to walk for thirty minutes.

6 Early in the morning, listening to distant crows waking the city and to the prayers of muezzins and priests, we would walk through the quiet and clean streets of Asmara. We would pass the Commercial Bank, built with bulletproof glass and surrounded by cans and ropes that deformed its beauty and made ugly sounds whenever anybody came close. The Ethiopian soldiers who guarded it would smile at us sometimes, but we would pretend not to see them. Our fun would begin at the market place, *Mercato*. Then we would start window shopping. When we tired of this, we would begin shouting and laughing and racing as if we owned the whole city.

14 When we reached the cathedral, we would look at each other as if we could read each other’s mind. We would run up the stairs and laugh until we stopped at the big, cool doors where the picture of St Mary and Jesus Christ is posted. All of a sudden, we would compose ourselves and push the big doors open and go inside. It did not matter to us that we did not belong to that church. I went to the Protestant church, and he was a Muslim. We had visited the cathedral several times, so we knew what to do once we were inside. We would find old women, mostly Italians, kneeling with their rosary in their hands and chanting their prayers—*Ave Maria*.... We would stand on tiptoes and dip our fingers in the holy water and make a sign of the cross before we sat and remained composed for several minutes. We loved the cool, quiet, peaceful atmosphere. As children we understood God or Allah better than anybody else. We knew that He would not discriminate against us. We were His children. A Christian, a Muslim, a girl, and a boy...we all are equal before His eyes and were welcome in His house.

27 In those times, we innocently believed that a boy and a girl could be friends, but the adults thought differently. The closer we became, the more people began to talk about us. Soon we were seen as a very big issue, the kind that required a family forum. An immediate decision closed the case. He was to leave for Yemen and not to see me again. We were shocked. All our young minds could ask was, “But why?” He never even came to say goodbye.

33 Now, ten years later, I think of him and wish to see him and talk about those days we enjoyed as children. He was funny and sweet. He was a brother to me.

35 I am the kind of person who is usually unemotional. Tears do not come easily to my eyes, and my heart does not leap with happiness when something good happens to me. I have always lingered at this point. The only reason I can think of is maybe I am afraid of getting hurt and finding no one beside me for comfort. I am afraid of losing the good, and so I would rather not have it than have it and then lose it again. Anis was one of the good things that had happened to me. I lost him, and I lost several friends after him too.

41 Anisino, I wish you the best wherever you are and thank you for all those good times. You were my best friend.

NB. Line numbers added after the students had read the text.

“Anisino” by Rahel Asghedom

Your number:

Please **write three sentences** saying what, in your opinion, this story is about.

This story is about _____

This story is about _____

This story is about _____

If there is anything else you would like to add, please do:

Norwegian student texts: “The Monkey and the Crocodile”

N1

The message of “The Monkey and the Crocodile”

In my opinion:

When you try to put a trick on someone, you must see the possibility that they will trick you back.

N2

The monkey and the crocodile

I’ve heard this story many times during my childhood and the versions differ according to who the story teller is, while the underlying message stays the same. I always thought this was a story from India written in Sanskrit (200BC), but I suppose good stories travel.

The monkey and the crocodile has a similar structure to the animal fables that I’ve heard. In our fables the characters are often “black and white” where one of the animals is clearly dumber than the other. In *The monkey and the crocodile* neither of the animals are foolish, although the monkey does outsmart the crocodile in the end. I also see some similarities to stories/tales from Sápmi where the story shows how and why the Shaman/Noaidi is smarter than ordinary people. They are stories that also have a spiritual aspect. I won’t compare them at that level because I’ve always thought that the monkey was a rebirth of Buda, or so I was told. Although Buda is not mentioned in the story at all, I must have picked it up while living in Bradford.

The monkey and the crocodile, as like Aesop’s fables, gently teach us a lesson. The first thing I thought of was that; wit is superior to brute force, and that it warns us to be careful who we pick as friends. I also see that both animals are egoistic in their quest to fill their own interests. The monkey is naïve when he believes the crocodile, that the fruit is better on the other side of the river. In the same way the crocodile is naïve when he believes that monkeys leave their hearts in the tree when they come to the ground.

Both animals are trying to exploit each other, and although the crocodile says that they are friends, they both know that they aren’t. The monkey doesn’t trust the crocodile, but will take a chance to be able to eat more figs. The crocodile is also trying to be smart, but his weakness is that he starts trusting the monkey.

At first I thought that the crocodile was bad, but at the same time he was bad for a reason. He is interested in the monkey’s heart so that his sick wife can get better. The monkey only thinking about his tummy when he makes his decisions.

I think that this story can be understood differently according to who is telling the story. I’ve heard it different places and every time the message changes a bit. It might be because I change my opinion all the time, but I also like to believe stories like this have many different messages. The different messages can be strengthened or weakened according to what the story teller want’s us to believe.

N3**“The Monkey and the crocodile”**

When I read “The monkey and the crocodile”, I thought it was a very cute story. But when it came to find the moral of the story, I was lost. After some thought, I came up with two very vague suggestions;

1. Stick to what you know
2. Quick thinking in the face of danger can save your life. It was not until I was told what it meant (Monkey = Eritrea, crocodile = Ethiopia) that I started to appreciate the story.

N4

The monkey and the crocodile

At first, the monkey and the crocodile might seem like just an entertaining story with talking animals. In my opinion, it is more than that. I believe that this story has got a message, namely that you should not trust anybody, even though they appear to be your friend. I also feel that this story says that it is OK to give someone what they deserve, as the monkey does when the crocodile is trying to trick him. Through this short story we get a moral lecture, something I believe to be typical for many African stories.

N5

After reading *The Monkey and the Crocodile* one is left wondering what the true message and purpose of the transcribed orature is. What is actually that the story, since the author is unknown, wishes to achieve? Is it something exclusive to the people of Africa who have a tradition of hearing this kind of medium or is the content of a more universal kind? As it is said that the beauty is in the eye of the beholder, one could probably say that the true meaning of every story is in the heart and soul of the receiver. Such is the case, in my opinion, of *The Monkey and the Crocodile*. The story can be interpreted on several levels: as being a simple story told in order to entertain, a story told in order to shed light on an important issue of life and educate the receiver or as a story with political undertones told to reinforce the sense of, a hard fought for, independence.

If one bears in mind the place of origin of the story, Africa, and it’s tradition of oral performance one could argue that the story is one of entertainment. The fact that animals are the main characters makes the story easily imagined on a stage. The possibility of visual and audio “effects” accompanying the performance as well as the simple story line make up for a story that could readily capture and involve the audience.

The fact that animals are being given the main characters and are heaving human features makes the reader of the story draw resemblance to a fable. This makes one wonder if the true meaning of the story, as with a fable, is to educate. There are several possible “lessons to be learned” – true friendships are not made overnight, there lies a lot in each and everybody regardless of their apparent flaws and physical abilities, good gestures often come with an agenda.

Furthermore the story has a strong political message; one that could be understood as a description of a conflict particular to the African continent or that could easily apply to any conflict where a weaker party has experienced being violated by a superior power. If we for a moment consider the African continent only, the story could apply with identical strength as a

comment on the period of imperialism and the process of gaining independence as well as a comment on a conflict between two rivalling neighbouring countries. In each case it searches to give a feeling of pride and honours the perseverance and ability of the weaker party.

In conclusion *The Monkey and the Crocodile* is a story that “works” on many levels. Each and every reader will undoubtedly to a large extent understand the story in accordance with his/hers own life experience, but isn’t that the very fact that a good story aspires to achieve? To reach out to as many people as possible in a simple, easily understandable language, that we should not be deceived by because is it not the case that the greatest wisdoms often are best told in the simplest terms?

N6

The Monkey and the crocodile

I think that one of the messages in this story is to not trust someone you don’t know that well, because they might turn out to be false friends. Also, that things aren’t always as good as they appear: the grass isn’t greener on the other side. The story also hails the importance of playing it cool and being a quick thinker – it might just save your life.

One thing that struck me as thought-provoking was the crocodile’s reason for acting the way he did. In similar stories, the violator’s reason for being cruel is usually that “it is in my nature”. But this crocodile wants to kill the monkey to save his wife’s life. Does that make the crocodile more sympathetic than if he wanted to kill the monkey solely for feeding purposes? Also, with the comparisons of the monkey as Eritrea and the crocodile as Ethiopia in mind, to me this raised the question: Did/do Ethiopians think that an Ethiopian life is more worth than an Eritrean? (Since the monkey would die to make the crocodile’s wife live.)

(This is perhaps pretty far-fetched, but it crossed my mind when I read the story, so I thought I should include it.)

N7

The message:

There could be more than one message, it is up to us to interpret the story.

I think the story is trying to tell us that we need to know about each other’s cultures(s) in order to interact well together and in order to understand each other.

“No person knows his culture, who knows only his culture.”

N8

Comments on “The Monkey and the Crocodile”

I can see that there are many possible interpretations to this story. However, I would like to put into words my immediate reaction to the text. It simply didn’t make sense to me. I found it impossible to get passed the fact that the monkey was willing to sit on the back of the crocodile when it knew that it was dangerous. Being a very cautious person myself, no amount of “dates” would make me risk “sitting on the crocodile’s back”. Personally I’d just wait for the crocodile to leave so that I could get back to my own dates. Perhaps it’s my Norwegian scepticism.

I recall a fable about how the elephant got its long trunk. There was an extremely inquisitive little elephant who stretched the patience of all the animals asking all kinds of

questions. In the end it talked to a crocodile who got so annoyed that it grabbed hold of the elephants nose and didn't let go until it was stretched all the way to the ground. My point in sharing this story is that the only reason why the elephant got so close to the crocodile was that the elephant was young and ignorant.

It is of course likely for many people to be tempted by bigger and better dates. One might also be deceived into disregarding the dangers involved in trying to get a hold of these. When studied I'm sure this story could give some sort of insight. But this was my first and very personal reaction to the piece.

N9

THE MONKEY AND THE CROCODILE

The message of ‘The Monkey and the Crocodile’ could be that trust is fragile, it can easily be broken. I believe most people think of crocodiles as these fierce predators, and monkeys as these funny creatures. But these perceptions do not necessarily reflect the entire behaviour of these animals themselves.

This story is a moral folk tale, and the moral of this story could, aside from the message, be that the one who tries to outsmart the other, might be the one who'll eventually be outsmarted.

N10

“The monkey and the crocodile”

After merely having googled the words “monkey”, “and” and “crocodile”, I found a somewhat similar story to the one we read in class. It seems that the story is adapted from the sacred books of the Buddhists and that they are known as “birth stories” or the Jatakas. What I found particularly interesting was the second part of the story, left out from our version. Here the monkey again meets the crocodile, still being more quick-minded tricks him a second time where the crocodile now considers himself defeated, “Monkey, you have great cunning. You know no fear. I'll let you alone after this.” The monkey however, having learnt his lesson still tells the crocodile that he will nevertheless look out for him....

The personal attributes given to the animals are also interesting, the crocodile is obeyant in wanting to do what his mother tells him. It is not his personal desire to acquire the heart. He is considered dumb, but he does think of a few ways to try to trick the monkey. He is however outsmarted in the end. He does also admit his defeat in the end which shows that he is somewhat intrapersonally reflected. The monkey shows his intelligence through his knowledge. He knows that when crocodiles open their mouths, they close their eyes. A weakness in the opponent. He uses a lie to deceive the crocodile when he himself is in grave danger of drowning. He uses deception twice, the second time by making the crocodile answer when he is portraying the rock. Here the monkey also relies on his perception, in order to notice the sudden difference in the shape of the rock. Last but not least he shows one of the seven deadly sins when failing to resist the temptation of the ripe fruit/dates. His greed.

Thus both animals have qualities which are good and bad, again reflecting the concept of harmony where good evens out the evil. The moral might be “he who knows the ways and the traits of nature, might more easily use this as an advantage” or “know the ways of thy enemy”...

Eritrean student texts: “The Monkey and the Crocodile”

E1

“The Monkey and the crocodile” is an interesting story which has a teaching lesson to any reader who wants to be careful and cunning in any time in trouble circumstances. One should think and invent solution in times of danger. The crocodile is a suggestive to a lazy fellow who expects to live without his effort. Besides the crocodile can be taken as a foolish, easily deceived by others.

The monkey is a suggestive of a cunning, wise and brave person who never surrenders in times of trouble but fights to spare his life to the end. The monkey is also creative, broadminded to think how to get rid of the crocodile and finally wins his objective.

Therefore, this story has a useful message to human beings that every one should be ready and be creative in times of trouble; being cunning and wise to save his life one should think twice before making decision.

Thank you very much!

E2

This story is a wonderful and fantastic story. If we see it seems somehow a children’s story and joking story. But It is not like that, If we observe and feel it in detail it has an importance that gives message and enlightens the ability to understand about who are you, how would able to have a relation or an else contact.

The beginning, the crocodile and the monkey don’t know well each other; but when the crocodile was under the palm tree, a date fall from the monkey’s mouth which was not the crocodiles food, not because of the sympathy. the same was the crocodile even though they seem helping each other, Both are very cunning, but much more the monkey is cunning As they are friends they aren’t frankly and especially the monkey is wise but not the crocodile.

So generally from this what we can understand is the one who think evil or cunning is always at lost. Friends must be wise, frank, sympathy[etic] and always must share their problem and happiness frankly, because a friend in deed is a friend in need.

E3

In my opinion the message is that about the role our facial expression plays during a dangerous situation. What we display outwardly can have the difference of life and death. To make it clear, had the monkey been afraid and disturbed when he heard what the crocodile had said, his life would not have saved. This tells us that under any circumstances, we should not get disturbed, instead we should try our best to make good out of bad. When I read this story a tigrina proverb strike my mind. It goes like this ‘brave and smoke never lose exit.’ It is because of the monkeys bravery and wiseness his life is saved. And smoke, as the proverb says, even if a room is closed, will not fail to leave the room. To conclude the message is that trying to overcome a problem is better than accepting it and become a victim of it.

E4

The message of the story ‘The Monkey and the Crocodile’ is that when you are in a problem or trap you should try to outsmart your enemy rather than panicking and showing your enemy how frightened you are. I hope the next story shows you this.

DAVID AND THE DRIVER

It was a hot day, and David after finishing his class for the day was eager to go home and drink his favorite lemonade sitting up at his tree house. While thinking about what he’ll do after reaching home a black car pulled up beside him, the driver who was a very tall huge man with black sunglasses and a black sweater smiled at him. The stranger looks frightening and dangerous but when he talked to David he was acting like a very sweet honest man.

‘Hi kid do you want a ride home?’ asked the driver smiling Remembering what his mother told him, never to go with strangers David declines politely.

‘No sir thank you’

‘But its awfully hot and you must be tired of walking’ said the smiling driver

‘I’m okay sir and I love walking but thanks for asking’

The driver trying to control his mounting anger and his temptation just to grab the boy and put David in the car, tried one more time which was useless. Getting out of the car and after looking around pulled out a gun from his pocket he hissed at David

‘If you don’t want to die you’ll get in the car NOW!’

David who was 14 years old and the son of one of the richest man in the city has been told that things like this could happen to him. So rather than showing him how frightened he was calmly said

‘If I were you sir I would put that gun down because there is a police officer coming behind you’

The driver sweating, put his gun back in his pocket and after taking a deep breath and trying to look normal turned around to see to old ladies coming towards him. Knowing the kid was playing games with him turned around to shout at David who was nowhere in sight.

* Mrs Juliet Munden I really like the two classes which you came to us and shared your experience and your knowledge. I’m really grateful for what you did and I hope your students like what we wrote to them. Thank you again and have a nice journey back to your place. We’re looking forward to seeing you again.

E5

The message of the story “The monkey and the crocodile” is about friendship “friend in need is friend in deed.” It tells us to be faithful and honest for our friends. And also about social life and its challenges and at the same time our response to that. It really advises us that, we have to be intelligent and patient in solving our problems, during such a challenging situation.

E6

1. What is the message of the tale?

→ The message of the tale is about, two characters, which are one the crocodile and the second is the monkey. As the crocodile invite the monkey to be friends, the monkey honestly obeys the crocodile’s question to be friends. Then the crocodile takes the monkey with him to the sea from the shore on his back. At the middle of the sea the crocodile asks the monkey to kill him and take his heart for medical treatment. But the monkey with out been disturbed by the crocodile’s crime idea, responds that it was easy and simple but he told him he has forgotten in the place, which he were. They return to the shore, then the monkey scaped to his own place and gives good bye to the crocodile.

This tells us if we asked to be a friend, we can obey it faithfully. But if it is turn in to such dangerous thing we have to think over it with out been disturbed. And it is quiet possible ride free of such trouble events.

E7

I suppose the story is trying to tell us that we shouldn't put our trust on anyone or anything that we think we know about, that we should know better that to be that trusting. I believe that being wise always keep you on the safe ground.

Hopefully the story that I'm about to write now will confirm what I've just wrote.

- Long time ago in my neighbourhood there was a family – quite happily content family – a mother and a father with their only child. Their only daughter Solina. Solina being the only child for her parents was a very spoiled little girl. She would ask anything and the next minute she'll get it either way and with that she was a very active student in her class, in fact she was one of the outstanding student in the school she was in. But, unfortunately after her sixteenth birthday her father passed away and left her mother to care for her all alone. So, now Solina was a fatherless child with only a mother to lean on and also she was left vulnerable to any sort of mistreatment that can come on her. After a couple of yrs living by themselves her mother got married to one of her colleagues and he moved in to their house to settle down with them. This sudden change of their lives left Solina feel uneasy, unprotected at all times. But, she decided to keep her feelings to herself for the sake of her mother. The trouble was with her new step father – he always gives her weird looks or glances whenever she comes in or goes out and even goes as far as to manhandling her for not doing the house work which wasn't her part to do. One fine day, this mistreatment kept on going and all hell broke loose on her and she run away from her home and went to her grand parent. Still stunned from the realization of her daughter's disappearance, her mother searched all over for her but in due time after 12 hours, Soliana came back drained of all her strength, looking as white as a ghost. With no explanations to her mother she went in her room, put her head on the pillow and falling to a terrible sleep full of night mares of her step father.

So, the next morning she woke up with a new plan to justify herself In case her mother don't believe her when it is time for her to finally tell the other life she was leading which no one knows including her very own mother. It was one o'clock in the afternoon on Monday, usually her mother doesn't come in for lunch, so the step-father came in looking violent as always, and started shouting and putting his hands on her and calling her names, She didn't do anything but let him do what ever he wanted to do....but, she did do something, that guarantees to put him in jail for the rest of his life and that was she tape recorded every thing he had said and called her and I mean everything, this he didn't know until at last he was taken under arrest for child molesting and sentences for some yrs, I can't say exactly but he was taken away from them for good this time and Soliana just like every other kid re-started leading her normal life.

-Soliana was smart enough to do what she did and I'm proud to re-tell her story, a story of a smart girl who can be a good example to other kids as well.

Well, that's all – it has been a pleasure to write this story. Thank you. – we are very grateful for your being (stay) here with us

please come again.

With all the respect and gratitude

Your student

E8

The message is basically about deception (illusion) someone in time of difficulty in order to save (rescue) one’s life. For example, when we see in the story of the monkey and the crocodile, the crocodile intended to take the monkey’s heart by deceiving it. But the monkey was cleverer than it. It invented one technique of deceiving or cheating and it could save its life from being devastated.

a) My thought about the story is that, this story is very informative and entertaining one. This can be seen from different aspects of perspectives.

One the story is targeted towards cheating someone and make it your victim by creating stealthy pretext. And here we note that people who approach us may look very sincere but we don’t know them what they are thinking about. They may look very kind & considerate outwardly. But inwardly they may be very malicious. First of all we have to take care of such insincere and evil people. But if we face such people we must think and find relevant and proper solution.

To conclude with, the story was very impressive and it is about the encounter of two cunning animals. So, we learn from this typical story, how to save or how to find immediate and proper solution to any problem that faces us.

E9

My thought about the story is, I am impressed by the cleverness of the Monkey. The story is very fantastic and enjoyable story. When I was in fifth grade, I used to read it. This story has an important message specially to young children, Because, they can learn cunningness or cleverness from it. The story stated that, if any body is captured by his foes (enemies), he/she should not disturb by the incident. Instead he/she should create another way to save his/herself. So, it is very important story to every body, particularly to children.

Another Story About ‘A Bully Boy’

Up on a time, there was a ‘bully body’ near my town. This body is very greedy. He asks students to bring foods and money from their home. Specially, he asks to young ladies who comes from rich family.

One afternoon he met a young lady to bring ‘zigni’ from her home. Then, the next day she brought a delicious food (zigni) and gave him. He ate the food very greedily and eagerly because, he was too starved. After two days later, he met the young lady and asked to bring more food and money, but the girl was very angered by his doing. Then, the young lady told her problems to her friend. Both the young friends went to their home and they prepare ‘zigni’ and they also added spoiled food with it. Next morning, they went to their school. The bully body met them. Then, they gave the food to him. They went to their school fastly.

After they went to their school, he started to eat the food. The food had fantastic odour. His mouse is filled with water. Because the spoiled food was cover with fantastic ‘zigni’. Then he started to eat but the food was full of insects. This bully person was very angered by the two girls action. Then, he decided to meet them and to hit. But the two clever friends turned to their home in another way, so he did not meet them. Then from that day on wards, he was frustrated and stopped to disturb the young lady.

N.B.

E10Message of the story “The Monkey and Crocodile”.

Anybody when ever he fell in to any trouble must not be disturbed. Instead; he must find the way how he would escape from it. When we see the story “The Monkey and Crocodile”, had the monkey lost its conscious, it would have been eaten by the crocodile while it was in the sea. Being the monkey so genius, it saved its life.

The crocodile in contrast being selfish, he want to eat poor, miserable monkey eating fruit from the palm tree. Forgetting the right to live on earth according the law of nature distubes the monkey while eating fruits from the tree. The crocodile give a call to come and join with it then the monkey accepts the request.

There fore from this story of the two wild creatures we should understand, the background we have also the limitation we are encountered before we suffer to danger. If we lost this conscious we should not be disturbed, rather we should think the opportunities how to be free from our present circumstances. The story “The Monkey and Crocodile” is an ideal example for this principle.

E11

The main message of the story of “The Monkey and The Crocodile” is that, It gives us a sense of, we can’t do relationship with those whom are not at the same class. or if it can be, It will be the relation of selfish and a false friend, moreover, it tells us that the monkey is more cunny than the crocodile.

For Instance, we can observe that, the crocodile likes the MONKey because of his selfish desire to fulfil. However the monkey did not. But The monkey understood that if his reaction is in anger, she will LOSE her life, so she decides to face (imitate) the question of her false friend with a cunning way. That she became a successful at the end of the story.

In addition, this Story tells us that, even if a hard (heavy) problem How can faced it. Through this story I can understood that, I have to make a close relation with my peers and groups. Moreover If it is apart I have to prepare how can react the problem that comes from my false friend.

E12

The message that we can see or find from this short story seems to be a competition in between two cryptically thinking on planning to win their deeds in achieving their goals. Here we see the one (crocodile) who tries first to pretend the friend or monkey, then to have her heart that is to kill for the sake of curing his wife. Whereas the monkey immediately understood his deeds and then she create a wise pretending against his foolish resolutions, and finally she won in her wisely and quickly crafted thoughts. As a result she rescued herself out of the ruthless gums of the foolish crocodile’s plan.

In sum up If we think of this message, we can understand that no one can know one’s plans in mind Except at the final ends of desires on one hand and after looking such terrible resolutions instead of becoming a victim simply being a hopeful to win trying your best so as to save yourself using a wise and well being thoughts than that of the foes or enemies which looks friends at first but beasts next.

Norwegian student texts: "Anisino"*This story is about _____**If there is anything else you would like to add, please do:*

- 1 - children's open mind, that adults never have
 - how religion can set limits for us as human beings, but also give comfort and happiness used in a "free-minded" way (as children)
 - to lose a friend, but to be able to remember the good times in spite of the grief.

- 2 - children and religion -
 - growing up in a country with multiple cultures
 - childhood friendship between a boy and a girl with different backgrounds

- 3 - how children can see how simple and easy things can be and how adults seem to complicate them
 - how religion can pull people apart instead of gathering them
 - how childhood experiences can shape our entire lives, for better or worse

This story is about how you cannot decide what's wrong and right on someone else's behalf. You only know what is right and wrong for yourself.

- 4 - how experiences in your childhood and youth can catch up with you as an adult
 - the value of a good friendship
 - being afraid to lose something that is good in your life

I thought this was a very sweet story and it made me think of things I did in my childhood with my friends which I still remember.

- 5 - how communities use religion in order to enforce a certain set of rules on people
 - how religious belief is used to divide
 - the fact that young people with more open minds should be given the opportunity to have a voice and thus hopefully bring about the necessary changes in societies throughout the world "bound" in different religious conflicts

- 6 - true friendship
 - adults not letting children be children
 - appreciating good things in the moment, because you never know when they might be gone

A lovely story about the innocence of childhood, and the true sense of religion

Appendix 9: Norwegian student texts on "Anisino"

- | | | |
|----|--|--|
| 7 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the fact that we are all equal, also in the eyes of God - our safety mechanisms that we create in order to protect ourselves - How we react to the things in the world that we do not understand | <p>I really liked this story, it inspired me to write a poem or a story myself =)</p> |
| 8 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the innocence of youth - the injustice of the world - the understanding of God/Allah | <p>Things that have happened to you in childhood can mark you for the rest of your life.</p> |
| 9 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the innocence of children - the beauty of friendship - religious freedom, and how it can interact without causing friction. Acceptance. | <p>Considering the reaction of the people surrounding them, I would also add conformity of religion as a point. Because they were of different religious groups, people in their lives didn't see it fit for them to hang out. Somehow fear could enter into that account as well. The fear of losing their children to the other one's beliefs.</p> |
| 10 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the innocence of children in a time of arguments - a friendship that breaks with conventional borders set by other people - the hurt of being deprived something that matters, for no apparent reason! | <p>"As children we understood God or Allah better than anybody else." – I love this sentence. Through the eyes of innocence, you see better the true values of religion. or a side of religion that I feel more comfortable with.</p> |

Eritrean student texts: “Anisino”*This story is about _____**If there is anything else you would like to add, please do:*

- 1 - love. Love does not discriminate any origin, religious background and colour. Love is blind. If you are in love you don't bother about others.
 - revolution of two lovers against the uncivilized way of thinking o human being.
 - past experience of a lady to her love who left an impression on her mind.

- 2 - How students were worried to go to school absolutely free where the Ethiopians soldier could not give them mind freedom.
 - religion is an influential factor in society in the way they live, even it cann't challenge it easily if though there is passion as well as love.
 - is about how love is not able to control by religion, because love an emotional feeling beyond control.

- 3 - Childhood. Childhood is the sweetest and unforgettable part of our age. What one does during this age departs from innocence.
 - Friendship. To befriend with someone, difference in religion does not matter. The only thing is giving each other's heart.
 - Betrayal. One must not betray or forget what one has come across. To make it clear, we should not forget former friends.

- 4 - love, it's about two best friends who love each other very much and who got no other sinful thought than to have fun and enjoy life
 - equality, its about equality showing us that we are humans before we are muslim or christian, a boy or a girl.
 - ruining innocence, when they pull them away from each other they were also taking the innocent love which was inside them.

This story shows us how hard it is to live in this world without getting hurt or losing something so precious to you. Their friendship was not based on religion or gender it wasn't based on who they are but what they love doing together and how they love each other. But good things don't last, its destined to end as their friendship did.

Appendix 10: Eritrean student texts on "Anisino"

- 5 - the two intimate friends and how innocent they were and how they love each other despite their difference in religion.
 - religion and its influences. It clearly shows us that culture, custom and tradition is intolerable bondage of a society.
 - Departion and how unbearable it is. How difficult and hard it is to depart from the one you love deep from your heart
- 6 - two young students life as student before their separation, Anisino to Yemen. They were friend students who were going to school together.
 - two beloved one who lived in close by houses. They are real friends right from their child hood.
 - The separation of two young lovers the boy to yemen the lady remains in Asmara, who is expressing her feeling to meet her friend again.
- 7 - the innocence of childhood, where children no matter their differences get to have one another for a friend and explore the beauty of having not a care in the world.
 - The tribal or religious discrimination Concerning all ages including the innocent children who were forced to be apart and no longer have their most precious friendship.
 - Having fun, though it is usually believed that there could never be a real friendship when it comes to the opposite sex, theirs was all about enjoying the time while you still have it on your hands.
- 8 - childhood memory. This arises or emanates from the continuous contact between the two people (children)
 - childhood experience emanating from common experience and adaptation with each other.
 - regret (remorse) of the girl because she had internal love that she did not describe it before.

I realize that these two children were being brought up in a conservative society. For this reason they could not describe their internal feelings openly. They could have been lovers if they were not under the conservative society. There was love but the love was described.

Appendix 10: Eritrean student texts on "Anisino"

- 9 - two Eritrean children who had lived in Asmara for many years very friendly. They love each other too much.
 - The daily routine of two Eritrean boy and girl who lived in Asmara many years ago. They were different in their believe (faith or religion.).
 - 'Anisino' the boy friend of the writer (may be Rahel). He was a lovely boy. Both the writer and Anisino used to go to school together near the commercial Bank. When they came near to the protestant church, they entered to compound and prayed though he was Moslem.
- In my opinion, they had a problem. Because they were different in religion. People would see them in evil eyes. But they did not matter anything about Moslem and Christianity. According to them love is the main and crucial thing in life.
- 10 - teenager memories when she reached adulthood. She recounts her memory to someboy who was close to her.
 - universal peer relationship in Eritrea. Almost everybody has his own memories.
 - The sweet memory of her childhood and the obstacles of the soldiers in Eritrea, the inability to live together in Eritrea during the colonization.
- 11 - adolescent love that matches the girl and the boy during their early age.
 - Virtual love. I mean they are opposite in religion both they both believe God is one.
 - A good example of Eritrean culture that now we loved each other even if we are of different believers.
- 12 - two friends of different sex that is male and female ones with different religious faith they had a good relationship between them..
 - though they were different believers they used to go the church aimlessly on their way along the cathedral street the would look at each other..
 - these two friend were not only differ in their faith but also their nationality too. finally this tells us that is doesn't matter to be friends though they have so many differences

Norwegian student texts: *The Other War*

N1

* In this first act we are introduced to a conflict in the family.

We meet an elderly woman who is disappointed in her daughter's choice of husband. He is an Amhara.

Because of that, she can not enjoy her daughter's visit and company, and she is not able to feel joy when her daughter shows her the new baby. Her son-in-law may be a nice man, but the fact that he is an Amhara "blinds" her in a way. She sees an enemy, not a person with human qualities at all. Neither good or bad.

* In act two the family conflict continues. By conversations between grandmother/granddaughter, mother/daughter we get to learn more about the problems leading up to the conflict.

In the relationship between these 3 women there are a lot of disappointment and anger and grief. The grandchild is blaming her mother for her difficult childhood, and her insecurity. The mother, blames her own mother (the grandmother) for her unhappy marriage and for sending her away from home.

The grandmother blames her daughter for not being true to her family and country. Because of this grief these 3 women suffer, they have their own "power struggle".

The grandchild turns to her grandmother for comfort.

The mother turns to the enemy for love and support, and fights with him as an Amhara.

The grandmother gives up her daughter, and her comfort is her granddaughter and her son who is not living with her.

* In act three there is a new kind of power struggle. Assefa and his wife on one side and grandmother/granddaughter on the other. Maybe we in this act finally begin to see Assefa's true face?

In this act he is shown as a hard and brutal man, telling/giving orders to others what to do. His wife seems blinded by her love for him, to be able to see what is going on. But can you blame her? She feels abandoned by her family and her own people.

In this act Solomie also shows her hate for her step-father. She knows that her grandmother feels sorry for her, and that Assefa and her grandmother don't like each other. She might feel that she has her grandmother's support.

We also hear in act 3 that Letiyesus may take on some self-criticism when it comes to her daughter's first marriage. Though she feels disappointed by her daughter's behavior, it seems that she understands some of her problems better now.

I have not read the play before class, so I might feel different about these 3 acts when I get the whole picture by reading the whole play.

[N12 had to leave before responding to Acts 4 and 5.]

N2

Act 1

From the title I understand that there are at least 2 conflicts in this play. The checkpoints that are mentioned indicate that there is, or has been a conflict going on at a national/international level.

The other conflict must be the conflict that we see in the family between Letiyesus, her daughter and Assefa, who is Astier's Ethiopian husband. Letiyesus is clearly not happy with the situation and doesn't show any joy over her daughters return. For her it is like having "the enemy" living in her own house.

Act 2

The power struggle between Letiyesus and Astier is heating up. They have an argument and we learn about things that have happened to Astier in the past. Her past is the reason why she has chosen to join "the other side". Astier has thought that she can run away from her past and start a new beginning. She becomes the chairwoman; something that has a direct effect on the rest of her family especially her daughter Solomie.

Act3

In this act I feel that the focus changes slightly. Assefa is more involved in the action. So far he has given the impression of being a very nice guy although Letiyesus has shown her dislike to him. In this act he is trying to change Letiyesus' views on things, but he soon realises that he can't change her. Instead he gets frustrated and angry. The sudden way he changes shows how he has been acting all the time, trying to get Letiyesus to trust him.

Act 4+5

As the story goes on Assefa is becoming more and more aggressive in the way he acts and speaks to Letiyesus and Solomie. Letiyesus is a strong woman and she stands her ground as Assefa attacks her verbally again and again. This is so bad that Letiyesus decides to run away to her village taking Solomie and Hiwot with her.

Towards the end Assefa is becoming the person that Astier has tried to escape from. When he finds out that Letiyesus has left with the children he blames Astier. He is abusive and even threatens her with a gun. Again Astier becomes a prisoner in her own home.

All in all I think that this story is mainly about the conflicts that are going on inside the family home. The family is divided and forced to take sides in a political conflict that is going on outside, but brings the problems inside. The problems between the family members is a direct consequence of the ongoing war between Ethiopia and Eritrea.

We see that Assefa changes through the play. At least we are meant to believe it. He does change, but his political views and feelings have always been there. They were hidden from us through his false politeness in the beginning of the play. Towards the end we see these views clearly through the way he treats Astier. I am left with the feeling: "Once an Amhara, always an Amhara".

Note from email of 04050X from N19:

I remember we worked in the class with the *Other War*, and I found the original text here. I did write most of it in class, but the last 4 pages of the play were missing from my compendium, so I couldn't finish it then and there. I haven't changed anything apart from the ending that was missing.

N3**Act 1: Conflict in the family**

Letiyesus is glad that her daughter is home, but when she learns that she has brought her husband, an Amhara, to her house, she gets angry. Her home was supposed to be her safe haven, but the enemy (in her eyes) has been brought in by her own flesh and blood. She also learns that she has another grandchild, but even though we might expect her to be happy and accept the boy, she hardly looks at him. I suppose it is because the child's father is an Amhara. Astier, Letiyesus' daughter, seems to put her husband above her mother.

Act 2: Power struggle (in family)

Solomie tells her grandmother Letiyesus about her life at home, how she is treated bad by her mother and how she is treated by the other children in school. Letiyesus tells Solomie that she must stop being a weakling, but comforts her just the same.

Through a fight between mother Letiyesus and daughter Astier, we get to know some of Astier's past. The two of them throw words at each other while choking back tears, neither of them wanting to show defeat to the other. Defeat in the meaning of crying. Letiyesus finally starts to shed tears, but manages to convey the message that she's far from defeated. Assefa comes into the room and sees Letiyesus crying and immediately blames Astier and shouts at her.

Act 3: Assefa's change

Assefa comes through as a kind, reflected man who cares about family and family ties. He seems to like/want peace and quiet, and he gives the illusion that he wants people to respect each other. But that image breaks when he cannot get mother Letiyesus to do his bidding and bring her son back home to surrender. He explodes in rage and shouts at Letiyesus, calling her names and showing his true self. But although he is absolutely furious, he does not get violent. The only time he uses violence is when Solomie pours scolding hot water on his feet, and then he only slaps her face. The scary thing about him is that he is a man of power. And when a man of power gets cornered, you never know what he might do. Still, the contrast from polite to angry in Assafa is enormous and might be the biggest shock and fright for the family.

Act 4:

Assefa reveals an awful truth to Letiyesus during a heated argument they have when Astier is imprisoned. He refers to Astier as an Eritrean womb, and Kitaw as his roots in Eritrea which cannot be removed. I interpreted this as Assefa's plan to "infiltrate" and "destroy" Eritrea from within. He only used Astier as a mean to win a war, and his son is only regarded as a weapon. Assefa also threatens Letiyesus as gunpoint and denies them the privilege of leaving the house without his permission. When he leaves, Letiyesus takes Solomie and Kitaw and leaves to join the Wembedies.

Act 5:

Four days have gone since Letiyesus left with the children, and Astier and Assefa learn where they have gone. Assefa suddenly turns on Astier, and she finally gets to see what he is really about. He threatens her and hurts her, bringing her back to the marriage she once had long ago where she was used or misused daily.

N4**Act 1 - Conflict in the family**

In act 1 of “the other war”, there is a conflict in the family, especially between the mother, Letiyesus, and her daughter Astier. It seems that they disagree heavily over Astier’s choice of husband and that Astier, her husband and 2 children have moved into Letiyesus’ house without telling her. Even though Astier tries to convince her mother that her husband will become like a son, I feel that Letiyesus is reluctant, and worries more about what other people will say. There is obviously a struggle of what side is the right side, and what side is the wrong side to be on.

Act II - Power struggle

In act 2 we get to learn more about Astier’s previous marriage, a marriage which was arranged by Astier’s parents. Astier is telling her mother about how her first husband used to beat her, and blames her mother for marrying her off to Zecharias. I believe that the issue of Astier’s first marriage is one of the roots to the power struggle and conflict between Letiyesus and Astier. We also get to learn about Astier’s daughter Solomie, who Letiyesus is fond of. Solomie is the daughter of Zecharias, and Letiyesus’s favourite of the two grandchildren. The fact that one of the grandchildren is favoured over the other, shows that Letiyesus is very much against Astier’s marriage to an Amhara. Letiyesus is also against Astier being a chairwoman in the Kebele, and the ways she’s conducting her work. There seems to be many conflicts between mother and daughter, and almost every conversation they have ends up in a quarrel.

Act III - Assefa

In the beginning of the play, Assefa is presented as a kind and polite man. He is positive to his mother-in-law asking her how she is and how she is feeling. In act 3 however, Assefa and Astier mention Letiyesus’ son Miki-el who is missing and the conversation turns into a big quarrel. Assefa suddenly shows us a different side, he becomes angry at Letiyesus and explodes when Solomie later stands up for her grandmother by bringing him boiling water for his feet. He burns and in rage calls Solomie a little bitch and slaps her. The mentioning of Miki-el really showed us the true face of Assefa.

My thoughts on the play:

I believe that this play shows us the power struggles and conflicts within a family as well as within the country. There are conflicts about which side you should be on and what being on the “wrong” side can do to a family. The members of this family betray each other by joining the “wrong” groups and the conflicts end in a tragic way. I liked this play because it shows us problems and conflicts that occur in other parts of the world as well, such as political beliefs and views on who should run a country.

N5

In act one we meet Letiyesus upon returning home after a visit to her village discovering a change in her home; her daughter with her family being there. This fact foreshadows the conflict between the mother and the daughter and also the conflict raging in the country. It could be said that at the bottom of the conflict lies the fact that the mother, Letiyesus, and the daughter, Astier, belong to two different groups which are at present in great opposition. Astier being married to a Amhara man and having a son with him as perceived by the mother as an enemy and the fact that she brings them into her home as a violation of her personal space, already violated several times by his fellows. The conflict builds up towards the end of the act ending with the mother wondering if all is first a dream.

Act two:

In act two several relationships within the family are introduced, elaborated on and to a certain extent explanations are being given to why they are the way they are. We see the deep connection between the grandmother Letiyesus and her granddaughter, Solomie. They seem to have an understanding that brings them close together. Solomie feels safe and loved by Letiyesus and opens up. At the same time we are being introduced to the conflict between Letiyesus and Astier from Astier's point of view. We see a child that blames its parents for not being there for her all the time, a child sold off for profit and status, a bitter woman who wishes to sever the ties to her family in order to forget and build a new life founded on her beliefs.

We are also introduced to Assefa's caring, kind side; as person willing to make an effort to make the new family situation work out for everybody.

Act 3

In act three there is a change in the household has come about. Letiyesus, although owner of the home, has to take on a lesser role, taking care of the intruders. In the course of the act we learn more about the "true" face of Assefa who shifts from being a nice, almost loveable person into a hostile man keen to get what he's after. The strong bond between Letiyesus and Solomie is yet again revealed through Solomies act of bringing Assefa's food. The washing of feet is in my opinion a significant moment since it seems Assefa cannot trust anyone with this except his own wife – a nice metaphor for his position in the family and the general position of Ethiopians in Eritrea.

In act four we witness the final break up of the family. Letiyesus and Solomie taking one side and realizing that the only option they are left with is to leave the household and join their people. We also witness the depth of the conflict brought about by the war, tearing apart families and making new enemies along the way. The hidden meaning of the title, "The Other War" is also revealed – a war where offspring is used as ammunition in a desperate attempt to win the war. The desperation is further revealed in chapter five when the relationship between Assefa and Astier definitely falls apart. Also the place where Assefa's heart lies most is shown – not with his family but with his cause.

N6

Act 1:

The conflict in the family is very obvious. The daughter comes home to her mother with her husband and children, but the reunion is not blissful. We learn that Letiyesus' son is gone apparently fighting, and we don't know if he's well. Letiyesus' son in law represent the occupiers, who have offended Letiyesus earlier that day at the checkpoints. Still, there is a cool distance between Letiyesus and Assefa – Assefa seems to want to be friends with her. Between Letiyesus and Astier there is, certainly from Letiyesus, a high degree of passive aggression. Immediately, I took Letiyesus' side in the conflict (probably because I was first introduced to her and see her point of view), but when she wasn't interested in her grandson, I started doubting her good nature.

Act 2:

We learn more about the background of Astier and Solomie, and develop more sympathy for the characters. They have both been abused, Astier by her first husband and Solomie by Astier. Zacharias was chosen for Astier by her parents, and she blames them for her turbulent marriage with the abuse. Perhaps the reason why Astier has turned towards the Amhara is because this goes against her mother's wishes, and perhaps this was also one of the reasons why she married Assefa in the first place. Solomie is treated quite roughly by her mother, and she develops further the bond with her grandmother. Perhaps Astier mistreated Solomie

because she saw her as Zacharias' daughter, not first and foremost her own. Astier seems to put Kitaw's needs before Solomie's – because he represents her new life which includes a position of power, while Solomie represents her old life where she was suppressed?

Act 3:

Assefa and Letiyesus come to an open confrontation, initiated by Assefa and Astier regarding Miki-el. Assefa shows his brutal side, both verbally and physically. He has tried to win Letiyesus over with a (false) friendliness, but now he sees that it won't work and expresses his frustration. It is clear that there are two fronts in the house: Letiyesus and Solomie against Assefa and Astier. Kitaw is not participating, yet he is somehow in the centre. Letiyesus won't accept him because of his father, he represents the possible future for her family/ her country.

Act 4 & 5:

It becomes obvious that “the other war” is the war fought in the women's wombs – producing children who are half Eritrean and half Amhara and raising them against their Eritrean family/nation. Assefa appears to have known this for a long time, but when Letiyesus realises that she can use this against him, she seems more enthusiastic about Kitaw/Awet. The suspicion Assefa directs against Astier towards the end perhaps shows that regardless of the bonds between two representatives of each people they can never trust each other completely.

N7

Act 1: Conflict in the family

We see that Letiyesus doesn't like the fact that her daughter, Astier, has married an Amhara, Assefa. Although this is the main reason for the conflict in the family in this scene, I feel that Letiyesus might be unhappy with the homecoming of her daughter as well. She has missed her granddaughter, Solomie, but knows that she can't be with her without Solomie's mother also being there. Kitaw, her new grandson is a part of Assefa and is therefore an Amhara. She/Letiyesus doesn't like him. Also, the homecoming of Letiyesus' daughter and her family is a disturbance in Letiyesus' life and it comes as a surprise. When Astier says that Letiyesus won't miss her son, Miki-el, anymore now that Assefa is there, he will be like a son to her, she steps on Letiyesus' belief of Miki-el as the perfect son, the perfect soldier and a man that fights for the right reasons.

Act 2: Power struggle in the family

Astier wants to have power over everyone, but she is realizing that she can't have power over Letiyesus. Letiyesus is a stubborn, “ole” woman, used to her ways and habits. Astier is also loosing power over Solomie, but this power she thinks she is able to get back. Assefa is acting like the nice, perfect son-in-law, I think this is to get Letiyesus on his side so he can have more power over her later. Maybe Astier wants power so badly because she had none when she was married to Zecharias? She got the taste of power when she left him and maybe she can't get enough. Or maybe she is trying to be as good as Miki-el in her mother's eyes by fighting and being strong?

Act 3: Assefa('s change)

I think Assefa thinks that he has control and power over Letiyesus after being the good son-in-law for so long, but in this scene he realizes how stubborn Letiyesus really is and how she has turned Solomie against him and Astier. I think that Assefa wants to know where Miki-el is in order to stop him and his comrades from fighting, not in order to save him.

Act 4 and 5:

I think Miki-el represents Eritrea and Kitaw represents Ethiopia. Assefa shows his true self in these scenes and Astier is no longer in power. Maybe Assefa only married Astier as a sort of undercover operation for the Amharas. Letiyesus takes control over her life again and does what I think she should have done earlier in the play, she leaves with Solomie and Kitaw. The one question I am left with is; what will happen with Astier? Should Letiyesus have taken her with her? I don't know.

N8

Act 1: Conflict in the family

Letiyesus' son is a soldier and she misses him. After having been groped at the checkpoint she comes home to find that her daughter who has married the enemy has moved into her house with her family. The daughter says that her husband will replace her brother in the family and that Letiyesus should be happy that they are there.

Act 2:

Letiyesus feels betrayed. She feels that her daughter has betrayed also her people. Even her daughter Solomie is feeling the consequences of her mother's choices. She is ostracised at school as one taking sides with the enemy. Astier on her side feels that she was betrayed by her parents when they married her off to a man that turned out to be a brutal drunkard. Assefa was her "knight on shining armour" and thus everything that came with him is all that she sees as good in the world. Before Assefa came into her life Astier would vent her anger by beating Solomie. Assefa was kind to Solomie and is at the end of this act seemingly reprimanding Astier for quarrelling with her mother. As a person he seems to be a peace maker even though he is a representative for the enemy in the household. The strongest enmity, however, seems to be between Letiyesus and Astier.

Act 3:

In this act Assefa's authoritative side comes out. He tries to win Letiyesus over by promising to bring Miki-El home to her and is very angered when she cannot tell him his whereabouts. Is he kind or is he in fact trying to get information about the whereabouts of Miki-El and his comrades? When Solomie pours hot water on his feet and he in turn slaps her, is this merely a reaction to her cruelty or is it showing his true character or dominant nature? If so, why does Solomie "stand up" for him when the grandmother says he is ugly?

Act 4:

Assefa's real intentions are revealed. Having Kitaw with Astier is part of a plan to take over Eritrea. When Letiyesus discovers this she decides to leave with Solomie to join the Tegadelit. Hiwot encourages her to take Kitaw with her in order to frustrate their plans. She does so and renames the child "Awet" which means victory.

Act 5:

In the last act it becomes clear that Assefa has no love for Astier and is only interested in bringing back his son, his property. He thinks he has betrayed her. At the end she is alone and "betrayed" by everyone.

N9

Act 1:

It's hard for Letiyesus to accept her daughter's choice of a husband, because of her experience with some of them at a checkpoint. She feels she's lost some of her friends and also her own child to the Amharas. Her fears also involve how she'll be perceived in society. Letiyesus can't see the Amharas as anything but evil.

Act II:

Astier and Letiyesus argue about Astier's decision to become an Amhara. Astier claims her marriage to Assefa is much better than her first one to Zecharias. In my mind, I think they may be kind of similar, because it seems that Astier is being beaten by Assefa as well. There is a power struggle going on, but it's not just one. You have the struggle between Astier and her mother, as well as between Astier and Assefa. Astier may seem to lose the struggle to Assefa; but I think she might be the one with her mother as well, because she appears to be a little fragile. Solomie is just a child, but her observations are many, even though she's not as vocal about them. A child should be seen and not heard.

Act III:

Assefa has been playing nice in order to convince Letiyesus to join their side, but she will not be convinced. When Assefa begins shouting, he does so out of frustration, because Letiyesus will not give him a smidge of hope that he will be able to overtake the power of that household. His true colors start to come through and his agenda is halted. Solomie sees through him and knows she'll get punished for boiling the water too much for Assefa. But she doesn't seem to care. She knows how he'll react, because she's aware of who he really is. She sees through him.

Act IV - V:

Letiyesus breaks free of Assefa and Astier. Assefa's rage is showing more and more. He is not willing to accept any other decisions than the ones he makes himself. Solomie is happy to be away from the stern grip of Assefa. Leaving with her grandmother and brother, and ending up among Eritreans, might give her the opportunity to live a life without fear and live on her own terms, instead of under the strict rule of Assefa.

The story in itself gives a look into the anguish, rage, and uncertainty of Eritreans, What they had to deal with when the Ethiopians took over. It is a story of power struggle, family relationships and a battle for survival.

N10**ACT ONE 1: Conflict in the family**

Letiyesus arrives at her own home and is annoyed to find her daughter, son-in-law and their baby boy there. She is however, most welcome to her granddaughter. We hear that Letiyesus also has a son. He is not present at the house and he is evidently a part of EPLF. As a mother she seems quite affectionate towards this son. The son-in-law Assefa seems like he wants to make a good impression even though he fails, both with the impression and language. “Me-as ... Metu ... Gebu...”, he is corrected by Astier: “Me-as Atitkhen” and manages still to pronounce this wrongly “Good! Ma-as Atikhin.” Her son-in-law is apparently on the other side of the war from her son, working as a cadre for the Dergue.

We see the sceptical and sarcastic behaviour of the mother i.e. where they that Assefa and Astier speak “Anchi Manchi, Anchi Manchi.” Letiyesus also shows no interest at all, as mentioned, for her grand child (Kitaw) which make her seem cynical.

Act two: Confronting the past

Astier shares with us the story where she was married off. This was when she was “lost” according to herself. Letiyesus said that her husband sacrificed himself to build “a shelter” for his daughter, but we don’t feel that she is welcome to use this shelter. These are two strong women, but their hearts are in different places now. It has begun to accumulate towards a power struggle, and again Assefa sides with the mother-in-law, seemingly coming out as a great guy. Solomie admires her grandmother and lets us know that her mother treats her badly.

ACT THREE: Assefa’s agenda

Like taken out from “The monkey and the crocodile,” Assefa’s hidden agenda begins to manifest itself. The seemingly great guy, after having tried to build up trust with Letiyesus, wants her to reveal the location of the Gedli. If he finds Miki-El, he will bring him home safely... However, what will happen to Miki-El’s comrades? What I find intriguing here is also Letiyesus’ ability to see her daughter’s flaws in parenting, when they can be compared to the ones that she herself has overlooked. “Aren’t you giving her enough reasons to hate you for yourself?” She asks her daughter, when accused of having turned Solomie against her. Letiyesus was previously astounded regarding what “drove her daughter to betray her own country and people.

Again Letiyesus also furthermore establishes her disgust in this baby boy. Solomie however sees him as handsome.

ACT FOUR & FIVE:

Assefa does show us that all he thinks of is the revolution. He felt it like a plot against him when everyone left to become “bandits” or wembodie. The fact that they took with them Kitaw was perhaps what most hurt his pride, Letiyesus did this just with the ulterior motive of hurting Assefa. As for Astier, she is once again alone, twice scorned.

“In times of turmoil, even political ties are thicker than blood... There is also another lesson here: ill-treat your family, and they will renounce their heritage..., going as far as to treat a new addition to the family as a commodity or spoils the war.”

Eritrean student texts: *The Other War*

E1

“The other War”, a play written and directed by Alemseghed Tesfai is a very fantastic and wonderful one. It deals with mixed marriages practiced between the Eritrean woman and the Ethiopian soldier which has a great impact in the minds of Eritreans.

Act-One

In the first Act, Leteyesus and Hiwot are in a conversation after the arrival of Leteyesus from village to Asmara and they are discussing about temporary harsh conditions under which the Eritreans were suffering. Hiwot describes that Aster, the daughter of Leteyesus, has just arrived at her home along with her husband – an Ethiopian soldier, Assefa. Leteyesus is really upset to see an Amhara to be her son-in-law and she is ashamed to be his mother-in-law. Aster seems to be happy to have a husband from the Amhara Ethnic group because they were the dominant and ruling class during those times. They named their son “Kitaw” to punish and defeat the Eritrean freedom fighters. Leteyesus acts as a true Eritrean woman and heroine One.

Act two

In act two Leteyesus and Solomie, her grand daughter, are discussing the matter about Aster’s becoming the chairman of the kebele, Solomie says she is secluded and neglected from the rest of the children for being the daughter of the kebele – which every Eritrean refused to be like that. Leteyesus consoles to Solomie that time will change and a comfortable life will come only if the fighters defeated the enemy. Leteyesus and Aster are in a quarrel because Leteyesus is not happy about her daughter’s decision of enthusiastic approach to the enemy. Aster shouts that she never knows any family and any people. As she says Zecharias oppressed her when they were in Asid and that is why she hated her own family and her own people. She charges her parents had compelled her to marry Zecharias to whom she did not love. Now she became the chairman and started to suffer the people and punishing the women who are late in a meeting. This makes her cruel and bad fellow. She says “Zecharias locked the doors, but Assefa opened” her eye to the world.

Act Three

In act three Leteyesus and Hiwot start the play and Leteyesus is really upset to see her home to be the shelter for the donkeys who set party after party to defeat the the freedom fighters of Eritrea by naming the offensive “Red Star Offensive”. Assefa threatens Leteyesus that Mechiel her child will be killed in the battle and he will be eaten by “vultures”. He tries to change Leteyesus and to make her loyal to his side thereby to bring Michiel to Asmara by Helicopter. Assefa is cunning and tries to change the whole family in to his side. Leteyesus is a brave mother. She says that Michiel is not any better than his friends. Now Assefa suspects her and shouts at her. Solomie, hearing Asefa calling to her grandmother as “bandit”, she brings hot water and Assefa puts his feet and shouts from pain. Being angry, Asefa threatens her, but she never feels to betray. Again Aster and Leteyesus enter into a quarrel. In general Assefa is a cunning, cruel and arrogant cadre who turned Leteyesus and Aster to be antagonistic.

“The Other War” is one of the wonderful plays written during the armed struggle of Eritrea. It deals with mixed marriages of ethnic groups. But the writer has special target to achieve here. I think he does not mean that mixed marriages are unacceptable. During the colonial times Eritreans have suffered a lot under the Derg regime not only in battles but also in social, political and other aspects. The regime was intended to assimilate the Eritrean culture and Eritrea to be cancelled out of the map of the world.

Leteyesus acts as a true Eritrean mother and completes her target successfully. Assefa is a representative of the cadres who oppressed innocent civilians during those times. He decided to use Kitaw as a weapon to eliminate the identity of Eritreans thereby to control the country under his rule. But this was in vain.

This play is a mirror of the sufferings, hardships which had to be endured by the Eritrean masses. The Amhara was a dominant language and dominant ethnic group in Ethiopia with absolute power. Eritreans were the first people to oppose and they started arm struggle and got their independence after 36 years of war.

Leteyesus snatches “Kitaw” to Sahel and joined the EPLF. As he burned her, Assefa in turn burned himself after the successful operation of Leteyesus. Now Aster left alone and Assefa started to suspect her as wombedie (bandit).

Therefore, the title itself shows the Ethiopian regime not only destroyed the villages of the country through bombs and pistols but also strived another war secretly to eliminate and dominate the Eritrean population.

I admire Aslemseged Tesfai, the writer, for his contribution of this play to the world. Note that mixed marriage between the Eritreans and Ethiopians is normal and very acceptable. But the play only wants to show during the Derg regime, the Amhara ethnic group dominated the other race which is condemned by a humanitarian organizations and other

E2

Alemseged Tesfai is one of the Eritrean soldiers (fighters) who contributes a great contribution in Eritrean struggle for independence. He is one of the early fighters who fights against their enemy strongly. Not only a fighter but also he is one of the famous Eritrean Writers. He has written many books in Tigrinya and also some translated books and plays. “The Other War” is his famous play written in Tigrinya and in English.

At the beginning of the play (Act 1), we get first two women somehow look like old one but not too. Their names are Hiwot and Letiyesus. Both they have close intimacy, since they are neighbourhood. It is quite difficult talk outside their room what ever they felt they are living in freeless situation because of the presence of the Amharas. Letiyesus is careful woman who hates for the Amharas. She is worried by the Amhara where she get them at the checkpoints. Even though the Amharas were grinning and smirking, she knows and understands all their wishes to Eritreans.

When Letiyesus is coming from village to Asmara she gets the fighter on her way. She is very surprised by the fighters means of life, i.e. dressing hairstyles, the way of their speak; even the marriage ceremony is totally changed from society’s marriage ceremony. She is the finest supporter to the fighters, because the Amharas were very cruel and none national group, and also her son Mikiel is one of those fighters.

Unfortunately the brilliant mother, Letiyesus, became mother in-law of some enemy – some Amhara. Her daughter, Astier, get a child (Kitaw) from the Amhara cadre, Assefa. This makes Letiyesus to become angry and couldn’t control her feelings and shakes with rage. All Astier’s family and her mother sat down together at Letiyesus’s house. Letiyesus did want to say welcome to Assefa. Even though he hold her hands with both of his, bowing his respectfully, she simple shakes his hand. This is because of a strong hatred, But she greets her daughter Aster with sincere kisses. Assefa has tried to flatter Letiyesus, that how much she is young and beautiful who seem a lady instead of an old mother. He wanted to be look like and smart, funny and smiling [?] cadre. According to Astier, Assefa is a brilliant cadre as well as a kind person who could be able like a brother and husband to her and as a son to her mother.

But Letiyesus is more sarcastic and knows all the Amhara's smiling, all the Amhara's were smiling even at the checkpoint. This is nonsense for Letiyesus. Letiyesus could not control her feelings and her anger any longer when Astier considered for Assefa as much as possible like Miki-el (her son) and she is amazed by name given to Aster's and Assefa's son "Kitaw" to when is going to "punish".

Act Two (2)

In Act two of the play "the Other War", we see a great Argument (disagreement), and quarrels between Letiyesus and her own daughter, Astier. This quarrel is raised, Letiyesus has a very patriotic character of woman who supports and loves for the fighters where her own son, Mikiel, had jointed too. She has an enormous feeling of nationalism caused by the people where jointed to EPLF fighters for struggle against the Amharas. While Astier became a great dramatic participator with the Amhara. She elected and became a kebele chair woman, which made so mad to her mother, and became a loyal member of the Amhara. She married to Assefa and get a child named Kitaw. So in general Astier become and grew up so cruel, who intended to afraid for her own mother. Working together with the Amhara cadre's. She became like gloves and hands with the Amhara members. She revolve against her own family, her own people. This measure is taken by Astier as a revenge for Zecharias a her former husband, later who left her and jointed to struggle with fighters after he got divorce with her. According to Astiers expression, Zecharias was beating to her, she spent her youth lying in bed, crying endlessly, waiting for him to come back drunk and use or misuse her as he saw fit. Astier heart was full of hatred. But she said that "Assefa opened the door and my eyes to the world, "Assefa filled my heart love. I was ignorant, today I am chair woman." For all this considered as a good fortune and opening her eye to the to the world, but more than what she was, she is becoming more ignorant and a blind who can't see and choosing her way to destruction. When she was appreciating for Assefa and thanks to him. He didn't open her eyes to the world, oppositely Assefa closed her eyes to her nation, where she became a cruel creature that revolve against her people in general and against her own mother, Letiyesus, in particular. In order to hurt her heart, Astier betrayed her own country and people.

Act three (3)

After controlling both Astier's mind and her physical, Assefa tried to do the same for her mother also. First Assefa started to show a smiling face and funny character in order to manipulate Letiyesus' heart. He asked to Letiyesus politely to get help. He asked her to bring up her son from the fighters just Mikiel to give up his hand to the Amhara. Assefa used different means in order to change her idea in order to get help from her. He wanted to become a sympathetic of Mikiel and trying to save his life from his comrades. He tried to inform her how much hi is able to do every thing and how much he has power to bring Mikiel by helicopter without being harmed or without being in any danger if he is willingly to surrender. But Letiyesus was willingly to do so, she strengthened more than ever so, because she understood everything about the Amhara. Especially Assefa's trick.

Just his aim is to demoralize the fighters and the whole people. Letiyesus told to Asefa she wishes to scarify for his nation equally with his comrades rather than to surrender to the enemy, that he is not better than all his comrades.

Assefa realised that he could able to get help from Letiyesus to get Mikiel even though he tried to seem as the benefactor of them. He wanted be an ideal but he couldn't. All the measures he took couldn't success him. Discourageously he has spoken out Mikiel is going to be eaten by the Vultures, must this was what he said in order to hurt V and make her more angry either she is going to weep of feel sorrow. But ultimate Letiyesus has broken Assefa's heart rather than him.

“The Other War”

In Eritrea there was a bitter struggle for independence that get a great contribution of the whole society. It took almost around 30 years to get Eritrea it independences and in the same way asked a great scarification of number of fighters. The struggle “war” with Ethiopian was known throughout the world. But there was another war in side the society which involved and had hidden aims. Alemseged took as an example of one family, Letiyesus family. He clearly described the Amhara’s aim. It was just to have a mixed marriage. Assefa the Amhara cadre get marriage with Astier the Eritrean lady. This done to planted Amhara’s seed in the Eritrean wombs where easily able to destroy Eritrean fighters, to make weak the nationalism and to disappear the Eritrean patriotic feelings. The Amhara tried plant their roots firmly in Eritrean wombs that no power can ever pull them up, where a way to destroy the Eritrean fighter easily destroyed from their motherland. Alemseged also show the great nationalism and patriotic contribution of Eritrean woman and able to challenge for the Amhara terrible aim. He describe the feelings by representing Letiyesus.

So generally Alemsegeds play “the other war” is about the Amharas mixed marriage with the Eritreans to destroyed the Eritreans seeds and fighters easily and on the other hand the play is about the Eritrean women showing their objections and a successful struggle inside society against the terrible regime.

E3

“The other War” is a play written by Eritrean writer Alemseged Tesfai. Originally, it is a Tigrigna play signifying how the Ethiopian army, during the Eritrean struggle for independence, discriminated the people of Eritrea. I have studied this play under the course “Eritrean writings”. As the title indicates the Ethiopian army tried to destroy Eritreans not only through guns and other weapons but also by compelling Eritrean mothers to have a child from Ethiopians. This was another weapon.

In act one the main character, Letiyesus, arrives home from village. She is a symbol of Eritrean mother. She has a son in the filed by the name Mikiel. He fights against the Ethiopian who were punishing his people in his land. Here the problem is when Letiyesus arrives home from village her daughter – Astier was already home from Addis Abeba – the Ethiopian capital. To top it all off, Astier was with her Ethiopian husband Assefa, the very enemy of Eritrean people. Letiyesus could not accept this – Mikiel’s house to be a shelter for an Amhara i.e. his enemy. She greets Solomie, her grandchild very well but she greets Astier insincerely Letiyesus was worried about what people will call her “whose mother-in-law Some enemy! Some Amhara!” She was confused and not happy at her daughter’s decision of marrying an Amhara – the enemy of every Eritrean then.

It is because of this Letiyesus gave a cold welcome to Astier. Being clever enough to observe her mother’s reaction was unhappy, Astier questions her “Why don’t you joke and laugh as usual?” she also compares Assefa to Mikiel which annoyed Letiyesus. Letiyesus cannot accept Assefa as a human being also.

ACT TWO

In Act Two Solomie continuously asks her grandmother why she was always talking to herself. But Letiyesus tries to hide her feelings from Solomie – the granddaughter – saying “I am not talking to myself.” Solomie was beyond her grandmother’s expectation in the sense she had also started to talk to herself. Though Letiyesus is happy at having Solomie with her, she is unhappy by the way this girl is treated. She knows that this girl is not safe with her mother – Astier – and an Amhara. “The time will come for you to be happy. Don’t worry.” remarks Letiyesus when Solomie explains her problems and difficulties.

In this Act the main problem is between Letiyesus and her daughter – Astier. Letiyesus was shocked at her daughter’s behaviour, punishing her own people for no reason. Letiyesus warns her about this, but Astier fails to understand her point, she is upset, but all the same resigned, “Time will show” is her reaction to every word of Astier. Astier punishes many people in the kebele including her mother’s best friend – Hiwot. She states that even if Letiyesus comes late to the meeting she would not spare her. She says that their hearts are in different places. Letiyesus could not control her anger. “...and nothing is more terrible than to be afraid of one’s own child” says Letiyesus. Astier could not accept her mother’s advice.

Instead she states that she is left with a scar by the way her mother and father treated her in her childhood. In this way their disagreement reaches its peak – Letiyesus weeps.

ACT THREE

In Act three Assefa cunningly tries to get information about Miki-el. He manipulates Letiyesus with an intention of getting news about Miki-el. But all his trial was in vain. Letiyesus knew about this enemy and never revealed anything when he threatened her also, she would not.

At first Assefa tells Letiyesus that he and Astier meant to talk to her about her son – Miki-el. At this point Letiyesus as a mother is so startled. She drops what she is holding on the floor. Noticing her reaction the cunning man, Assefa, tells her that it is good news and need not be afraid. Assefa continues to say that their Revolutionary Army is annihilating the bandits. He pretends to help Letiyesus. He remarks that he can bring Miki-el to Asmara by helicopter if Letiyesus tells him his whereabouts. Letiyesus despises his whole behaviour. Assefa tells her to send a relative and try to contact Miki-el. He tries all the ways that he thought will help him win Letiyesus’ cooperation in Miki-el’s surrender. He pretends that he and Astier were doing this for Letiyesus’ benefit. His polite manner disappears when he finds no answer from Letiyesus. Assefa starts shouting. Shouting he says that “your son will be eaten by vultures!”

Assefa cannot believe what is happening when Letiyesus asks him “Is he any better than all his comrades?” he seems to have known that Letiyesus cannot be cheated by him. He seems also to have understood his trial resulted in nothing. Hopelessly, he tells Astier to ignore Letiyesus. At this point he was extremely angry. He mutters to himself in exaggerated agitation – “I don’t believe in such ingratitude. Pure arrogance!”

Generalization

The play “The Other War” deals with the controversy of mixed marriages- The writer of the play, Alemseged, wrote it based on an incident that he witnessed when he was employed in Ethiopia. He is not against mixed marriages based on love between individuals. He does not oppose this idea. Alemseged wanted to remind individuals of any nation that their love may have negative impact if it is not taken seriously. The Ethiopian regime used to encourage individuals to marry Eritrean women either by their agreement or coercion. This was to make the Eritrean people Ethiopian at heart. They wanted the Eritrean people to be dominated by the Ethiopians. But this system did not work. This was their last choice to be tried on the Eritrean people. When they realize that the people of Eritrea will kneel under them by using each and every weapon available in the world, they decided to discriminate the Eritrean people by the way of mixed marriages, unfortunately for them, this system failed to work. Letiyesus decides to leave the city along with Solomie, and Kitaw – the son of Astier from an Ethiopian husband.

Though at first Letiyesus decided to leave Kitaw in Asmara, finally Solomie and Hiwot convinced her to take him away. This is to make Assefa unhappy as he had already plotted over Letiyesus. Finally a conflict occurs between Assefa and Astier – his Eritrean wife. He insults her terribly. This shows that their marriage was primarily based on political benefit and not on love. So the writer never stands against mixed marriages but against the terrible aim of the politicians of that time by the name of mixed marriages.

E4

ACT 1

Letiyesus, an old woman of fifty came home from a village where she went to see her freedom fighter son to find a shocked Hiwot in the house waiting for her. Letiyesus who was busy telling her friend how animal like the guards at the check points were, missed the shocked look. Even if she was tired from the journey she started talking about the fighters and the ways they were following which was so different from theirs. She was in the middle of telling her how the wedding ceremony was when suddenly she noticed the different things in her house like a new tape.

Hiwot gets very uncomfortable and tries to calm her but when she insisted Hiwot told her that her daughter with her family has come to live with her from Addis. Letiyesus was really angry seeing Mika-el's house changing into an Amhara's house, her being the mother in law of the enemy, when she was in the middle of this Astier and her family came. The only thing that cheered Letiyesus up was the sight of her granddaughter Solomie.

Astier sensed that her mother is not taking them in with a welcoming hands and Letiyesus was very irritated at both her daughter and son-in-law even if he tried to sweet talk her with no help. Astier told her mom that he is a very nice man & she even see him as her brother which amazed her mother.

ACT TWO

In this act Astier got elected as a chairwoman of the kebele which brings problem to everyone. Solomie is having problems in the school because of her mother's election, they nicknamed her, and not even one student would be her friend for fear of her mother. Solomie complains about this to her grandmother, she even tells her about how her life was very hard in Addis first with her father and then with her step father. Astier comes in the middle of their talk and sends her to baby-sit Kitaw.

Letiyesus tries to advice her daughter but Astier has no ears for a mother, as she put it, who marries her off to a drunkard just because he has money and his families got some fancy titles. After told her mum that she is so angry at her and her dad she also is angry at her ex-husband for treating her in such a cruel way that she wants to take all the pain and pay it back on the people who gave birth to him forgetting that she was one of them. Her mother tries hard but with vain.

Astier thanks her God for giving her Assefa who opens her 'eyes and doors to the world' she take them as her people and her own people as the enemy.

ACT THREE

In this act Assefa who is a sweet covered poison gets his real behaviour out. Assefa asks his mother-in-law to tell him where her son is. He promise to bring him to safety with the connection he got, when Letiyesus refuses to cooperate he got very angry predicting Mika-el's future saying he'd be eaten by vultures and calling her 'this woman' when all the time he was calling her 'emama'. He was so pissed he told her not to mess up with him because she doesn't even know who she is messing up with him.

He calls her names, 'bandit' who cooperates with them. Assefa who was covering behind curtains to charm his mother-in-law, is very animal like shouting and screaming at her.

ACT FOUR

Assefa came home interrupting Letiyesus and Solomie's conversation about the victory of the fighters over the enemy and the whereabouts of Mika-el. Assefa start talking about Astier being loyal to her beliefs and the people turning against her. When Assefa told Letiyesus that her daughter is under arrest she shows no sign of amazement or shock which angers him a lot.

He then tells her that her dreams are never gonna come true because, to him, the future of Eritea is filled with Kitaw's, no Eritrea at heart. Letiyesus was so angry that she told him she never thought there was war going on their daughter's womb – and that he take his own son as bomb and bullet.

Assefa threatens her with his pistol and told her not to move a muscle without his permission when he went out. Letiyesus packs her and her granddaughters stuff to get away from the house. Solomie refuses to move without her brother Kitaw after some talk with Hiwot who is going with them Letiyesus agrees to take him with them after changing his name to 'Awet' from 'Kitaw' which means victory

ACT FIVE

In this last act Astier also sees who her real husband is but one was already too late

Astier got out of prison only to find her mother and two children nowhere to be found. Assefa was frantic he called everybody and anybody who can bring his son but with vain. Astier was in the same condition when one finally hears that they were out of their reach. Assefa start suspecting his wife and looks at her with hatred when one tries to sweet talk him he tries to kill her and change his mind and puts her in prison.

Astier goes mad screaming and shouting but there was nobody to hear or help her. She realizes the truth when it is too late for her.

E5**“The Other War”**

The other war is a play in which it is written by an Eritrean author Alemseged Tesfai. And I have seen it first on Eri-tv, when I was a kid and also before few years. But I have studied it also the previous year, in one of the subject (Eritrean Literature); so, the play is familiar to me.

Act One

The first act of the play “The Other War” is about the arrival of Letiyesus to her house from the village and the strange events that welcomed her and as the same time about her response to that. Soon, as she arrive her house she starts to tell her friend Hiwot about all the troubles faced her on her way. Hiwot her intimate friend tells her about the arrival of her daughter Astier and she awares her also not to talk or act in a bad way, as her son in law Assefa, too is with her daughter. But Letiyesus is not able to control herself and she is really upset by that news. She don't want to see Mikiel's house become a shelter for an enemy and as a result she is not able to hide her feelings. Astier tells her mother that she is not happy by her hospitality and asks her if she ever wrongs her. But Letiyesus deny everything and tries to assure her daughter that she is happy by their arrival, but unfortunately she fails to convince her.

Act Two

In act two there is some disagreement between Letiyesus and her daughter Astier due to different reasons. When we see in the case of Letiyesus, she is not happy by her daughter's marriage to an Amhara and she is not also happy with their arrival to her own home; and it is only because she don't want her house or Mikiel's house to be a shelter for an Amhara or enemy. And when we see the details that provoke Astier to take a revenge upon her own

people and family, which results her disagreement with her mother. The first thing is the bad memories of her first husband Zecharias; and his merciless treatment remains stuck in her mind. She also accuses her father and mother for they forced her to marry and live with Zecharias.

Act Three

Assefa is one of the characters of the play 'The other War' in which he is the most disliked character by all Eritreans. In the first Assefa tries to cheat Letiyesus, but he is not able to seduce mother Letiyesus. Assefa tempts Letiyesus so many times to get news of Mikiel and his comrade (gedlie) but unluckily, he fails and it is because Letiyesus is not a simple mother. Her heart all her conscience is with her son – Mikiel and the comrade who are fighting for the Eritrean independence. His anger reaches its highest degree and as a result of it he starts to shout at her and tries to depress her by telling bad news of tegadelti; that they are in a critical situation and that they are going to vanish soon. But unlike his aim Letiyesus become strong than ever and she starts or decides to work harder by consoling herself, so that to see him dying of anger. Assefa fails to convince her (Letiyesus) and as a result he starts to express his real hidden behaviour.

“THE OTHER WAR”

The play 'The Other War' is a play which is written by an Eritrean author Alemseged Tesfai. 'The Other War' is about the war which is going on the cities, villages and families of Eritrea, unlike the universally known war at the battle. All Eritreans love this play, because it is about their past experience, the troubles they met during those days (during the colonization) and they always look at it passionately and with great interest. The family of mother Letiyesus is an example of all other Eritrean families who were in trouble; and as an example it shows clearly the sense of nationalism Eritrean people had, the sacrifices they made for their independence and about how they challenge all the adversities faced to them. Though there were so many other bitter experiences which are not listed here, but I don't want to fail from appreciating the author Alemseged Tesfai for his great and interesting work.

E6

“The Other War” composed by Alemseged Tesfai is a wonderful story. It narrates about the Eritrean struggle for their independence. As its title indicated that it is a war that took place indirect way.

In the first act of the story we can see the main character of the play “Letiyesus” is just arrived her room in Asmara from the village. She told her to friend, Hiwot about her journey. She told her that soldier in the checkpoint were shameless human being.

We also see that she is very upset that her daughter Astier is settled in her home. She is very angry that her daughter Astier is married to an Amhara, Eritrean enemy.

In the second act we find Astier become the chair woman of the kebele. Her mother Letiyesus become stressed because she would not like her daughter to become the instrument of the enemy to punish her own people. Solomie Astier's daughter become friendless in her school since her mother Aster is a chair woman who is disliked by all of the kebele. In the very early of her election Astier began to punish the people, among them were Adey Hiwot, Letiyesus's real friend.

The quarrel between Astier and her mother become ferrous when Aster tells her mother that, the people of the kebele must punished from the early time itself. They go on talking and Aster told her mother that she is taking that in the revenge of that she got by her former husband and her father and mother. From the beginning of the story to this act Asefa is acting as honest man.

Act Three

In this act we understand that Asfa is trying to get information about the fighters which were in Sahel from Letiyesus. He tries to believe her that he can bring her son Mikiel from the battle field to live with them peacefully. But all his system to get information from her and her relative was in vain. As a result he become very angry and he told her that as her son is eaten by vulture. We also understand that the child Solomie has great annoys with the enemy in general and with Asefa and her mother Astier in particular. We see Letiyesus as the representative of the Eritrean mothers who stuggled for our independence and shows her strength to refuse him from giving him information.

Act IV

In this act we find that Assefa is very angry because his wife Astier is arrested and he did not found any information which he wished to get from Astiers mother. In this act we understand that Assefa's exposed by his own word when he favously interrogated with Letiyesus. Here he shows his dictator behaviour. In the beginning of the play he appears as an honest man and cares about Letiyesus and her relative. But in the end of the play he shows his real cruel behaviour.

Actually the system they used to rule the Eritrean land was the right one. Because if we see Solomie at the end of the play likes her brother Kitaw although he is from the Amharan side. We see her very angry when Letiyesus ordered her top pick up her clothes and to live the child alone in the house. I think this was the trick which Assefa and his followers used to rule the land comfortably without any disturbance, because one can fight against his or her brother if they are intermingled. But this become in vain by Letiyesus as representative the Eritrean women get their thick and found the solution got it taking the child to the field. Rename him "Awet" which means victory.

Act V

In this last act we find Letiyesus got her solution by leave her home taking the child from the Amhara side and her lovely grand daughter Solomie and her friend Hiwot. She did this after she got a great problem in her own home from her enemy Assefa. He threatened her when he hears Astier is arrested. He also pointed his pistol on her and ordered her not to move from the house with out his permission. In this act we find him yet suspicious even to his wife Aster and accuse her she is also a wenbedie. Her Astier is field in great problem because of miss understand Assefa's real behavior and not heard her mothers warning.

Actually this play is a real story which clarifies the all the problem which was foild on Eritrean mothers. Their system for ruling the land was which the tried to get their ambition. As a result many Eritrean women got children from them.

E7

In this well written play – THE OTHER WAR, we learn all about the cruel and aggressive treatment that was committed on Eritrean people by the Ethiopian reign, especially on the Eritrean mothers and their daughters, and so this play shed its lights on the young Eritrean girls who were married to the enemy at the time – The Amhara.

And so in the very first act, Letiyesus – the aged Eritrean mother returned back home after her long visit to the frontier where her son was fighting for what he believed in – for Eritrean independence. In arriving at her house, Letiyesus was angry and deeply enraged by the Ethiopian soldiers at the check point, they savagely mistreated all the villagers not sparing the elder women like herself. But shortly after a while, she was welcomed and comforted by her friend's presence at her house. After a few minutes of her arrival, Letiyesus noticed some changes at her house and she enquired what caused the disturbance, and so it was then that Hiwet – her friend told her about her daughter's family's Sudden and unannounced visit to the

village, and she told her that they not only mean to visit but to settle with her for good. And so this news angered and enraged her even more to the limit and couldn't come to terms with the fact that Miki-el's home become a shelter for an Amhara – the enemy.

Her daughter Astier happened to be marrying the enemy himself but Letiyesus had some consolation with the fact that now she has a chance of being with the most loved of her – Solomie her grand daughter from her daughter's first marriage to an Eritrean.

In Act two, we observe the severe conflict that arises between the mother and daughter mostly. When Astier was only a teenager or so her parents married her off wealthy but elder man – Zecharias. It was an arranged marriage and so like almost all the Eritrean girls – Astier went on with the arrangement without a single protest of her own. Soon enough her elder husband turned out to be drunkard and had made a habit of biting his wife day and night, using and misusing her any way he saw fit. All these treatments left her with a physical and emotional scare (bruise).

And so now that she is married to one of the lords of the time after her disastrous marriage that ended up in divorce, she has all the intention of taking it all out on her family – her people as a revenge for all the [empty space] that was done to her. But the mother was all in tears when she heard this out of her only daughter, all the hatred and disgust that her daughter was harbouring broke her heart and wished if she could only take it back, but she very well knew that she wasn't capable of doing that. She only tried to bring her daughter to come to her sense and to watch what she was doing, but all her efforts was to no avail.

Letiyesus did understand all the wrong deeds that was done to her daughter, but she believed that it wasn't good enough of a reason for her daughter to pass all the punishments possible to her people, after all they are her home town people, her family. But Astier stubbornly refused to listen to her mother and make amends of her mistakes.

In Act three, we sort of focus or concentrate in the Assefais personality, we can just easily call him a typical Amhara – that should describe him perfectly.

Assefa is just like a serpent underneath a beautiful flower, he is the sort of a man who tries to be what he is absolutely not.

At the very first act, we visualize him behaving as a decent and well-mannered as any son-in law would behave, but a little later on he turned completely to some one else, different in one and so many ways. All of a sudden he thought he could question and manipulate all the information that he can gather from the mother to entrap her son – Miki-el, but he wasn't successful in getting a thing out of the courageous and strong willed Letiyesus. Neither him nor his wife could get a single clue out of Letiyesus and that made him go wild and scream in anger, but mostly identified his true personality.

In Act four, we observe the truly deceived and angered Assefa dictating every one's moves – especially the two other women's moves in the household -Letiyesus and Solomie's. Despite all his efforts, the two women were now openly (tie between them) chit chatting about the warfare, the frontiers, the soldiers (tegadelti) and soon and soon ---.

One day Assefa came home early from work to tell Letiyesus Astier's imprisonment, which was not surprise at all to Letiyesus concerning all Astier's ways and treatments to her people.

But Letiyesus felt no remorse for this news of her daughter's and Assefa couldn't believe that the mother of his wife had no feeling towards her daughter. And he accused her of being unfeeling and heartless when it comes to his wife because if it was Miki-el or Solomie that was behind bars, he said she would have pulled out her hair, but this was his wife – Amhara's wife.

After barking and pouring his poison out, he technically ordered then not to set foot out of the house without letting him know first – and that in his ways was an order not to be defied under any circumstances. But later on, we observe the two women carry out their plans to leave and give no heed to his orders at all.

E8

THE OTHER WAR

ACT ONE

As I have seen from the play in act one, there is definitely cultural as well historical contradiction between the Eritrean people and the Amharas/Ethiopians). As it is well known, Letiyesus, that is the Eritrean mother (also Astier's mother) is not at all happy with her daughter Astier due to her marriage to Assefa (an Amhara). Letiyesus found that it was very problematic to see her daughter marrying to an Amhara man. This is because we realize that all the Eritrean people was struggling against the Amhara people and the Amhara soldiers were inflicting severe torture and enormous massacre on the Eritrean people. As it was clear when Letiyesus came from her village she found that her house was already occupied by her daughter and she was not happy by that act. And we saw that she greeted Solomie warmly because she was from a former Eritrean father but she did not pay much attention to Aster, Assefa and Kitaw. And I understood that this was one way of opposition against the marriage. Letiyesus was not happy at all and she was not open and frank with them except with Solomie.

ACT TWO

There we see a continuous quarrel between Letiyesus and Astier. And this disagreement arises from the marriage of Astier to Assefa. According the Eritrean custom especially during the armed struggle, seeing an Eritrean woman marrying to an Amhara (Ethiopian soldier) was definitely forbidden and shameful. Furthermore, Astier was against her own people. As soon as she came to power she started to punish the innocent people mercilessly, and her mother was opposing her strongly. But she could not listen to her mother's advice. She was utterly turned to an Amhara like Assefa.

ACT THREE

In act three Assefa wanted to get some secret from the Eritrean struggle from Letiyesus. And he appeared as if he was a considerate man to Mike-el. And he started by asking Letiyesus to bring back her son Mikiel from the the struggle by saying that the bandits were absolutely surrounded. When he observed that he could not persuade Letiyesus he became very angry and branded Letiyesus as one from the bandits. Previously, Assefa seemed to be a good and friendly man by hiding his real character. But finally, when he was sure that he would not get any information about the struggle, he started to reflect his real image.

ACT FOUR

In act four we see that the decision of Letiyesus to go the field taking Solomie with her. But Solomie insisted Kitaw be taken with them. At the beginning Letiyesus refused to take Kitaw with them. But after hearing Mrs Hiwet's advice and Solomie's request she also decided to take Kitaw with them. As a result of this a fresh tension arises between Astier and Assefa. Assefa tried to catch Letiyesus but all his attempts proved meaningless. And finally Assefa declined his credibility in Astier.

ACT FIVE

Letiyesus has gone to the struggle taking Solomie and Kitaw. Assefa & Astier tried hard to get them back but they could not. Assefa started to imagine Astier as a bandit (Wembedie). And at that time she was not loyal to him. And the tenseness between the wife and husband reached its peak. Assefa threatened to kill Astier. And we see Astier begging Assefa not to kill her. From my point of view we know that we can expect mana being given from colonizers. First they use the subject as their instrument but finally they don't care about the people who served them.

E9'The Other War' (Act I)

'The OTHER War' is composed by Alemseged Tesfai. He is one of the greatest Eritrean writers. Alemseged compositions are very very fantastic and enjoyable.

Here, in the first act, there are some more characters. Namely, Aster, Letiyesus, Asefa (Astier's husband) Solomie (Aster's daughter), Hiwot Letiyesus's honest friend), Kitaw (Aster's and Asefa's son).

In this Act, we see that Letiyesus is very disturbed and troubled by the Amharas in the checkpoint. She was very upset because, the Amharas checked (grapped) to the Eritrean women even though they are /were over age. That is why Letiyesus disliked and angered by them.

When Letiyesus and Hiwot were discussing these about the problems which faced to Letiyesus, both Asefa and Aster arrived. Before that, Hiwot told to Letiyesus that they had come to her house. At the time, she was upset. She says "Oh, wicked daughter! What will people call me now? Whose mother-in-law? Some enemy! Some Amhara!"

Then, Asefa and Aster arrived and they greeted Letiyesus. But Letiyesus was very disturbed and she replied 'Tsibub'. Aster told to Letiyesus that she had a son called Kitaw. 'Kitaw' means 'punish them'.

Act-II (conversation between Letiyesus and Aster)

In Act-II We learned that Letiyesus was praying to her St Mariam. Solomie asked why she was talking to herself. Letiyesus replied that she was asking her to keep her grand child Solomie safe and to help her with her studies.

We also learned that Aster decided to take revenge against her own people. She had a very cruel memory in her mind. When she was young girl, she was forced to marry an Eritrean man called Zecharias. Zecharias treated her very cruelly. According to Aster he is a bad man who left her a worse scar. When she repeated her memory with her own lips, "I was beaten up, trodden on by Zecharias so much that I thought it would never end. My face was

constantly swollen....” But her mother (Letiyesus) warned her, but Aster ignored Letiyesus’s advices and she insisted to take adverse punishment upon her own people. For example, she punished 4 women who came late to the meeting. She informed to Ato Zenebe through her telephone, “Ah, hello....Ato Zenebe?...Good afternoon...Aster here...fine...look, there were four women who were late coming to the meeting today, we shall send them to you for punishment... oh, take whatever measures you think necessary.” Letiyesus was surprised because Adei Hiwot was among the four women for punishment. Adie Hiwot is Letiyesus’s an old friend. She shared in hot and cold circumstances with Letiyesus. Letiyesus wanted to calm down their discussion but Aster did not listen her, she was settling account which were took place in the past time.

At the last we saw, Letiyesus was weeping. She continued her weeping. But Aster did feel any motherly feelings.

Asefa (Act – 3)

In act three both Letiyesus and Hiwot began the play. They were talking about the Ethiopian cadre, Assefa. Letiyesus called the Ethiopian army as donkeys. In this act Asefa seems an honest and helpful man but he is in the contrary. He is cruel. He wanted to gather information from Letiyesus about the Eritrean fighters through Mikiel. But, she ignored talking with him about her son Mikiel though he told her he would bring her son from Sahel by helicopter. He said angrily her son would be eaten by VULTURE! but it was in the other said, the Ethiopian army were destroyed and eaten by VULTURES too.

Here in act three we learned that how brave the Eritrean women and men fought against Amharas (Ethiopian army). As a result they got their independence by destroying to the Ethiopian regime (Dergi) decisively.

‘The Other War’ By Alemseged Tesfai

Alemseged is an Eritrean young writer. He wrote many short stories and plays. His plays are fantastic and touching. One of the most wonderful play is ‘The Other War’. It deals about the Eritrean struggle for independence against the Ethiopian army.

In the first act of the play, we see that both Letiyesus and Hiwot talking about the misbehave of Ethiopian soldiers in the check post. They grabbed her breasts and imitating their voice and gestures. Because of this, she becomes very angry and upset. When she met to her honest friend Hiwot, she described all the details which faced that the check post briefly. Then, they stopped their talking when Astier arrived at home. So, Hiwot decided to go to her home because it was closed for a many hours. Astier told that she had a child called Kitaw.

Letiyesus asked her ‘What is Kitaw? Hiwot said he is her son who has begotten from Assefa. Before she got married to Assefa, she had had an Eritrean man called Zecharias. According to Astier, he is a cruel and drunken man. He treated her very badly. That is why she stood against her own people when she became a chairwoman of the kebele (district administration).

Astier decided to send them for punishment for so who came late to the meeting. They were four women. Atei Hiwot was among the four women. When Letiyesus heard (knew) Hiwot would be punished, she became angry.

E10

Alemseghed's play "The Other War" deals with extended marriage. Assefa, an Amhara wants to marry an Eritrean woman in order to colonize Eritrea by his blood. At that time the people of Eritrea was so resistant against the Ethiopian colonization. That is why the Amharas were fighting against us by intermingling with us. Here Kitaw is the son of Amhara and Eritrea. Assefa had in his mind to give power to rule and administer Eritrea. Kitaw as he was from the Eritrean mother, Astier, would be obeyed by the Eritrean people, and the son as he is from the Ethiopian father to rule Eritrea under their protectorate. The aim was considered as indirect colonization. In this play there six characters and five acts.

In the first act Letiyesus an Eritrean mother, explains her experience on her way to see her family at village. There were many checkpoints by the time. The soldiers were fondling even to the old mothers. They were totally indisciplined soldiers. At the checkpoint there was raping, however there was nobody to hear their problems.

The moment Letiyesus returned to her house, she meets her friend Mother Hiwot. 'when she went to the village, she left her key with her, this is peculiar to Eritreans. She saw her house with some changes and asks to her friend Hiwot.

When she heard that her daughter Astier came with Amhara became annoyed.

Act II

In this act Astier and her mother are quarrelling each other. Letiyesus is not happy to her daughters marriage to Amhara; moreover Astier became the chair woman of the kebele, administrative style of Amhara. Astier also punished to the women who came late to the meeting soon after her election. Therefore she became the weapon against her people. Astier tries to convince about her programme. However the iron willed Letiyesus is ready to help the Eritrean struggle for independence, regardless of Astier's words. She is by the side of her son Mike-el, who is a fighter. Here the difference comes between the mother and the daughter. Solomie the grand daughter of Letiyesus from Eritrean, consoles her grandmother.

Act III

The third Act deals with the party celebrated. It was celebrated for celebrated for the Red Star offensive. This was an offensive intended for total elimination of the EPLF by the Dergue, but it could not work as what they want to be. Here Assefa comes from his bed and requests Solomie for Asprin. After the whole night drinking Assefa tries to know about Miki-el. However Letiyesus could give him no information as he was more interested to know about the position of EPLF than the fighter Miki-el. Then he said to her that her son would be eaten by vultures. Solomie was annoyed and prepared hot water for his feet.

Act IV

In this act Assefa appears in the play annoyed by the grandmother and the grand daughter's relation. Letiyesus regards more on Solomie than to Kitaw. He gave warning to "Letiyesus and Solomie. His wife is now in prison Letiyesus gives no regard to her daughter. But she felt her duty to look after the child Kitaw as grand-mother. And she was agreed to take food for her daughter to the prison, But Assefa told her that there were people who treat her well. When Assefa went from his home. Then the climax of the play comes. Letiyesus decides to out her house with her granddaughter leaving the child alone, but Solomie felt sympathy to her brother Kitaw and told her grandmother to take him with them. Hiwot comes and observes the activity was being taken by Letiyesus and Solomie. She was by the side of Solomie. She supported Kitaw to be taken because she was conscious of the plan of Amhara. Therefore she told the plan then Letiyesus accepted her decision.

Act V

Astier is released from the prison, she found the house empty. There was no one in the house. Assefa was so irritated he suspects to her because he lost his son, not only that but also his plan would not work if his son is taken.

Poor Astier because of her marriage when she was young to an Eritrean husband, she dislike the people because of the poor tradition given an interest to marry too young Eritreans. Now also after she lost the love of her husband Assefa and her people living lonely as prisoner in the house. Assefa who was eager to open her eyes to see the evils behind the curtain now he sentenced to her being prisoner. Therefore Astier saw three prisons directly or indirectly. One when she was married to an Eritrean when she was immature second when she was against her people the third under the jail of the kebele.

Assefa's aim could not work because his son Kitaw is gone to fight against him, in the Eritrean armed struggle.

E11

Alemseged Tesfai is an Eritrean writer, who has been leaving at Adis Abeba with the ministry of finance. While he is working with them, he observes some thing that haunting him to write this play "The Other war". "The Other War" Explaining about the marriage between two different ethnic group.

In the first act of this play, Alemseged shows us that the main actor (Letiyesus) came from the village to Asmara, soon after her arrival to her home she finds her home was disturbed with music. She asks her friend Hiwet what is going the condition. Hiwet told her that her daughter has come from Adis Abeba with her family to live here. Immediately Letiyesus becomes upset, soon after, Astier and her husband enter and her granddaughter Solomie hungs her shoulder.

Here Alemseged wants to convince us that how the Eritrean mother is strong to her aim. During the "Derg" Ethiopian's governs Eritrea, the soldiers were disturbed, killing, ... for Eritreans, and some soldiers look like honest but they are cruel. So Alemseged construct the cruelty of the Amhara and some Eritrean daughters and the bravery of Eritrean mother.

Act two

In this act, Alemseged Tesfai shows us the disagreement of daughter and mother. The Basic problem between Letiyesus and Astier was, The misunderstand of Astier to word Assefa. Letiyesus knows that even if an Amhara laughing they are cruel, their plan were hidden. So she advises her daughter not to be honest with Amhara, but Astier did not accept her mother, she remembered, that when they treated her bad when she was young and gave a marriage to a drunkard Zekarias, because of wealthy. So she was upset over her mother particularly over her father. But Letiyesus began to convince her because of one man (Zekarias) she shouldn't have to take revenge over her own people. Astier become more angry because her mother told her about her people. So according to Astier the Eritreans weren't her own people, they were her enemy whereas the Amhara were her people. So she told her mother to tell her what was her opinion. But Letiyesus advised her that she was taking the way of her own destruction, and "Time will show us". So in this act the theme developed and Alemseged construct the action slowly forward, and we understood that the main problem between Mother and daughter.

Act three

In this act Alemseged shows us the behaviour of Amhar in general and Asefa in particular. In the opening of the act we show that all the groups of Asefa were drunkened at all night. When Hiwet came to inform Letiyesus about Astier that all the members of the kebele hate her and going to put her in prison. Meanwhile Astier and Asefa came and talked to Letiyesus to give them some information about mi-keal. He was cunning to Letiyesus. He want to collect information about the fighters but in vain. Astier helping her husband to get information from her mother. Asefa was foolish to understand the mind of Letiyesus. He seems to be cunning but Letiyesus was cunning more than him. He tries to calm her in order to get information but still in vain, at last he ventures over her that her son was dead. But Letiyesus couldn't become frightened. He told them He will show them what he was going to do. In this act we understood that how the Eritreans fight against the enemy even they were in stree[t]s. For example Soleim warm a hot water and burns his legs.

Act four

In act four, the writer, (shows us) developed the action that, Asefa decided to speak with Letiyesus about Mi-kiel immediately. But Letiyesus refused his question. Then he speaks to her loud and she decided to flew to Ala. She calls Solomie to call her best friend Hiwet. But Solomie asked her grandmother to take Kitow with them but Letiyesus in vain. After soon she accept and flow to Ala. At last Aster came back from the jail and find nothing in the house. Asefa suspect Aster but Astier begs him not to suspect her. At last they knew that all the family with Kitaw joined the wenbede.

In conclusion, we can observe that the writer, wants to convince us that, the miss odyess takes you to your own destruction. And in addition, during the period of struggle to independent, the Eritrean people particularly were not only fighting against the enemy in the battle field they were also fighting against the empire inside the village town, particularly from mixedly the Ethnic group Amhara to any other ethnic groups of Eritrea. Finally we thanks to Alemseged Tesfai that He tries to engage the bravery of Eritrean struggle generally and the bravery of Eritrean woman particularly in this Drama.

E12

In the contemporary African plays "The Other War" at its very beginning act it starts with mother and daughter talking about their opinion and suggestions of who the Amharas look like and are they different from the Eritreans or "Tegaddelti" who fought for their motherland for the independence. Here in this play the main and foremost theme is to know the plans of the enemies (Amhara) the way the have been using to treat or tame the united people of Eritreans whiles they were trying to force them on wars parallely by making racial mixing with the Eritrean unarmed people or civilian then their enemies that the Tegadelti would not be able to get help of their people and the to win the whole war.

Then we have seen and hear that Aster is trying to help the Amharan man and she finally get him marry and begot a child from him. (Assefa). On the way her mother Leteyesus disliked her daughter (Aster) for that she had got married to an enemy man (Assefa) we see in the first Act a little conflict and opposition of her mother that saying her the home of Tegadelti would not be changed to the home of the enemies.

Act -2

In the next Act-2 we have seen and heard that both mother and daughter getting discontent among themselves, due to that Aster had taken a bad or a contrary decisions of her people. Leteyesus disagreed her and informed her that she is doing wrong, she is taking steps against her people, though Aster had elected as a chairwoman. Leteyesus was not happy with that process of election, but Aster looks to take a revenge against her people for that her parents got her married with whom she disliked Zecharias. As compared with Asefa Aster liked Assefa very much unknowingly she was doing till the end of the play.

In Act 3 we/I heard a man's voice in his arrogant sound, here, Assefa trs to understand Leteyesus that he becomes a part of their family having a child from her daughter, but Leteyesus disallowed and disagreed that idea then Assefa asked Solomie to wash his feet with water, then Solomie come with her hot water and she tried to wash his feet in the meantime he senses that the water burnt his feet and he got upset. then he called his Aster to wash him with cold water. finally he understand that both Leteyesus and Solomie are doing against him. then asked a question where Michiel was. following his arrogant voice, he told them that he and his comrades will destroy all the Tegadelti.

At the fourth act we can see that Leteyesus had planned with Hiwot to join the Tegadelti to go to the Eritrean army to the field. having Kitaw who is the son of the Amhara (Assefa) this was done due to the misleading and mistreating of the Amharan army up on the Eritrean people. Or parallel to that in the same act Aster had imprisoned by the kebele then Assefa asked her mother why she do not worry about Aster. through such he suspected Leteyesus that she (Leteyesus) disliked her daughter due to her husband Assefa from the Amhara. then discontent among them arises. Leteyesus then planned her journey to the armed struggle for independence of Eritrea.

In general I have seen and read this play it is so good and I do understand that the people of Eritrea and the Amharan army were not so good and disagree among those who live in their mother land and the Amharan soldiers. Here in this play we can learn that how the people of Eritrea had been giving their support and hate the Amhara's army. on the one hand and the way that the Amhara had been using to tame or seduce the people to become against their son in the struggle on the other hand. then at the end it shows and teaches that the unity of the people with the armed struggle for independence. With make and results to be strong and unchanged at any circumstances.

An overview of Eritrean literature in English

Genre	Title	Author	Date and place of publication	Notes
Poems		various	online	
	<i>We Have our Voice</i> <i>We Invented the Wheel</i>	Reesom Haile	1998, USA 2000, USA	set in parallel with Tigrinya
	<i>Blanket of Sand</i>	Ararat Iyob	1999, USA	set in parallel with Tigrinya
	combat ballads	various	2002, Eritrea	translated from Tigrinya
	<i>Who Needs a Story?</i>	various Eds. Negash and Cantalupo**	2005, Eritrea	translated from Tigrinya, Tigré and Arabic
	<i>Some Sweetly Kept Thoughts</i>	Rahel Asghedom	2005, Eritrea	also includes short narratives
Tales	<i>The Fire on the Mountain and Other Ethiopian Stories</i>	Coulander and Leslau (collectors)	1950, USA	includes Eritrean tales
	<i>Colorful Stories</i>	Various Ed. Rahel Asghedom	2003, Eritrea	
	div. English readers for schools	The English Panel, Dept of General Education	post independence, Eritrea	
	several	'traditional'	http://www.crcstudio.org	translated from Tigrinya
	several	Sahle	PDJF home page	
Essay	"The Heart of a Tegadelai"	Alemseged Tesfai	2002, USA 2008, Eritrea	from <i>Two Weeks in the Trenches</i>
Short narratives	"Shobere" "Grazmatch Tsegu" "Hansu"	Alemseged Tesfai	2002, USA 2008, Eritrea	from <i>Two Weeks in the Trenches</i>
	7 short prose texts and the novella "The Lesser of Two Evils" in <i>Some Sweetly Kept Thoughts</i> * <i>Before She Breaks My Heart</i>	Rahel Asghedom	2005, Eritrea 2008, Eritrea	book also includes poetry a coming-of-age novel
Liberation testimonials	<i>A Painful Season & A Stubborn Hope</i>	Abeba Tesfagiorgis	1992, USA	
	<i>The Final War</i>	Samuel Zeratsion	200?, Eritrea	translated from Tigrinya
	<i>Inside Eritrea's War for Independence: Journey from Nakfa to Nakfa</i>	Tekeste Fekadu	2002, Eritrea	later translated into Tigrinya
	<i>The Tenacity and Resilience of Eritrea 1979 - 1983</i>	Tekeste Fekadu	2008, Eritrea	
	"Two Weeks in the Trenches"	Alemseged Tesfai	2002. USA	from <i>Two Weeks in the</i>

Appendix 13: An overview of Eritrean literature in English

	“At the Battle of Afabet”			<i>Trenches</i>
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Political novels	<i>Riding the Whirlwind</i>	Bereket Habte Selassie	1993, USA	
	<i>Project Babylon: The Beginning</i> <i>Project Babylon: The Second Attempt</i> <i>Messengers of Satan</i>	Kibreab Fre	2002, UK 2005, UK 2005, UK	all self-published
	<i>The Other War*</i> <i>Le’ul</i>	Alemseged Tesfai	2002, USA 2002, USA	
Drama	<i>A Village Dream</i> <i>The Snare</i> <i>Aster</i>	Mesgun Zerai Solomon Dirar Esaias Tseggai	2005, UK	from <i>Three Eritrean Plays</i>
	<i>The Collusion on Eritrea</i> <i>Mass Casualty Management under Unique War Situation</i> <i>Abdominal War Wounds: Challenges to Field Surgeons</i> <i>The Crown and the Pen: The Memoirs of a of a Lawyer Turned Rebel</i>	Bocrestion Haile Tekeste Fekadu Bereket Habte Selassie	2000, 2007, Eritrea 200?, Eritrea 2007, USA	

* indicates texts to which the students responded.

** Cantalupo writes that the production of this book took four years, and involved “a huge cast of performers”. It was also the first Eritrean book to have an ISBN “precisely because the book was seeking an international as well as a national audience” (Cantalupo, 2006: 6).