

By James D. N. Bardis, M.A. Honours, McGill University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada
Visiting Professor of Practical English
Hankuk University of Foreign Studies
Seoul, Republic of Korea

ABSTRACT: A report on the pioneering of a new pedagogy designed to challenge students to use and improve their memory, increase their awareness of logical fallacies and tacitly embedded contradiction(s) and sensitize them to the deeply symbolic nature of thought in all its expressions (math, logos, music, picture and motor skills), as created, by the author, from in situ research at a senior level (ESL) course in Storytelling at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, South Korea's premier university for foreign languages and translation.

As a Visiting Professor of Foreign Languages, I recently had a glorious opportunity to innovate curriculum and teaching techniques in a South Korean university classroom. Under the auspices of teaching senior level thematic courses in English as a Foreign Language, or more specifically, "storytelling," I was blessed with the opportunity to innovate both on the level of curriculum and pedagogy.

But let me backtrack to set up my story from the start. All of this began in a children's ESL class at a private language institute before my tenure at Hankuk, where I was given some newly formed intermediate level English classes for middle school students on a new campus that had yet to form a library. While waiting for my standard textbooks to arrive I began innovating with one of my own children's stories titled *The Tale of the Purple People Eater* (a three page mythic story written in the late 90s. Please see appendix).

In working with this story, because I envisioned presenting it orally (from memory) at first as a way to introduce students to memory arts exercises, I was compelled to read it over many times, which, to my surprise revealed a troubling feature: it was riddled with contradictions in every paragraph. At any rate, with the middle school aged students I only touched on this feature very briefly and focused more on language acquisition exercises. The tale nevertheless impressed upon me this bizarre aspect of language where a story can appear naturally cogent on the surface, but can also come apart at the seams if taken "literally."

Hence, later at Hankuk while teaching Storytelling with a rather dry textbook, I was invited to supplement the class with exercises of my own. Here I was curious to try work shopping the 'Tale of The Purple People Eater' with young adults. This involved three stages: 1) Memory work — or engaging with the unpublished story orally; 2) Exploring the contradictory nature of language and thought; 3) Probing the "deeply-symbolic" nature of meaning.

Of course, all of these levels have a long history of precedence in our civilization. Memory arts — though defunct now — had been highly developed in the ancient world, not least among bards who performed oral recitations from memory of the entire *Illiad* and *Odyssey*. Dialectics — now transmuted into the debate for show and prizes — had a deeper epistemological mission to discover truth and achieve enlightenment (i.e. Socrates, Boethius and St-Augustine). And if it could not be done via contradictory-prone rationality, it would do it by re-attaching or remembering broken meanings via the sym-bol ("throwing together"), as per our lineage of platonic poets who created a world compelling enough to make us ask where Jesus went during his (underworld journey) three days in the crypt? Or, and, on what terrain did Dante travel?

Lets look at all three: Memory work can be very simple: it amounts to an oral recitation of the story in class followed by a homework assignment wherein the students are asked to reproduce the story (in writing) from memory. They can then compare 'notes' in class and by working in groups attempt to produce one version per group of the story in question. In this way

we invite them to engage with ‘live’ stories as did our oral-history ancestors. Likewise, by writing it down (“for the first time”) they are re-living the act of our first bardic writer(s) who wove together a collection of competing versions of a popular legend to produce a standard. Very primal work! If Plato thought that writing meant the end of memory in his time, imagine what smart phones are doing to memory now.

Contradictions too are easy to work with. It suffices to project a written version of the teacher’s story on the classroom screen — no note taking! — and let students have ample time to read it over and over, at first to check with their own memorized version, and later to seek out logical contradictions in the prose. Any way to ‘repair’ the story? Does it lose credibility because of contradictions? Can it be real without being true? Can it be true without being real? Do reality (L. *res* = matter) and truth (Gk. *a-leithea* = un-forgetting) etymologically speaking, share the same domain?

Further, if below the surface-meaning the story falls apart, its apparent mythical meaning immediately is called into question. This is a good time to ask the students to propose a (deeper) interpretation. On the surface, the obvious meaning of the Tale of the Purple People Eater, a world in which a purple ogre predatorily feasted on the purple race of the United Peoples of Benetton (a multi-racial nation representing every “skin colour of the rainbow”), revolves around racism, and indeed everyone save for one, thought the story was about racism.

I, the author, had the challenge of discovering the deeper meaning of my own story. Because it was written inspirationally one morning, the way we might record the memory of a dream from the night before in a journal, I also was ignorant of the story’s meaning. As luck would have it, a few days before I was to give my class feedback on their interpretations, a meditation on the color “purple” led to the book “The Color Purple” which I first heard of from a friend who, in my reply to a question about the book she was reading (in 1985), summarized it succinctly in one sentence about a black woman’s sexual awakening and liberation. I quickly got the book from the university library as well as the film which I viewed several times before my next class.

To my utter amazement, after reading the Tale of the Purple People Eater in light of the Color Purple and adjusting the meaning of color in the tale from the color of people’s complexion to the “color of people’s souls” (to commensurate with the film) as depicted in their clothing and other accoutrements (e.g. automobiles) as reflective of the “health of their souls” (white for revolt, purple for majesty, etc...) where the enslaved Celie is surrounded by drab lifeless colors in the beginning of the film in contrast to the liberated woman she has become in the end of the story symbolized by the extraordinary intensity of the purple shawl that bedecks her like an African queen, the tale can be considered, in part, as a kind of back story of the inner evolution of the book’s and film’s protagonist.

Many other cross-polenised metaphors come to the fore: Hippocrates in the tale is the mail man in the film; St-Yves anti-ageing gel is a metaphor for remaining in “childhood (sexual) slavery”; the Ex-Thrax vaccine is the spiritual laxative in the form of letters from Africa (from Ex-Lax and Thrace, a “wild place”) that eases Celie out of her yoke; the egg-shaped conference table with the pointy end in the tale is the kitchen table in the last meeting where Celie threatens her husband with the pointy end of the knife in the film...

Of course, the students could not be expected to decode the meaning of a story of this nature whose collective unconscious connotations the author himself had to go to great lengths to excavate almost like a detective of the subconscious. What was important here was the shared engagement between mind and narrative and how it acted as a vehicle for 1) re-remembering, 2) becoming aware that all language is a metaphorical cover and 3) that the deep symbol and fused metaphor are divided not by external time and space but by external reality (in the Latin sense, *res*) and internal truth (in the Greek sense, *aleithea*). Myth then, in its highest meaning is a hybrid form (of these two) of narrative. Hence both parts real and true.

ONCE UPON A TIME in the land of Benetton there lived people of many different colours. And they lived for a very long time because they used a very special cream on their skin called the St-Ives anti-ageing gel. Sometimes they even used this gel to brush their teeth, especially when they thought that they may soon be getting into a fight.

But the odd fight here and there was not a major problem for the many coloured people of Benetton. On the whole they had learned to live in peace and harmony. Then one day, a purple people eater showed up out of nowhere. He was a big fat purple ogre who loved to gorge out on the purple people of the United Peoples of Benetton. How he got into the country nobody knows. But there he was searching out the purple people for breakfast, lunch and supper.

This soon became a problem for the unity of the United Peoples of Benetton. Because the number of purple people diminished which affected the country's population colour code statistics. Meaning that the lower number of purple people, with each passing generation, changed the hue and saturation of all the other colours of the United Peoples of Benetton. Their colours started to blend and they all started to look more alike.

To remedy this, the country's authorities, the white people, who were now all a deep pearl colour, or even worse, some were starting to look pink, mustard yellow and even olive green—you know, sickly looking—they decided to import more purple people from other countries. At first the white authorities were happy with this solution, and indeed, it seemed to be a real solution as the colour codes were beginning to revert back to their original pure spectrum.

But then, after a few generations, the purple people started sprouting teeny-weeny polka-dot bikinis on their skin. As soon as the white authorities noticed this they quickly quarantined the purple people to keep the polka-dots from spreading and contaminating the rest of the United Colours of Benetton.

Well, you can only imagine what a problem this created for the big fat purple people eater. He got so mad that he started to eat the white people. Then the white people got alarmed and had a very very long committee meeting around a giant egg-shaped table where the three presidents sat at the pointy end.

One idea they had was to allow the purple people eater into the quarantine pen and let him eat the purple people there. But then they feared that after the supply of purple people ran out the purple people eater would turn around and eat from the other colours. So they decided to import more purple people from other countries, coaxing them into believing that a good life was waiting for them in the United Peoples of Benetton. And then, quickly, before they could mate and spread their polka-dots, they would be kidnapped and delivered to the quarantine's cantina for the purple people eater's dinner.

Well this worked for a while. But eventually the purple people eater also sprouted a green polka-dot bikini on his skin and became very ill. The rest of the population outside the quarantine was beginning to mix colours again and look like a dirty cream of celery soup.

So another committee meeting around the egg-shaped table was called with the three presidents presiding at the pointy end. They had to figure out how to purify their population and also heal the purple people eater. The key seemed to lie in curing the green polka-dots. They needed a vaccine. But first they had to figure out if the disease was viral or bacterial. So they called in a famous expert named Hippocrates who was also, as luck would have it, purple.

They gave Hippocrates his own research lab and he quickly set himself to the task. A year later the great doctor presented the egg-shaped committee with an anti-viral vaccine named ex-thrax. They quickly tested it on a statistically relevant population sample and — Eureka! It worked like a charm. They eradicated the polka-dot virus, healed the purple people eater and set him free to eat the infinite supply of pre-vaccinated purple people that could now be imported into the country.

Only, later a new complication emerged. The ex-thrax vaccine, it turned out had some side effects. It neutralised the effects of the St-Ives anti-ageing gel. Remember the anti-ageing gel? And we all know what that meant; since, the anti-ageing gel was calibrated differently for each colour group guaranteeing an equally long life for everyone. Without the gel, the United Peoples of Benetton, were left to age according to their colour group's organic code. Some aged quickly and died early, before they even had a chance to mate and pass on the colour of their genes. Others, despite the gel's name, lived even longer without it and mated for several generations over.

You could imagine the problems that this caused! Yes, indeed. The whole colour population spectrum scrambled as never before — some colour groups merged into ugly mongrel tones, others separated into new irritatingly dark shades. But worst of all, since pure purple no longer existed, the purple people eater became confused and mad and started eating from many of the other neighbouring colours.

Then, the whites decided, in their last committee meeting, to keep their colour unchanged. They stopped vaccinating themselves and they forbade their children to consort with the other colours of Benetton. In this way, they each remained first among equals which they would proudly shout out for all to hear: "one for all and all for one!" They all lived to the same median age and remained immune from the purple people eater's appetite.

But of course, they had to pay a price for their immunity. They had to endure their children who would walk around all summer with that dreadful green polka-dot bikini stitched to their skin!

