'It actually painted a picture of the village and the sea and the bottom of the sea': Reading groups, cultural legitimacy, and description in narrative (with particular reference to John Steinbeck's *The Pearl*)

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‘It actually painted a picture of the village and the sea and the bottom of the sea’: Reading groups, cultural legitimacy, and description in narrative (with particular reference to John Steinbeck’s *The Pearl*)

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Abstract
This article proposes a form of research that integrates reader study with textual analysis. Its purpose is to investigate the social production of literary value, potentially providing cultural sociology with a systematic means by which to study the formal features of texts in relation to their social significance: a means arguably required by (but not necessarily supplied in) the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Quantitative and qualitative analysis of reading group (or ‘book club’) discussions reveals an association between descriptive writing, cultural legitimacy, and a focus on the form, rather than the content, of fictional texts. In order to understand this association, the analysis then turns to two paragraphs from John Steinbeck’s *The Pearl* (2000 [1946]), which had been read by most of the groups involved and which many group members had referred to as involving ‘description’. It is argued that a long-standing tradition of association between descriptive writing and visual art has served as a resource both for consumers and for producers in distinguishing literature from popular fiction.

Keywords
book clubs, description, emic categories, legitimate culture, narratology, *The Pearl*, reading groups, reception, sociology of literature, Steinbeck

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Introduction: Emic categories and internal analysis

In this article I would like to propose a form of literary research that is sociological in two senses: first, it begins with social research on real readers, and second, it draws on and seeks to contribute to an understanding of the social mechanisms of cultural legitimation, that is (in this case), the production of a situation in which some texts will count as valued works of literature and others will not (being taken to belong to non-literary or sub-literary textual genres). Most forms of literary criticism either actively participate in or implicitly presuppose the evaluation of literary works. Thus, Short argues that, apart from interpretation and evaluation, nothing done with a literary work ‘would ... be of interest unless the culture to which the particular work belongs had decided that the writing concerned was valuable.’ (Short, 1996: 2) Evaluation by critics is explicitly a part of the process by which particular writings are established as valuable (and others are not); as I have argued elsewhere, interpretation by critics implicitly participates in the same process (Allington, 2006). By contrast, the approach proposed here takes the social process of the ‘deciding’ of literary value for its object of study. This is not in itself a new idea (see eg. Ohmann, 1983 and Bell, 2000), although it is one that has been marginalized by the mainstream of literary study.

Many sociologists who study literature eschew all ‘internal’ analysis of literary texts, concentrating instead on the ‘external’ analysis of literary institutions. Although this position was rejected by the influential sociologist of culture, Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1993a [1986]), the latter proposed no systematic methodology for textual analysis, so the suspicion remains that any attempt to establish a relationship between a text’s internal features and its social significance will (as Verdaasdonk 1985 argues) simply reflect the normative standpoint of the analyst. In this article, my aim is to suggest a methodology that may to some extent allay that suspicion by grounding internal analysis in emic categories drawn from readers’ (and perhaps also writers’) discourse. Anthropologists and ethnographers define emic categories as ‘significant indigenous cultural categories’ (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007: 194), in other words categories that research subjects make use of in the course of their cultural practices. These are contrasted with etic categories: categories devised by theorists and researchers, and not treated as significant within the research subjects’ culture.

For the purposes of this article, the most important emic categories are what Bourdieu calls ‘the categories which are used to perceive and appreciate the work of art’ (Bourdieu, 1993b [1987]: 262). To find out what these might be, I first apply quantitative and qualitative analysis to reading group discourse in order to identify and investigate some of the categories that readers use in their classifications and evaluations of texts and of the constituent parts of texts. Then I attempt to employ these categories in analysing one of the texts that had been the object of that discourse. Because this discourse turns out to be redolent of a long-standing tradition of writing and thinking about art and literature, I suggest that the text in question may have been written in anticipation of such categorization.

I would argue that the analytic process adopted here may enable us to understand both the evaluation of texts from particular normative standpoints and the construction of those texts as objects designed for evaluation from particular normative standpoints. The general principle is to start with what Radway calls the ‘important differences among novels for those who read them’ (Radway, 1987 [1984]: 50, emphasis in original), then turn to the texts themselves, reading them (as it were) over one’s research subjects’ shoulders.
Data collection

The data discussed here were gathered for the Discourse of Reading Groups project, carried out at the Open University with the support of a grant from the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (see Allington, 2011; O’Halloran, 2011; Swann and Allington, 2009). This project, on which I was employed full-time, involved the observation and audio recording of 15 British reading groups, and the observation without audio recording of a 16th. All groups pre-existed the project. Most were observed on two separate occasions, with the second meeting being in most cases devoted to the Penguin Classics edition of John Steinbeck’s *The Pearl* (Steinbeck, 2000 [1946]) and the first to a book of each group’s own choosing. Recordings were transcribed verbatim and compared with researcher field notes.

Although reading groups (or ‘book clubs’) hold tremendous academic interest as a site of real-world ‘reader response’, it is necessary to exercise caution. It might be tempting to see them as prelapsarian interpretative communities uninfluenced by academic and other authority, but much social research would suggest this to be naive. Bourdieu’s survey research suggests that all cultural consumption is socially stratified (Bourdieu, 1986 [1979]), a conclusion that is supported by much existing empirical work on literature, reading, and reading groups. As surveys in a number of countries have shown, book-reading is a relatively exclusive activity, and the reading of the most legitimate books, ‘literary’ novels in particular, is confined on the whole to highly educated people in middle-class occupations (see e.g. Bennett et al., 1999; Bukodi, 2007; Prieur et al., 2008). In perhaps the most ambitious such survey, Bennett and colleagues find that, in Britain, ‘the field of book reading is still overwhelmingly populated by the educated middle classes’ (Bennett et al., 2009: 106), while, as for the working class as a whole, ‘[i]ts principal defining features are its lack of participation [in most cultural pursuits] and its dislike of legitimate culture’ (Bennett et al., 2009: 212). The same study finds that the reading of canonical literature is very rare, and that ‘[t]hose few interviewees who choose modern literature titles are, predictably, rich in cultural capital, graduates and professionals in “cultural” occupations of various kinds’ (Bennett et al., 2009: 100). This suggests that reading groups may in their literacy practices be closer to academics than to the average citizen: in her groundbreaking ethnographic research on reading groups, Long found that they tend to read books, especially novels, and that these tend to be of a type sanctioned by cultural authority (Long, 1986, 2003). Moreover, Hartley’s survey research reveals a tendency among reading groups to select books that have won literary prizes (Hartley, 2002: 155), interest in which has been found to be confined to ‘the professional middle classes’ (Bennett et al., 2009: 101), and which are themselves an expression of cultural authority and an instrument of legitimation. Lastly, reading group participation is often identified as a *typically* middle-class activity (e.g. Long, 1986: 591), and is arguably continuous with other middle-class cultural practices. For example, where reading groups meet in members’ homes, they have been argued to exhibit similarities with other forms of middle-class hospitality or ‘entertaining’ vis-à-vis the display of the home and the serving of food (Tyler, 2007).

When we study reading group activity, then, we are not studying reading in the abstract, but a social practice with specific relationships to cultural legitimacy and to social stratification – and as we shall see, reading group members often orient to these relationships in their spoken discourse.
Analysis I: Keywords in the discourse of reading groups

The first stage of analysis was quantitative, involving the computer-driven corpus analysis of just over a quarter of a million words of verbatim transcript. The aim was to gain a sense of what textual categories might be salient for the participating groups, the assumption being that at least some of these categories might correspond to words that (a) occur with unusually high frequency in reading group discussion and (b) have the clear potential to refer to aspects or characteristics of the books being discussed.

In corpus analysis, it is customary to compare word frequencies within the language corpus under analysis with word frequencies within a ‘reference corpus’ considered typical of language use more generally, with log-likelihood generally being considered the best measure of statistical significance.\(^2\) The log-likelihood of a lexical item is referred to as its ‘keyness’, which is customarily treated as a measure of the item’s over-use or underuse relative to its expected frequency of occurrence in the corpus under analysis, taking its frequency within the reference corpus as the assumed norm. Thus, while a log-likelihood of 6.63 is sufficient to indicate significance at the level of \(p < 0.01\), log-likelihood is also conventionally used to compare the relative importance of items within a corpus: the higher the log-likelihood, the more ‘key’ an item’s presence or absence is assumed to be.

In this particular analysis, Wordsmith Keywords was used to compare the corpus of reading group discussions with the million-word spoken conversation section of the 2004 BNC Baby corpus. The materials within the BNC Baby Corpus were selected to provide a balance of text types and speech situations (see Burnard, 2008), and so using it as a reference corpus arguably provides a meaningful comparison between British reading group conversations and British conversations more generally. The resulting keyword list was scrutinized for words that could be assumed to refer to formal features of the texts being discussed. Wordsmith Wordlists 5.0 was used to identify the frequencies with which these words occurred in the spoken sub-corpus of BNC Baby and in the corpus of reading group discussions. Words occurring five times or fewer in reading group discussions (e.g. ‘stylized’ and ‘stylistic’, which occurred just once each) were removed from the analysis. Morphologically related words were treated as lemmas, and keyness of words and lemmas in the project corpus relative to the BNC Baby spoken sub-corpus was recalculated. Table 1 presents the results.

The most key item in the table is the ‘character/characters’ lemma, with both of these words appearing over 100 times each in the project’s spoken corpus. By contrast, morphologically related words referring to the constructed nature of characters occurred very rarely: thus, ‘characterize’ (one occurrence), ‘characterizations’ (one occurrence), ‘characterized’ (unused) and ‘characterization’ (five occurrences, including two in a single utterance due to self-correction) were excluded from the analysis. This suggests the need for future studies investigating reading group discussion of characters, and may reflect Long’s observation that reading group members ‘often respond directly to fictional characters as if they were real people, discussing whether they like or dislike, admire or despise them, rather than focusing on how or why authors may have constructed such characters’ (Long, 1986: 606). Bennett and colleagues argue for the existence of a form of ‘emotional capital’ accumulated and displayed in talking about people, relationships, and feelings, and suggest that it is a particularly important factor in the reading behaviour of female
consumers (Bennett et al., 2009: 103); given that the majority of participants in the Discourse of Reading Groups study (and all the participants in Long’s research) were female, this may provide a partial explanation for the foregoing factors and a useful hypothesis for investigation in future research.

The lemma including ‘write’ is the most frequently used word or lemma in the table, although (as we shall see) this may be because it is usable to discuss diverse aspects of a novel; its keyness (though still very high) was lower than that of ‘character/characters’ because of its much higher frequency in the reference corpus. Informal correlation with a thematic analysis carried out on reading group discussions using the ATLAS.ti software package (see Swann and Allington, 2009 for details) found well under half the instances of this lemma in the corpus to appear within utterances that human coders had recognized as involving discussion of written language. By contrast, the great majority of instances of the word ‘language’ and of the lemma including ‘describe’ appeared in quotations coded in this way. The word ‘style’ also occurred for the most part within ATLAS.ti quotations coded for discussion of language, but has lower keyness than any of the ones just mentioned. The lemma including ‘story’ has a keyness between that of the lemma including ‘describe’ and that of the lemma including ‘write’, but (as one might expect) occurred less frequently than either of these in episodes coded for language discussion – as did ‘plot’, which has a rather lower keyness than any of the others except ‘style’ and ‘language’.

### Analysis II: ‘Wordy descriptive stuff’ and ‘an exercise in beautiful writing’

As we have seen, quantitative analysis can suggest a great deal about a corpus of spoken discourse, giving an overall impression of how it differs from a corpus assumed to reflect ‘normal’ usage. However, a richer understanding of such patterns can often be gained by
re-examining the same corpus on a qualitative level. For this reason, we shall now move from computer corpus analysis of reading group transcripts to qualitative analysis of items drawn from the entire dataset, including researcher field notes.

Qualitative examination of instances of ‘language’, ‘writing’ and ‘description’ and morphologically related words supports the inference that the language of texts was frequently discussed through categorization as ‘description’. The following refers to The Pearl:

A1 what did you think to the language?
A2 I quite liked some of the language the song of the family and the description at the beginning of this perfect life and then it got screwed up.

Words related to ‘writing’ may be more ambiguous than ‘language’ or ‘description’. For the academic critic, the word ‘writing’ would seem to apply primarily to a writer’s diction, and other elements of his or her prose style. But in the discourse of many other people, it can refer to almost any aspect of the writer’s craft. For example, the bestselling science fiction author and editor Ben Bova defines ‘the four main aspects of fiction writing’ (emphasis added) as ‘character, background, conflict, and plot’ (Bova, 1994: 4): a list that not only includes items other than prose style, but actually excludes prose style.

Moreover, in general use, ‘well-written’ and ‘badly-written’ often appear to function as synonyms of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ when applied to texts. Radway finds that, though the romance readers she studied often used the term ‘well written’ to evaluate texts, they had no interest in writers’ use of language: she notes that while, in the context of literary criticism, ‘well written’ might be used ‘to single out [a] writer’s unusual abilities at description or at finding unique ways to reorder perception’, these readers used the term to refer to ‘the exceptional nature of a plot or the likeable personality of the heroine or the hero’ (Radway, 1987 [1984]: 189–190).

In the data analysed here, uses of words morphologically related to ‘writing’ were often followed by uses of words morphologically related to ‘describe’, as in ‘I thought it was well written a lot of descriptive passages in it’. The co-text often emphasized visual perception, as in ‘I thought the writing was absolutely wonderful as all the descriptions for it were amazing I thought it actually painted a picture of the village and the sea and the bottom of the sea’. Such discourse may signal more definitively that one’s enjoyment of a novel stems from one’s appreciation of its prose style – and not, as with Radway’s readers, the characters or the plot.

This contrast is significant. Bourdieu finds ‘the affirmation of the primacy ... of the mode of representation over the object of representation’ – in the case of literature, the practice of ‘draw[ing] attention to language’ (what literary theorists call foregrounding) – to be the most characteristic principle of ‘cultural legitimacy regarding both the production and the reception of an art-work’ (Bourdieu, 1993c [1985]: 117). Moreover, it is clear that the educational system encourages attention to the mode of representation, as when students of literature are explicitly taught to focus on the fine linguistic detail of texts (diction, metre, deviation, and so on). We might therefore expect invocations of emic categories like ‘description’ and ‘story’ to imply attitudes towards legitimate and popular culture. By expressing a taste or distaste for a writer’s textual strategy vis-à-vis writing/description and story, a reader can be argued to take a stance with regard to the mode and object of representation, and thus to legitimate and popular culture.
This may indeed have been the case for our research participants. For example, one teenage reader said, ‘I think he described things too much I swear the whole first chapter was describing the morning it was so boring’, and a member of a bookshop group complained ‘there were a lot of descriptions of day-to-day as I was sort of reading and thinking ... come on let’s get on with the story’. In these examples, too much ‘describing’ is grounds for negative evaluation – as in the responses the latter reader received from the other three members of her group, who contradicted her by playing down the quantity of ‘description’ in the book rather than by arguing in favour of ‘description’ per se (‘I don’t think it was too bad’; ‘it’s quite quick actually’; ‘it’s only a page or two’). As we shall see, there is evidence that some writers of popular fiction may expect their readers to be bored by long descriptions, and by anything else that attracts attention to language rather than to plot. Such distaste for ‘description’ can perhaps be related to the same group’s more overt rejection of cultural legitimacy in reading: when this group was interviewed, one member stated that ‘if there was somebody here who was ... a bit more literary-criticky then that would put me off coming’, prompting another to comment (to general agreement) ‘we’re more into the story of a book aren’t we rather than the way it was written or the style or something’. This particular group was exceptional in its apparently unanimous rejection of cultural legitimacy, but its doing so should remind us that there is diversity in all cultural practices. Bourdieu found enthusiasm for legitimate culture to be concentrated in the more intellectual fractions of the French middle classes (Bourdieu, 1986 [1979]), a finding apparently replicated in the UK, where ‘higher-education teachers, media workers, artists, and the old professions’ are the most enthusiastic for legitimate culture (Bennett et al., 2009: 181). And it is likely that many other factors than occupation may influence a person’s attitudes to legitimate culture, including his or her parents’ occupations: survey research in Hungary suggests that the most legitimate texts tend to be read by ‘high-status people coming from high-status family backgrounds’ (Bukodi, 2007: 125), for example. Lastly, it is obvious that, while reading groups are strongly associated with the middle classes, not all reading group members will be middle class.

That reading a book for prose not plot implies a ‘literary-criticky’ identification with legitimate culture was also suggested elsewhere. In another bookshop group’s discussion of Orhan Pamuk’s Snow (Pamuk, 2004), one reader referred to that particular work as ‘a very literary novel’, receiving the response, ‘we’re not gonna criticize it for being literary are we’. On being asked by a third reader what she had meant by ‘literary’, the first explained that she meant that Snow was ‘an exercise in ... beautiful writing’ rather than a piece of ‘story-telling’. These stated position-takings become all the more salient when we take into account the wider ethnographic context of these cultural practices: located in a mall, the shop whose reading group declared itself to be ‘into the story of a book’ is an ordinary branch of a chain of general interest bookshops; located in a historic building opposite an ancient university library, the shop whose group is ‘not gonna criticise [Snow] for being literary’ is the flagship branch of a chain of primarily academic bookshops. The novels chosen by these two groups were very different, with the former often choosing thrillers and bestsellers while the latter consistently picked ‘literary’ works: tellingly, this latter group refused to read and discuss The Pearl on the grounds that it had already done so. Even the beverages consumed were socially marked: despite the
explosion in their availability over the last decade, the lattes and cappuccinos consumed by the mall bookshop group are still a relatively upmarket form of coffee in Britain; nonetheless, they have none of the exclusiveness of the good quality red and white wine consumed by the academic bookshop group. What the discourse of these reading groups suggests is that the work of distinction is performed not only through differential cultural consumption, but also through justification of evaluations through differential orientation to categories such as ‘description’ and ‘story’.

Interestingly, there is evidence that this can occur almost irrespective of the evaluations’ specific valence: the teenage reader evaluated *The Pearl* negatively because of the ‘describing’, while the first-mentioned bookshop group evaluated it positively in spite of the same thing; by contrast, groups that might be interpreted as having a stronger ‘high-brow’ affiliation tended to orientate to the category ‘description’ very differently in the course of their evaluations. Such readers commonly praised *The Pearl* not in spite of but for its descriptions, as in the statement that ‘the writing was beautiful the descriptions of the landscape were amazing’ – a comment made to general agreement in a reading group of teachers. In one case, positive evaluation of *The Pearl*’s descriptions was mitigated by negative evaluation of ‘wordy descriptive stuff’ in general:

B1  I thought the descriptions of the village and the village life were wonderful and again I don’t usually like sort of wordy descriptive stuff you know I just sometimes I find it a bit I don’t know poncey and a bit um yeah just a bit wordy you know
B2  mm hmm
B1  I to be honest I’ve I found my eyes skipping
B3  yeah
B1  you know when it gets very long and
B2  mm hmm
B1  but I didn’t with that I thought it was all really to the point in um you wi– you could really imagine the landscape
B3  yes

As with the teenage reader who disliked *The Pearl*, description is associated with boredom: ‘I’ve ... found my eyes skipping’. The term ‘wordy’ is intriguing, as it implies that the medium of representation has been extended beyond the requirements of its object; suggestively, the bestselling crime novelist Elmore Leonard identifies ‘the part that readers tend to skip’ as ‘thick paragraphs of prose you can see have too many words in them’ (Leonard, 2001: 1, emphasis added). But the term ‘poncey’ is perhaps the most interesting thing. ‘Ponce’ is a pejorative British slang term for a homosexual and/or pretentious man, and may have been one of the two words that provoked the aesthete Oscar Wilde’s disastrous libel suit against the homophobic Marquis of Queensbury. ‘Poncey’ is defined as follows: ‘Affected, pretentious, self-consciously refined or superior; overly fancy or elaborate; effeminate, homosexual’ (Oxford English Dictionary, 2007). The phrase ‘self-consciously refined or superior’ recalls IA Richards’s elitist fear of popular hostility towards ‘superior persons’ who implicitly claim to possess more ‘refined’ taste than the majority (Richards, 1966 [1924]: 36–37). And the association of effeminacy and
homosexuality with producers or consumers of ‘high’ culture certainly has precedent. For example, the fictional Gordon Comstock applies the word ‘pansy’ to the ‘coterie of moneyed highbrows’ he imagines behind the scenes of the *Primrose Quarterly* poetry journal (Orwell, 1997 [1936]: 84). What complicates this in the current instance, however, is that the category ‘wordy descriptive stuff’ is only set up in order to be disassociated from descriptions in *The Pearl*. This may have been prompted by the group leader’s introduction of the group to two new members (one being B1):

**B2** I’ll just run through what we usually do we usually just we ehm we talk about the book everyone gets a chance to speak and ehm we don’t have any great in-depth philosophical discussions about it

Thus, B1’s negative orientation to ‘wordy descriptive stuff’ may serve to head off any implication that, in positively evaluating the descriptions in *The Pearl*, she is acting ‘superior’ among people who ‘don’t have any great in-depth philosophical discussions’. Of course, B2’s introductory statement may simply have been an attempt to reassure B1 and the other newcomer that high levels of cultural capital are not an entry requirement! But as has been shown elsewhere (Swann and Allington, 2009), one of the key factors structuring reading group discussion may be members’ desire to protect their own and one another’s ‘face’ (Goffman, 1955) – arguably a factor in both speakers’ contributions.

**Analysis III: ‘A wash, a glow, a lightness’**

Although the analysis in the previous section has suggested much of interest with regard to the cultural significance of ‘writing’, ‘description’, and ‘story’ in the context of informal reading groups, it has remained a resolutely external analysis, leaving open all questions regarding the *referents* of these terms. If we can accept a turn towards a looser form of analysis, however, I would argue that discourse such as that already analysed can provide a basis for attempts to investigate the form of cultural artefacts such as novels.

In several cases, it was description of the physical environment that reading group members singled out for comment and evaluation. If the language of a text is most discussible when it has been used to describe, it may be the case that it is especially so when it has been used to describe the physical environment, which (being relatively static) is easily opposed to the plot (whose essence is change). Moreover, it offers obvious parallels with one of the great traditions of modern figurative painting, ‘landscape’ – the most universally liked form of art in Bennett et al.’s survey (Bennett et al., 2009: Table 7.2) and in several cases the very word used by reading group members in discussing particular cases of description. As noted earlier, the metaphor of ‘painting a picture’ was also available for use in this same connection.

This is not in itself surprising. The comparison of descriptive writing and painting has become commonplace, and was perhaps most influentially made in Lessing’s argument that ‘actions are the peculiar subject of poetry’, that is, *belles lettres*, while ‘bodies, with their visible properties, are the peculiar objects of painting’ (Lessing, 1853 [1766]: 101). On that view, texts that take visible properties for their object are understood to have
become painting-like. But while Lessing saw this simply as a fault, he was writing at a time when excessively descriptive writing was frequently condemned by rhetoricians; as Hamon shows, the 19th century saw a change in attitudes, when ‘[t]he “pomp” of description, which Boileau categorized in the epic, or the descriptive “luxury” so strongly condemned by a certain Lamy for moral reasons’ was reconceived as ‘stylistic know-how and total artistic value’ (1981: 21). This was of course the same period which Bourdieu argues to have seen the emergence and consolidation of the autonomous literary field, with its valorization of form (Bourdieu, 1996 [1992]). Together with changes in the relative status of writing and painting, this may contribute to an explanation of the association between descriptive writing, visual art, and legitimate culture.

Although what we now call visual art was once regarded as inferior to belles lettres, this relationship was to some extent reversed in the early 20th century, so that Bourdieu is able to write of a perceived ‘lag of literature behind painting’ (1996 [1992]: 138) in the quest for avant-garde autonomy. Indeed, visual art is now the ‘art’ most straightforwardly identifiable with the word: in British higher education, for example, one learns to make paintings and sculptures at an ‘art school’, while one learns to make poems and stories on a ‘creative writing’ course. Furthermore, among the forms of visual art, it is painting that now holds the greatest legitimacy: with few exceptions (such as Donatello and Rodin), the artists most central to legitimate culture in the West are painters (such as Rembrandt and Monet) and painter-sculptors (such as Michelangelo and Picasso). Invoking categories such as ‘landscape’ and ‘painting’ in discussion of a book might thus seem an effective way of establishing that one views it as legitimate. And constructing a book with features that invite such categorization – extended passages detailing the visual characteristics of natural vistas – might be taken as a recognizable bid for legitimate status. As we shall see, there are grounds for applying such an interpretation to Steinbeck’s writing of The Pearl.

Because so many participating groups discussed The Pearl, we can form a fairly good idea of what they considered ‘description’ to be. Different groups made reference to descriptions located in the first part of the first chapter, as can be seen earlier in quotations mentioning descriptions of ‘this perfect life’ and ‘the morning’. The following paragraph comes early on:

The dawn came quickly now, a wash, a glow, a lightness, and then an explosion of fire as the sun arose out of the Gulf. Kino looked down to cover his eyes from the glare. He could hear the pat of the corncakes in the house and the rich smell of them on the cooking plate. The ants were busy on the ground, big black ones with shiny bodies, and little dusty quick ants. Kino watched with the detachment of God while a dusty ant frantically tried to escape the sand trap an ant lion had dug for him. A thin, timid dog came close and, at a soft word from Kino, curled up, arranged its tail neatly over its feet, and laid its chin delicately on the pile. It was a black dog with yellow-gold spots where its eyebrows should have been. It was a morning like other mornings and yet perfect among mornings. (Steinbeck, 2000 [1946]: 6–7)

This passage is focalized through Kino, the fisherman and pearl diver, whose senses perceive the details described – a matter whose connection to the texts of legitimate culture has already been suggested. But it may initially be difficult to see why it was repeatedly picked out as an instance of ‘description’, since it is not, as Sternberg puts it in his critique of
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Lessing, ‘[o]riented to the statics of the world’ (Sternberg, 1981: 61): as a continuous sequence of states, a morning would appear to fall into the category of ‘actions’, at least as defined by Lessing: ‘[o]bjects, whose wholes or parts are consecutive’ (Lessing, 1853 [1766]: 101). However, we should remember that the reading groups studied appeared to discuss descriptive writing in terms not of a contrast between spatiality and temporality, but of a contrast between writing (in the sense of prose style) and story. Though full of events, this extract contains not a single ‘kernel’ (Chatman, 1978), and thus cannot advance the story being told: it is not just that no events beyond the paragraph causally depend upon events within it, but that (with the very minor exception of the ‘soft word from Kino’ that leads the dog to lie down) the events within it do not depend upon one another. Events are presented not in a chain of causes and effects such as might constitute a plot, but simply as typical occurrences in a ‘morning like other mornings’. This recalls Sternberg’s notion of a cline from narrative to descriptive writing, the descriptive pole of which is characterized by an organization in which ‘spatial items are ... strung along a chronological line rather than into a causal chain’ (Sternberg, 1981: 75). I would argue that it can thus be regarded as an instance of what Mosher calls ‘descriptised narration’ (Mosher, 1991), in other words, narrative-like discourse that fulfils a descriptive, rather than a narrative, function. Its affinity with the visual arts is emphasized by the fact that, with the exception of the cooking (heard and smelt), each event appears primarily as a visual spectacle. This is most pronounced in the case of the dawn, narrated as a succession of abstract images: ‘a wash, a glow, a lightness, and then an explosion of fire’. The association becomes explicit with the word ‘wash’, where a visual effect is suggested by the technical term for the means by which a painter would reproduce it.

The second chapter begins with five paragraphs of what different groups also referred to as ‘description’ (see, for example, the above-quoted remark about ‘the village and the sea and the bottom of the sea’). All these paragraphs detail urban or natural vistas (one underwater). The fourth is as follows:

Although the morning was young, the hazy mirage was up. The uncertain air that magnified some things and blotted out others hung over the whole Gulf so that all sights were unreal and vision could not be trusted; so that sea and land had the sharp clarities and the vagueness of a dream. Thus it might be that the people of the Gulf trust things of the spirit and things of the imagination, but they do not trust their eyes to show them distance or clear outline or any optical exactness. Across the estuary from the town one section of mangroves stood clear and telescopically defined, while another mangrove clump was a hazy black-green blob. Part of the far shore disappeared into a shimmer that looked like water. There was no certainty in seeing, no proof that what you saw was there or was not there. And the people of the Gulf expected all places were that way, and it was not strange to them. A copper haze hung over the water, and the hot morning sun beat on it and made it vibrate blindingly. (Steinbeck, 2000 [1946]: 17–18)

Here there are no events at all, merely the visual details of a timeless vista, static as a painting – unless one counts as changes in state the minuscule and directionless movements of a continuous (and illusory) vibration. While in the previous example, one of the book’s main characters is explicitly stated to observe and (minimally) interact with what is being described, here there is no-one in particular doing the perceiving: not even the
‘people of the Gulf’ who habitually perceive such vistas. But perception is, if anything, more strongly emphasized than before. Many of the words used serve to structure an opposition both of whose terms refer to the experience of seeing rather than the reality of the thing seen: that is, an opposition between lucidity (‘magnified’, ‘sharp clarities’, ‘clear’, ‘telescopically defined’) and obscurity (‘hazy mirage’, ‘uncertain air’, ‘blotted out’, ‘vagueness’, ‘hazy’, ‘shimmer’, ‘copper haze’, ‘blindingly’). And between the sentences in which the view is – how else to put it? – described are interspersed comments on the psychology of perception.

Although the paragraph makes no reference to visual art, we can draw an analogy between its highly accomplished performance of descriptive writing and the landscapes and seascapes of the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists. In these works, as in Steinbeck’s description of the view across the estuary, the subject matter is not the terrain surveyed, but its perceptibility from a given point, at a given moment, and under given conditions, as a purely visual phenomenon: ‘When Monet opened his eyes, he saw blocks of colour, surface patterns, the very air, as defined by light: and the impressions he received were his subject matter on canvas’ (Heinrich, 2000: 32). The poet Gustave Mallarmé – arch-aesthete and contemporary of the Impressionists – described his ambition for a new poetics as follows: ‘Paint, not the thing, but the effect it produces’ (1864, quoted in Lloyd, 2005 [1999]: 48, emphasis in original). And Virginia Woolf – another coterie aesthete – also employed the language of visual art and visual perception in her exhortation of writers to ‘trace the pattern ... which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness’ (quoted in Sternberg, 1981: 86, emphasis added).

By contrast, producers of popular fiction appear to align themselves with an alternative aesthetic: one in which description, perception, and the foregrounding of language are regarded less positively. For example, Ben Bova advises potential science fiction authors that ‘in general, hard science fiction is presented in realistic prose so that the reader can forget about the writing style and concentrate on the story’ (Bova, 1994: 210, emphasis added). And Elmore Leonard’s 10 ‘rules’ for writing (Leonard, 2001) largely amount to a series of guidelines on how to avoid (a) drawing attention to (or, as a stylistician might prefer to say, foregrounding) language, and (b) thereby giving readers who are primarily interested in the story a chance to become bored. Tellingly, rule 8 is ‘avoid detailed descriptions of characters’ and rule 9 is ‘don’t go into great detail describing places and things’ (Leonard, 2001: 1). Leonard does admit exceptions to his rules, but these are for writers more ‘legitimate’ than himself (most emphatically, Steinbeck), and are, given the foregoing discussion, somewhat intriguingly phrased: for example, the exception to rule 9 is ‘Unless you’re Margaret Atwood and can paint scenes with language or write landscapes in the style of Jim Harrison’ (Leonard, 2001: 1, emphasis added). It can thus be argued that the association between descriptive writing and visual art is a resource available both to literary and to popular writers as well as to the members of the reading groups studied here, and that for all of these social actors, it can be made to play a role in the distinction of literary from popular fiction.

Elsewhere in The Pearl, passages of ‘description’ are frequently larded with details suggesting a scientific interest in nature (a characteristic little in evidence in the extracts quoted here, except in a certain meticulousness with regard to animal and vegetable kinds). But the overwhelming tendency is towards the description of nature in terms of
perceptual (and primarily visual) impressions. In these passages, the underlying conception of ‘nature’ seems akin to that of the post-impressionist painter Paul Cézanne, who defined it as ‘the spectacle [emphasis added] that the Pater Omnipotens Aeterne Deus spreads out before our eyes’ (Cézanne, 1968 [1904]: 19): not so much a world as a vision.

Discussion

In the above analyses, we have seen how very different methodologies can be combined to gain a richer understanding of text as symbolic object: that is, as artefact bearing value relative to other artefacts by virtue of a complex of social practices. Quantitative analysis of reading group discourse gave suggestions as to the categories salient for the group members in their perception and evaluation of texts. Qualitative analysis of invocations of these categories gave hints as to their possible role in the production of literary value. And qualitative analysis of a text in terms of those categories suggests what that text might look like in relation to a standpoint from which those categories and their conventional associations are normative; together with evidence that these categories may have held similar associations for some time in the western world, this raises the possibility that the text was designed in the anticipation of similar categorizations.

This multi-layered analysis gives clues not only to what was recognizable to the participating groups as ‘description’, but also to why members of those groups place it in discursive opposition to ‘story’. Moreover, it provides insight with regard to the connections between ‘description’ and legitimate culture. This implies much about ‘how people use taste in their everyday lives’ (Bryson, 1996: 897), though the historical discussion given earlier should remind us that, even in the western world, ‘story’, ‘description’, and visual art have not always held the social meanings that they appear to hold in the reading group discourse analysed here. For example, when the young Alexander Pope writes that, in pastoral, ‘the connections should be loose, the narrations and descriptions short’ (Pope, 1963 [1717]: 120), he does not treat these components as possessing any contrasting social significance: brevity in both narration and description was for him simply characteristic of ‘the old way of writing’ (Pope, 1963 [1717]: 120).

Where consumers’ perceptual and appreciative categories are recognized by producers, we may perhaps analyse textual production in terms of intentional orientations to those categories. Elsewhere, I have used more intensive analysis of a single reading group’s discourse to argue that its evaluations of books were underpinned by the recognition of those books as intended members of particular categories with different social meanings and different success criteria (Allington, 2011; see also Allington, 2008); it seems to me that, whatever our assessment of the ‘intentional fallacy’ (Wimsatt and Beardsley, 1946), we should leave open at least the theoretical possibility of such recognitions’ being correct.

In exploring this avenue, future research could study cases where evaluation has demonstrably been anticipated: for example, in the authorial or editorial excision of linguistically-conspicuous prose (e.g. ‘descriptions’) from texts aimed at a popular audience, as per the commonplace advice to authors of would-be bestsellers: ‘murder your darlings’. As the previous section has suggested, such research could be informed by writers’ as much by readers’ discourse. On the basis of such data, it may be possible to construct a fully empirical poetics, with a sociological stylistics and narratology at its core.
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Notes

1 In UK schools, The Pearl is one of the less frequently taught of Steinbeck’s works; had the Discourse of Reading Groups project taken place in a US context, the use of a different book might have been needed.
2 See Dunning (1993) and Richardson (1994) for discussion of the principles involved.
3 That is, censor any turns of phrase of which you are particularly proud.

References


Tyler J (2007) ‘I like you because you like me, and we both like Nick Hornby’: An analysis of the use of public media texts in the performance of class and friendship in adult social networks. Presented at *Beyond the Book: Contemporary Cultures of Reading*. University of Birmingham.


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