SCHEMA TRIGGERING, SCHEMA APPLICATION:
ON AGREEMENT AND DISAGREEMENT IN READING

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In this paper I explain how we come to agree or disagree about interpretations of literary texts. The foundation for my argument is schema theory, a cognitive theory of memory structure, which I use to demonstrate how each of us develops an overall interpretation of a given story or poem. I consider several patterns of schema triggering and application that occur as we read, each of which helps lead us to a unique interpretation of a given text. In order to support this argument, I draw from my own empirical research, consisting of undergraduate English students reading a poem and then responding to preset questions about that poem. I also draw from figures in cognitive theory such as Rumelhart, Turner, and Hogan.

Introduction

The introduction of cognitive science into the field of literary studies has the potential to provide English scholars with new ways of thinking about reader response. Specifically, cognitive science can help with a particularly difficult issue in literary studies, one that has been controversial throughout the history of the field: why do we agree and disagree about interpretations? In the past scholars have gone so far as to argue that an objectively correct interpretation of a text was possible, meaning that disagreement could be explained by the fact that most people were just wrong, while agreements could be explained by pointing to the objectivity of the text at hand. Most scholars do not currently hold this view, but to my knowledge, no satisfying account has been produced to explain why disagreement and agreement are possible when we read. If there is a text in front of us, how can we disagree about what is right there? But if we are all different people with different attitudes and beliefs, how can we agree at all? Cognitive science, and schema theory in particular, is well suited to this task. There have been numerous studies into how schemas affect reading comprehension and interpretation, and that schemas play a central role in reading as well as everyday life is undeniable. However, the kinds of schemas that we use when we read, and the ways in which those schemas influence our reading, have not been explored in terms of agreement and disagreement.

In order to answer the question of why readers both agree and disagree, I conducted research with seven students from an upper-division English course at Illinois Wesleyan University; these students were asked to read a Sylvia Plath poem, “Stopped Dead,” and then respond to several questions about the poem. The questionnaire, along with a copy of the poem, is attached in the appendix at the end of this paper. The participants had one week to complete and return the questionnaire, and were instructed to refrain from accessing any outside sources that might help them interpret the poem, including scholarly articles, other poems by the poet, biographical information about the poet, each other, etc. This research allowed me to examine reader response from a schema theoretic perspective and to develop a theory of reading that can explain the ways in which we agree or disagree about texts as well as how that happens. Specifically, it gave insight into the ways in which schemas are triggered and applied while we read.1

1 It’s important to note here that, though seven students responded to my questionnaire, not all of the students...
Schema Theory

A schema “is a data structure for representing the generic concepts stored in memory. There are schemata representing our knowledge about all concepts” (Rumelhart, 1980, p. 34). Far from having dictionary definitions of words stored in our brains, we actually store much of our knowledge in schema form, as a “network of interrelations that is believed to normally hold among the constituents of the concept in question” (p. 34). For instance, the constituents, or “slots,” of our schema for dog might include “four legs,” “furry,” “has a tail,” and “has sharp teeth.” In addition to physical aspects of the dog, a dog’s role as a pet rather than as a wild animal might make up part of the schema, and culturally relevant traits, such as loyalty, might be added in as well. The network of interrelations between these constituents tells us how these elements fit together to form the concept of a dog (p. 34). The slots (has four legs, is furry) listed above are what are called “defaults,” at least as far as my own schema for dog is concerned (Hogan, 2003, 44). Default values for slots allow us to predict and more easily understand what a thing will be like. Slots, however, are flexible, and when we come into contact with something that does not match up with our defaults for the corresponding schema, we still easily recognize the thing in question; though one of my default values for dogs is that they are furry, I can adjust that understanding when I come into contact with a hairless dog. This flexibility exists because “default hierarchies usually include specified alternatives to the default” (p. 44). So, to use Patrick Colm Hogan’s example, if one of the defaults in our “man” schema is that he has two arms, upon learning that a particular man does not have two arms, we will switch to one of two alternatives: the man was “born without an arm/both arms” or he “lost an arm/both arms” (p. 44).

Schemas play crucial roles in comprehension in terms of both everyday life and reading. Some research on schemas focuses specifically on comprehension, on “how memory schemata are activated and used to guide the organization of incoming information” (Thordyke and Yekovich, 1980, p. 26). David E. Rumelhart expresses the general attitude of theorists with this focus when he says that “perhaps the central function of schemata is in the construction of an interpretation of an event, object, or situation – that is, in the process of comprehension” (p. 37). Many others have applied this principle to the reading process, suggesting that we understand the text through our own schemas, constructing our reading through collaboration between the text and our own minds. Dieter Freundlieb sums this up well: “the large part of what we understand when we read even very simple texts is the result of complex inference-making rather than a mere cognition of what is explicitly stated or somehow inherent in the text” (26).

Cycling Schemas

As we read, we not only use the schemas that we have already formed before reading, but develop additional schemas tailored specifically to the individual text. Two types of schemas that we typically develop as we read are thematic and character schemas. With schemas like these, we often work from a generic thematic or character schema, which we trigger in response to certain attributes of the text in general or of a specific character or speaker, then develop it into something particularly suited to the text at hand (Hogan 129-30). Our schemas for character or theme in a given text are developed from schemas that we already have in place, especially generic schemas for character and theme as well as everyday schemas. Soon, rather than having other schemas completely control developing schemas, developing schemas begin to cycle, controlling
how we use everyday schemas. That is, schemas developed as we read, like character schemas, schemas for theme, etc., are triggered, start to develop, and then are applied to other parts of the poem with the expectation that those parts will fit easily with the developing schema. We start by finding the schema using the poem; then, when the schema begins to develop, we start finding the poem using the schema.

R2’s \(^2\) response to question three, which asks: “What is (for you) the central idea of the poem and why do you think so?” provides a perfect example of cycling schemas, specifically a cycling thematic schema. R2 probably began developing a thematic schema for stasis and entrapment early in reading the poem, or perhaps developed it after having read the poem once. R2 cites multiple pieces of evidence for reading the poem in this way: “phrases like ‘squeal of brakes,’ ‘hung out,’ ‘dead drop,’ ‘out cold,’ ‘sunk in,’ ‘still as a ham’; consistent references to the uncle’s obesity and immobility” and the seeming definition of the soul as something “hidden away, stopped, unmoving and unchanging” (R2Q3). These pieces of evidence are scattered throughout the poem, and it’s not clear at what point a schema for this kind of theme would have been triggered. It could have been triggered early in the reading by two or three schema headers (signals to our brain to trigger a given schema) like “dead drop,” the third of the cited phrases, which occurs in only the third line of the poem; although such phrases as “dead drop” might not be exact matches to the content of the schema, they would fit well enough with that content to act as headers (Stockwell, 2003, p. 256). Perhaps, however, the schema was not triggered on the first read-through or even during the reading process at all. Even if that is the case, there is value in understanding the schema as working cyclically.

I’d first like to consider what would have happened if R2 had triggered the schema very early, say during the first stanza of the poem during the first read-through. In that case, the schema would be further developed over the course of the poem. That is, as R2 encountered the other cited pieces of evidence, schema accretion, which involves the addition of small pieces of information to an existing schema, would have taken place. As each piece of evidence was encountered, it would be added to the thematic entrapment/stasis schema, and the schema would be reinforced by it. As the schema acquired more support, it would continue to undergo accretion. It would also begin to affect interpretation of other elements of the poem. Especially in the case of a thematic schema, a schema that has already been activated and deemed appropriate for the poem at hand, application of that schema to elements of the poem that would not have been interpreted in the same way in the absence of the cycling schema.

In terms of R2’s reading, some of the “pieces of evidence” that R2 cites might not have been interpreted as indicative of “stasis” without the thematic schema having begun to develop beforehand. The developing thematic schema controls the interpretation of later elements.

A schema triggered during an after-the-fact interpretation could also be applied cyclically, though the process might not be as strictly “cyclical” as in the first case. Rather, it would be a process of reapplication in which a reader confronted a number of pieces of information in need of being fitted together. A fairly pervasive schema like a thematic schema, represented by so many different elements of the poem, would propel interpretation; in order to make pieces fit, the reader would read each piece through the lens of that theme, whether or not they obviously reflected it, allowing for an overarching interpretation of the poem. So the schema acts like a ball of snow rolling downhill, gathering momentum and material as it goes, flattening anything small that gets in its way, being broken apart by anything large enough to truly interfere; if the schema triggered for the theme ended up being

\(^2\) Throughout this paper I will refer to the readers as “R#.” So reader number two is R2, etc.
in significant conflict with anything encountered in the text, a more dramatic learning process than accretion would have to occur, and a different approach would necessary.

The accretion and then reapplication of a schema can also apply to other schemas that maintain their influence across the stretch of a story or poem, like character schemas. With character schemas, this idea is specifically supported by the fact that we are hard-wired to maintain knowledge of the identity of a person or object across time and space. Patrick Colm Hogan claims that we construct “identity schemas” for both objects and persons, which consist of “material continuity or persistence through time in the case of objects and mental continuity or persistence through time in the case of persons” (p. 118). Hogan discusses this through the example of the movie *Titanic*, saying that “we subsume Jack getting on the boat and Jack clinging to the raft under the schema for identity as there is both material continuity (of his body) and mental continuity (p. 118). The identity schema Hogan describes means that while we are engaged with a narrative like *Titanic*, we understand the characters and objects by assuming that these are unified and have continuity of identity and self unless inconsistency is itself an established trait.

The readers of “Stopped Dead” demonstrate the use of identity schemas by interpreting the characters, and specifically the speaker, as having mental continuity and a unified self. A good example of the coherent development of an identity schema for the speaker comes from R5, who consistently characterizes the speaker as an American citizen, with the speaker’s suicidal desire to leave the car analogous to a citizen’s desire to regain control over his or her own life. In R5’s interpretation, the speaker is determined, sure of his/her actions, as in R5’s response to question three: “the narrator leaves the country, risking (or even enduring) death as a price for achieving true independence.”

Later in the poem, R5 takes this understanding of the narrator as brave and independent and reapplies it to the extreme, letting it affect not just his or her reading of the poem, but also, retroactively, of *Hamlet*. In response to question five, R5 begins, “Hamlet seems like an appropriate allusion to make in the reference of Uncle, since Hamlet’s mission was to set out and kill his Uncle.” In most cultural understandings Hamlet is indecisive, not on a “mission” but struggling to decide whether or how to carry out an undeveloped plan. While it’s possible that R5’s schema for Hamlet is idiosyncratic enough to completely reject this view of Hamlet, this interpretation of Hamlet is rare enough that it’s more feasible to think that R5 is recycling his or her schema for the speaker and applying it to the Hamlet allusion. By applying it to the allusion, R5 manages to render the allusion appropriate to the character schema she has already developed for the speaker: someone on a mission. A certain amount of manipulation of the Hamlet schema by way of the speaker character schema is necessary to continue to understand the speaker in the same way. To better realize how important the reapplication is, imagine if the reader had instead understood Hamlet as indecisive. This characterization of Hamlet does not match the characterization of the speaker already created by R5, and since Hamlet’s traits must be projected onto the speaker, if the characterization of Hamlet does not match the previous characterization of the speaker, the speaker’s character schema must be reevaluated. By using that character schema to manipulate Hamlet’s traits, R5 (probably unconsciously) ensures that the schema will continue to apply and that the allusion will reinforce and not diminish his or her already forming interpretation.

Cycling schemas have the potential to take small scale agreements or disagreements and render them into major ones because cycling schemas contribute heavily to the development and strengthening of an overall poem schema.
Take, for instance, R2’s development of a thematic schema for stasis. Because schemas work cyclically, and can be reapplied in this way, the schema for stasis can become a thematic schema, one that holds a central position in the poem at hand. This is reinforced by the identity schema created for the speaker, in which he or she continues to feel trapped during all of the time that the poem takes place. If the schema were not reapplied in that way, it would be a minor part of the interpretation of the poem, relevant to the individual elements that could easily be interpreted as fitting into it, but not going beyond those elements; it would be relatively local. But, because it does become central, the triggering of one schema ends up committing R2 to a certain overall interpretation. So schemas that are cyclically reapplied contribute heavily to the reader’s overall schema for the work. Because schemas that are triggered on a relatively local level have the potential to become so globally important, differences in these schemas can create important disagreements between readers. Any reader who does not trigger the stasis/entrapment schema cannot integrate it into an overall interpretation, so because schemas cycle in this way, these readers will disagree with R2 not just over a small aspect of the poem, but about a major feature of their individual text schemas. Our ability to manipulate certain information in order to have it fit with our existing schemas means that we will often continue to reinforce schemas that are different than those of others. But the opposite can happen if a reader triggers a similar schema to someone else. If two readers trigger similar schemas on a local level, then develop those same schemas into global-level schemas, those readers will go from agreeing about a small portion of the poem to agreeing about a major point in their overall interpretation, just as R2 and the differing reader ended up disagreeing about the overall interpretation. Developing similar local schemas into similar global schemas might be relatively common, because we often have similar generic schemas for character and theme developed from having read a lot of other texts. This makes it likely that in many cases, the schemas that we will trigger will be at least relatively similar from the start, making it easier for us to develop those schemas into similar individual text schemas.

**Influencing Future Schemas**

Another way in which schemas are applied and triggered during reading is through temporal influence. Schemas that work in this way are similar to cyclical schemas insofar as schemas triggered earlier in a given reading can affect the schemas triggered later in the reading. However, these schemas do not influence later schemas in the same way as cyclical schemas do. Whereas cyclical schemas limit future schemas through reaplication, other schemas merely influence what schemas are triggered later without being reapplied. One schema influences the schema to be triggered directly after it by making a given set of schemas the most probable to be triggered.

There are several ways in which schemas can limit the other schemas they help trigger. One factor is probably priming, which occurs as a result of the way lexical entries (including schemas) are structured in relation to each other. According to Patrick Colm Hogan, far from being organized in a dictionary-like fashion, lexical entries are more web-like, with entries for different things being accessible from other closely linked entries. Links between entries are important because lexical entries (again, including schemas), can be either fully accessed (as in they enter working memory) or merely primed, meaning they are partially activated but have not yet entered working memory. Priming occurs along the lines of the links between entries. For instance, when respondents are asked to respond to the word “river,” it takes them longer to identify it as a word when it follows “dog” than when it follows “boat” (p. 48). That is because “boat” and “river” are linked in the mental lexicon, so when
we encounter “boat,” “river” gets primed and is more quickly accessible to working memory.

The fact that we prime lexical entries that are linked to already accessed entries implies that when we trigger certain schemas as we read, we are more likely to trigger related schemas than unrelated ones later. Of course we will still be able to trigger unrelated schemas when necessary; schemas triggered directly after an already triggered schema need not be linked. But, in cases where triggering a linked schema is possible, priming makes it more likely that we will do so.

Priming appears to come into play in R5’s interpretation, in question six, of “bloody baby,” in which he or she combines “bloody” and “baby” to trigger a schema for “birth.” When R5 read the word “baby,” birth was probably quickly primed, being a closely related subject and one specifically mentioned at the beginning of the poem. This priming meant that birth, especially since it works in conjunction with “bloody,” already had a greater likelihood of being full activated than many other concepts related to babies. This is a case in which that priming was strong enough for the schema to finally become fully activated. Birth was not mentioned in any other respondents’ answers about the “bloody baby,” so it’s clear that while priming occurs constantly as we read, it’s not necessarily consistent between individuals, and even when it is, a primed schema will not always be activated. For this reader, having birth primed brought the birth schema close enough to the surface to break through, but for other readers the priming, if it happened at all, was evidently not enough to have the same effect, and some other schema took hold instead.

There are other ways, in addition to priming, that future schemas can be influenced by previously triggered schemas. One of these ways is through association between schemas; this kind of association is looser than those between the linked lexical entries causing priming. Additionally, associative triggering seems wrapped up in consciousness; rather than simply triggering a primed schema, a reader making associations might be consciously casting about for a schema to fit neatly with previously triggered schemas. A good example of this comes from R5’s response to question seven, in which he or she triggers a series of schemas that eventually link babies to political change:

Baby associations contradict the associations made with “sunset,” as sunsets denote conclusion and babies are new beginnings. The fact that it is described as bloody could be seen as newly born (as is alluded to in the first stanza, second line) or as a new born dying, the stifling of potential change and new ideas. I prefer the imagery of the first, however, the concept of change coming into the world, new things emerging from the mess that is left behind as old ideologies die out. And birth is painful. So is change.

R5 constructs a conceptual blend that combines “bloody” and “baby” to reach “birth.” “Birth” then connects back to “baby.” After returning to the “baby” schema, R5 associates this schema with “new beginnings,” which leads to schemas for “new ideas” and “political change” almost simultaneously.

The associations R5 makes might ordinarily be connected somewhat loosely, not the kinds of connections that are normally associated with priming. The connections between schemas here is very contextual; a schema for new ideas might not prime a schema for political change, because though they’re connected, the connection isn’t general enough for a priming effect to occur. In the context of the poem, however, and certainly in the context of the cyclical thematic schema of a disillusioned citizen within a problematic country that R5 has begun to develop, these schemas fit closely together. This series of schemas gets compressed into one overall interpretation, giving R5 a unique reading of the poem based on his or her own associations between various schemas within the context of this poem.
In addition to priming and associative triggering, causal relationships place heavy influence on movement from one schema to the next. In response to question three, R7 demonstrates this, using causal reasoning to move between several schemas:

This poem seems to be about the speaker’s strained relationship with the Uncle—a relationship of misunderstanding that probably cannot be reconciled. This relationship seems to place the speaker in a bizarre state of mind; she (I assume) finds herself at the edge, staring into what she does not know. The only solution is to get out of the car and live in the air of Gibraltar.

First, the idea of a strained relationship comes into play. This relationship schema then gets reapplied to the speaker and uncle, and a schema for their relationship in particular gets constructed. The schema for the relationship between the speaker and the uncle then moves toward a more specific focus on the schema for the speaker, as, even though R7 claims that the most important aspect of the poem is the relationship between the speaker and the uncle, he or she uses the relationship as a jumping off point, and ends by discussing the speaker’s state of mind and the speaker’s proposed solution to the problem of the relationship. The speaker schema comes from the schema for the relationship, as the “bizarre state of mind” R7 attributes to the speaker comes directly from it.

Each movement from one schema to the next requires not just association but a creative exercise in step-by-step causal reasoning. The schema for the speaker and uncle’s relationship is applied to the speaker schema causally, which results in a guess that the speaker means to somehow solve the problem created by the relationship; this probably requires a schema for problem-solving to come into play. In the R5 example in which R5 links babies to political change, R5 triggered preformed schemas (such as his or her schemas for babies and birth) but did not develop schemas within this example; here, R7 is not only triggering schemas, but developing his or her schemas for the speaker-uncle relationship and for the speaker as he or she goes. By using the schema for the speaker and uncle’s relationship to trigger the schema for just the speaker, R7 allows the relationship schema to influence the kind of schema that can be used for the speaker; the speaker schema that gets developed then influences future possibilities for interpretation, letting R7 guess that the speaker posits a solution, and, later, guess what that solution will be.

If schemas work by influencing future schemas without cycling, the consequences for two people’s interpretations will be important. To get a feel for the possibilities for disagreement that could be created through the content of the schemas alone, imagine that a reader triggers a series of schemas, each a schema that the reader has brought to the text and influencing the schema after it. Given the fact that every reader might not trigger exactly the same schemas at first, the result of the schemas’ influence might be significantly different between two readers after a series of schemas linked together in one or more of these ways. This is evident in the example of R5 linking babies to political change. R5 triggers a schema for birth, then links birth back to babies. If R5 had not triggered a birth schema, he or she would have had to account for “bloody” in some other way. Whether bloody was interpreted as a swear word or an expletive, it’s hard to imagine that it would be possible to trigger the same series of schemas, and therefore arrive at the same interpretation, without having first triggered a schema for birth, which makes the word “bloody” much less threatening than either of the other two interpretations do. In other circumstances, of course, people might wind up agreeing. They might agree because, since the poem forces them to trigger certain schemas and it’s likely that people would make similar moves in linking schemas together, the similar schemas that they
trigger in the first place will lead them to trigger a whole series of similar schemas. Though none of the other readers triggered a birth schema like R5 did, if someone had, it would be much more possible for that person to connect the baby to new ideas coming into the world, and therefore much easier for him or her to agree with R2’s interpretation. Finally, in addition to agreeing or disagreeing as a result of triggering similar or different schemas, it’s possible that, even triggering somewhat different schemas throughout, the overall interpretation of those schemas, or the last schemas of the series, could still be similar and so cause agreement.

Adding in the possibility that some of the schemas like this will have been created during reading, and that the creation of those schemas will be dependent upon the schemas that have come before, the consequences for agreement and disagreement will be important. This will depend upon the factors discussed above with cyclical schemas, as the schemas we develop as we read are frequently culturally influenced (generic schemas for character and theme or schemas with similar development for author or genre) and so might create agreement. But, as with cyclical schemas, triggering different schemas to begin with might affect the way we develop future schemas because those schemas could end up being dependent upon the previous schemas. If we trigger different schemas to begin with and these schemas affect future schemas, then disagreement becomes likely. For instance, in R7’s case, he or she triggers a schema for a speaker who is out of place, “staring into what she does not know,” and forced into making a choice (“the only choice she has”) at the end of the poem. R7’s speaker is recognizably passive, but if someone else had triggered a generic character schema that was more active and decisive from the get-go, perhaps as a result of reading the tone of the poem as aggressive, that person might develop a very different schema from R7’s. On the other hand, someone else might easily trigger a culturally relevant passive character schema and develop it in much the same way R7 does, thus creating agreement.

**Conceptual Blending**

Another important schematic process that contributes to individual text schema is conceptual blending. Conceptual blending is a concept that has frequently been studied in an attempt to explain how metaphor functions, and a traditional understanding of metaphor is the best place to start in describing how conceptual blending functions. In traditional descriptions of metaphor, a source is mapped onto a target. In “Juliet is the sun,” for example, the sun is the source and Juliet is the target (Stockwell 107). We take known attributes of the source and map them onto the target. Attributing traits from source to target, in this understanding, is a one directional process, and the transfer of traits is fairly straightforward. No truly new or creative understanding of the source or the target arises; we merely transfer an existing understanding of one thing to another.

Conceptual blending turns this understanding of metaphor on its head. In a conceptual blend, things get much more complicated than the mere transfer of traits from one object or concept to another. Patrick Colm Hogan describes Mark Turner’s theory of conceptual blending as follows:

> metaphor—and, indeed, all thought—involves two or more inputs or input spaces, as he calls them. These input spaces project some properties to a blended space—thus the projection does not go directly from source to target. The resulting blend may then project back to a particular input [... ] Moreover, the blend is not confined to the mere combination of the projected (or, equivalently, transferred) properties. There is, in addition, an emergent structure that results from the combination itself. Finally, Turner emphasizes that blending is recursive and thus a blend may itself operate as an input to another blend. (pp. 107-08)
Blending can happen in a variety of ways, but none of those ways involves a simple one-directional transfer of traits from a source to a target. And this process is not limited to metaphor, but happens regularly, in thought that we would not consider to be “special” in the way that we might consider metaphor to be.

In my own research, conceptual blending turned out to be a vitally important part of the students’ responses. Take, for example, the response that R1 gives to question three: “The speaker is poor and the uncle is rich. The uncle is unkind and squanders money as others suffer. Nice guy.” Upon first reading this, the response is striking. Where does R1 get so much information about the uncle? The uncle is described only infrequently throughout the poem. In the fourth and fifth lines, he is “a pants factory Fatso, millionaire / out cold beside” the speaker.” Later he is “sunk in [his] seven chins, still as a ham” (line 16), taunted by the speaker as to whether or not he thinks of her as being like Hamlet (lines 17-19), and asked if his soul is “a penny, a pearl” (line 21). Nowhere, however, does the speaker explicitly say that the Uncle is unkind, or that he squanders money, or even that anyone (except, apparently, the speaker herself) suffers as he squanders that money. So where does the reader get the idea that the uncle is generally unkind? From a blend between the sources just described. If the reader, coming across various descriptions of the uncle, had constructed a blend using select elements of the poem as inputs, the emergent structure from that blend could easily have been that the uncle is unkind and callously wastes money as others suffer.

Especially salient possibilities for R1’s blend inputs come from the description of the uncle as a “pants factory Fatso, millionaire.” If “pants factory” were taken as one input, while “millionaire” was used as a second input, a blend that created an emergent structure of the uncle as unkind would be easily imaginable. One further input that would support the same emergent structure could be that the speaker, who is apparently poor (as she is not, it seems, the “rich pretty girl” she imagines) resents the Uncle. From these inputs, then, the reader comes up with a trait of the uncle’s that is never explicitly mentioned in the poem, but which feels like a justifiable reading of the uncle’s character as it is described. This blend, of course, is dependent upon the reader’s schemas for pants factories, or perhaps for factories in general; for millionaires; and for people that poor people, particularly the speaker, resent. So how does the blend come about, and why does this reader create this particular blend for the uncle that others, including me, do not? Quite possibly from overlaps between the reader’s schemas for the given inputs. The factories input for this speaker might have had a particularly salient slot for sweat shops and the cruelty of those who own and operate them to make a profit. The input for millionaires probably comes from a schema with a salient slot for unkindness, for wealthy people who do not concern themselves with others, especially those whom they take to be beneath them. The fact that the millionaire is apparently the owner of one of these pants factories, and that owning capital and being a millionaire go hand in hand, serves as impetus for the blend. If the fact of the speaker being poor and resentful also worked as an input, then the schema for poor people, and specifically the part of it related to poor peoples’ attitudes toward wealthy people, must contain a slot for the mistreatment of the poor at the hands of wealthy people, in other words, cruelty or unkindness. If all three of the schemas involved in the inputs contained slots for unkindness, then the emergent structure, in which the reader believes the uncle to be unkind, makes sense.

Looking at this example, it becomes quite apparent why different readers’ overall poem schemas could diverge significantly as a result of conceptual blending, even given similar schemas to start with; even with similar schemas, blending could still create different emergent structures for
those readers, leading to different individual text schemas. If this is the case, then the level of divergence between readers who trigger and use very different inputs (including very different schemas for the same thing) has the potential to be great. Given that conceptual blending can yield different emergent structures even through the use of similar inputs, the emergent structures coming out of blends constructed with differing inputs might be even more different from each other. And given the fact that conceptual blending happens quite frequently in reading, these divergences have the potential to be numerous. As the emergent structures coming from these blends will themselves end up being inputs into an overall blend, if two readers created a few different blends near the beginning of a reading, differences could easily become magnified; conceptual blending, like cyclical schemas, has the potential make the gap between different schemas widen, eventually leading the reader to an overall interpretation that might be very different from any other reader’s, even a reader who triggers all of the same schemas in the same places. Despite the potential for disagreement, though, conceptual blending could sometimes help foster agreement. Because many readers have similar schemas going into a reading, they will frequently use similar inputs in blends. While blends with similar inputs can turn out differently, readers will frequently yield similar emergent structures from the blends they create. Since these emergent structures often function as inputs for future blends, conceptual blending has the potential to turn agreement about one part of the poem into overall agreement, as previous blends frequently feed into later blends. The type of agreement that is possible here is not just agreement based on content of schemas; readers do not just agree on the meaning of the words in the poem, but actually end up agreeing about what additional schemas should be triggered in interpreting the poem.

**Guessing At Others’ Schemas**

A final process involving schemas is guessing at others’ schemas as we read. In addition to having a constitutive part, the part of the schema that tells us what a thing is like, schemas also have parts telling us what other people think that thing is like. These parts become more important with complex or abstract concepts; though many people have very similar beliefs about what dogs are like, allowing our subschema for others’ beliefs to be quite limited, a schema for something like a “soul” might have a much richer subschema for others’ beliefs, as those beliefs will vary quite a bit. These parts of our schemas allow for smoother communication; if we did not have them, we would assume that our own understanding of a given thing was the same as other people’s and that would make for a lot of confusion when discussing topics on which people tend to have important variations in belief. Knowing that there will probably be differences makes it easier to ascertain what the relevant differences are more quickly and with less confusion.

In reading, we necessarily interact with “other people” to a certain extent. Even in poetry in which no human actors exist, the fact of language means that someone is speaking the poem, which means that we are engaged in an act of communication, no matter how one-sided. This is especially important in light of another cognitive capacity, that of metarepresentation. Metarepresentation, as described by Lisa Zunshine, “consists of two parts. The first part specifies a source of representation, for example, ‘I thought . . . ,’ or ‘Our teacher informed us . . .’ The second part provides the content of representation, for example, ‘. . . that it was going to rain . . . ’ or ‘. . . that plants photosynthesize’” (p. 47). The “meta” part of metarepresentation, the source tag, “is what prevents the representation from circulating freely within our cognitive system” (p. 50). According to Zunshine, although not all incoming information must be tagged with the appropriate source, we do this regularly in
everyday thought, and it is extremely important insofar as it matters quite a bit what information is allowed to circulate freely. Metarepresentation is important in terms of literature; with characters, we use metarepresentation much as we do in everyday life. Moreover, we use metarepresentation in dealing with a literary work as a whole; when we read literature, Zunshine argues, we store the entire work as a metarepresentation with a source tag pointing to its author, in order not to let the information that we learn from it circulate as truth.

Because we metarepresent a full text to the author, we naturally guess at an author’s schemas throughout a piece; in order to store something with a source tag pointing to the author, we want to figure out what the author meant by it, not just what we think it means. We also guess at the schemas of characters, narrators, speakers, etc. In “Stopped Dead,” we guess at Sylvia Plath’s schemas as well as the speaker’s, whom we may or may not conflate with Plath. The best examples of the readers guessing at others’ schemas involve the speaker, who, as the only voice throughout the poem, gives the best opportunities for guessing at his or her schemas. One example of guessing at others’ schemas comes from R2 in response to question three: “the question ‘Where do you stash your life?’ seems to define the “soul” as something hidden away, stopped, unmoving and unchanging.” Here, rather than applying his or her own understanding of a soul, R2 tries to apply the speaker’s schema for soul. Using evidence from the line before, R2 posits that here a soul means something “hidden away, stopped, unmoving and unchanging.” So even if R2 believes that a soul is something that grows with a person, can be demonstrated outwardly, etc., he or she posits exactly the opposite. Of course, it’s possible that R2 actually does believe that the soul can be described as hidden and static. However, even if that is the case, he or she specifically points to textual evidence for that interpretation of soul, descriptions of the soul given by the speaker. So, whether or not R2 holds these particular beliefs about the soul, he or she guesses at the speaker’s schemas nonetheless.

Whether we guess at the speaker’s schemas or the poet’s, those schemas end up contributing to our individual text schema, and the same could be said if we guessed at a narrator and author’s schemas in a story. And, when a poem or story contains speech from others besides the narrator, speaker, author, or poet, readers might also guess at those characters’ schemas. So, instead of our own interpretations of various parts of a story or poem coming together to form an individual text schema, we must combine our interpretations of some parts with our interpretation of someone else’s meaning for other parts. It’s not clear whether or not guessing at others’ schemas would bring readers’ interpretations closer together or divide them, but these interpretations of others’ interpretations would always be filtered through our own schemas; though two people are guessing at a speaker’s schema for something, they might not agree any more than if they weren’t guessing in that way; in order to guess at a speaker’s schema for something, we must either use available evidence to add information to an existing schema (we learn something new about the concept, then attribute it to the speaker), or we must take parts of an already existing schema and attribute them. In either case, we are unlikely to attribute a schema to the speaker in the same way as another reader would. So, though guessing at others’ schemas might not contribute to disagreement any more than not guessing at them would do, it probably doesn’t contribute much to agreement either.

**Conclusion**

Most of the processes discussed here have the potential to further either agreement or disagreement. Agreements or disagreements can be both local and global, and they will not be uniform; that is, someone can agree with another reader on several local level issues, but disagree on
a global level, or possibly even reach general agreement globally, but not about several local issues. These combinations of agreement and disagreement occur due to the fact that each process or content issue applies to only certain situations, with those certain situations adding up to create an individual text schema. In creating the individual schema, readers apply multiple processes and may be additionally affected by similarities and differences in schema content from reader to reader. Of course, it’s possible that some of the processes or content issues will not be relevant in a certain group for a certain poem. For instance, it might be the case that for a given story or poem there is little character development, minimizing the cycling of a character schema. Certain processes, however, must always occur. It’s hard to imagine a reader reading a story or poem all the way through without constructing a single conceptual blend. Blending is pervasive, it occurs frequently across all forms of language. So while some of these contributors to agreement disagreement may sometimes be absent, it’s likely that at least some will be present in any reading, and since that’s the case, some form of both agreement and disagreement between readers, however minor, will be present in any reading.

References


Appendix

Poem:

Sylvia Plath
“Stopped Dead”

A squeal of brakes.
Or is it a birth cry?
And here we are, hung out over the dead drop
Uncle, pants factory Fatso, millionaire.
And you out cold beside me in your chair.

The wheels, two rubber grubs, bite their sweet tails.
Is that Spain down there?
Red and yellow, two passionate hot metals
Writhing and sighing, what sort of a scenery is it?
It isn’t England, it isn’t France, it isn’t Ireland.

It’s violent. We’re here on a visit,
With a goddam baby screaming off somewhere.
There’s always a bloody baby in the air.
I’d call it a sunset, but
Whoever heard a sunset yowl like that?

You are sunk in your seven chins, still as a ham.
Who do you think I am,
Uncle, uncle?
Sad Hamlet, with a knife?
Where do you stash your life?

Is it a penny, a pearl —
Your soul, your soul?
I’ll carry it off like a rich pretty girl,
Simply open the door and step out of the car
And live in Gibraltar on air, on air.

Response Questions:
1. Have you read the poem before?
2. What else have you read by Sylvia Plath?
3. What is (for you) the central idea of the poem and why do you think so?
4. What do you think the one or two most important conventional literary devices in the poem are and how do they tie into the central idea that you identified above?
5. What about Hamlet makes it appropriate for the speaker to compare him/herself with him? Why does the speaker make this comparison?
6. Why does the speaker concern him/herself with the sunset? How would the poem be different if this information were left out, or another time of day (like sunrise) were described?
7. Why does the speaker say that there’s always a “bloody baby in the air”?
8. What background information about Sylvia Plath are you aware of?