Zambezia (1994), XXI (ii).

COMPETING INTERPRETATIONS: CHARLES MUNGOSHI'S 'THE ACCIDENT'[1]

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Abstract

The essay uses a reader response approach to explore different interpretations of a short story, interpretations produced by 'O' level students in Harare and university students in the United States. The author proposes that the various readings resolve into a fundamental distinction between those who read the story as a conflict between autonomous individuals and those who stress that the social context of that conflict is a significant determinant in framing ethical issues. The story itself provides evidence of both readings, and the author argues the value of having students explore both possibilities in their classrooms.

IN HIS ESSAY 'Out of Africa: Topologies of nativism', Kwame Anthony Appiah explores the relationship between literature, universality and nationality. While literature plays a significant role in articulating collective subjectivity, it can also be held hostage to a particularist or nativist essentialism (e.g. Nigeria's *bolekaja* critics) deploying itself against the cultural hegemony of Eurocentric totalizing theories of literature.[2] Such polarized models or 'topologies' (the West and the rest, centre and periphery, insider and outsider) are false to the complex cultural positioning of most writers and readers in most societies. We need theoretical and interpretive models which recognize differentials in cultural power while continuing to map the middle ground between an overly simplified nativism and a pseudo-universalism. For the present, Appiah suggests:

> we shall be better off in our choice of theory if we give up the search for Mr Right and speak, more modestly, of *productive modes of reading* . . . the text exists as linguistic, as historical, as commercial, as political event. And while each of these ways of conceiving the very same object provides opportunities for pedagogy, each provides different opportunities — opportunities between which we must choose . . . To understand what a reading is, is to understand that what counts as a reading is always up for grabs.[3]

[1] I want to thank the teachers and students in many Harare schools who advised me and participated in this project. I am grateful also, to the faculty members in Curriculum Arts and Education, University of Zimbabwe, for providing office space, good counsel and hospitality during my sabbatical year.

[2] Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie, Ihechukwu Madubuike, *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature* (Washington D.C., Howard University Press, 1983).

[3] Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1992), 68–9.

The essay that follows is a case study of competing interpretations of an apparently quite simple short story. Most of these readings are 'productive', which is to say, they attend to evidence in the text and find interesting (but different) problems to explore. Most productive of all, at least pedagogically, will be to allow different readings to emerge in the same classroom and to encourage students to listen to each other gathering textual evidence and developing the logic of their interpretations.

This short story is rather like a recursive figure of the sort one finds in line drawings which can be composed by the viewer's eye into two quite distinct images depending upon what the viewer determines to be figure and ground. Among the most familiar recursive figures are:

1. the image of a skull which can be seen also as a woman seated before a dressing table;
2. a drawing which can be either an old hag or a young woman in a feather hat (see diagram); and
3. two silhouetted profiles facing each other which together can be seen as a vase.

Old Woman or Young Woman?

What is significant about recursive figures is that each pattern makes use of all the lines and details but resolves them into two competing 'interpretations' or images. Most people instantly see one of the possibilities and then have to work to get outside the first interpretation in order to see the other possibility in the image.

After a bit of training, the human eye can move quickly from one image to the other, seeing at one moment the old hag, at another the young lady, but it cannot see both images at the same moment. Readers of this short story composed it in their mind's eye according to the logic of one interpretation; the more flexible among these readers could then shift to a different kind of logic and make a different kind of sense — could 'see' different elements in the story in quite a different way. This experience of reading and discussing together itself becomes a microcosm of competing discourses in the world at large. The classroom becomes a place in which students can think together about what seem to be intractable, if not irreconcilable differences. We abandon the thought of quickly reaching a totalizing or universalizing theory, of achieving a single 'right' interpretation, and accept the necessity for dialogue, for attending to the patterns that other eyes have found.

In 1991, I spent eight months in Zimbabwe intending to explore student readers' responses to contemporary national literature written in English. What did the rising post-independence generation find of interest in the work of Tsitsi Dangarembga, Chenjerai Hove, Shimmer Chinodya, Dambudzo Marechera and Charles Mungoshi? I had anticipated that the school curriculum, 11 years after independence, would include at least one or two of the award-winning novels by these Zimbabweans. In fact, the first Zimbabwean literary text on the national syllabus for examination in English at the ordinary level was included only in January of 1991 — Charles Mungoshi's short story collection *Coming of the Dry Season*.[4] Because the national curriculum powerfully determines what Zimbabwean students and teachers read, much of the literature I had hoped to explore was unfamiliar, and most teachers had not yet introduced the Mungoshi text. With the assistance and advice of several school heads and teachers, I offered workshop classes in some Harare high schools, focusing on a number of short texts including 'The accident'; this accessible, five-page short story in *Coming of the Dry Season* consistently provoked the most discussion.

My intention was to elicit students' responses to the story rather than to direct them to any particular issues. To this end I provided little introduction, giving students a xeroxed copy of the story and asking them for a five-minute written response before opening discussion. I often began

[4] Charles Mungoshi, *Coming of the Dry Season* (Harare, ZPH, 1981).

discussion with as neutral a summary as I could construct. What follows is an example of such a summary, including those details which frequently emerged as important to the interpretive debates.

'The accident' is a third-person account of a traffic accident. The narration is detached, careful, and seemingly dispassionate, sounding at times like a newspaper account. The first paragraph reads:

> A man carrying a packet of tomatoes was knocked down by a car as he was crossing Cripps Road. He travelled in the air for twenty feet before he dropped to the side of the road. No one actually saw him hit.[5]

The narrator reports what can be seen and heard, occasionally using a metaphor to expand upon his report, occasionally telling us what the crowd felt but never entering the mind of any one character or exploring the motives of the key actors. The description makes clear that the victim is a poor Black African, the driver a European who is 'short, thickset, with a bullneck', sweating and balding, the top of his head 'as bare and red as an overripe tomato'. He has stopped his car and stands by the twisted body of the victim while a crowd gathers, speaking an African language which the European cannot understand. His movements (wiping his brow, a facial tic) suggest nervousness, fear, or guilt. The crowd cannot read his face, but 'they felt he was indifferent'. A young man in a straw hat joins the crowd sometime after the accident has occurred and begins to tell other latecomers what has happened. 'Who did it?' he is asked. 'That Boer . . . He did it on purpose. I saw it all . . . the bloody baboon went out of his way to kill him'. And later, 'The man who said he had seen it all went on talking as if he was appealing to the people to do something.' In the course of the story he changes slightly his description of the accident. 'He was just standing beside the road not talking to anybody and this maniac comes along and knocks him down.' Further on he says, 'Yes. That's the murderer. I was standing talking to the man when this . . . Boer knocked him down. I am going to say all I saw exactly as I saw it to the police.'

'They won't listen to you', the crowd says, and he responds, 'But I shall have said my share. I shall have shown them that they can't get away with everything here.'

A White police officer arrives with a Black assistant who keeps the crowd back from the victim. The two Europeans, policeman and driver, talk in 'very low, almost friendly tones', and the crowd infers that they will collude in dismissing the accident. The man in the straw hat steps forward to have his testimony heard, and the Black officer attempts to silence him. The crowd responds by reminding the constable that he doesn't 'drink

[5] Charles Mungoshi, 'The accident', in *The Setting Sun and the Rolling World* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1989), 119.

with' the Europeans. An ambulance at last arrives and 'more people than were really necessary from the crowd [step] forward to help lift the man on to the stretcher'. The Europeans who had stepped together down to the 'killer car' now return, and the officer asks for witnesses. Now two others join the man in the straw hat and 'defiantly [step] forward'. It looked as if more were prepared to hand themselves over but the constable held up his hand and said, 'Enough.' The three are summoned to the police station.

When they had gone there was a silence in the crowd, a disappointed silence.
'He is going to be released.'
'But those three men have courage. If only we had ten more like them — men who can stand up and tell them that they are wrong.'
'It will be a long, long time before we have ten like that.'
'We have them, only . . . ' and arguing sad politics the crowd dispersed, all going in the same direction, south-west, into the location. They all felt the same thing: once again, nothing has happened.

Charles Mungoshi wrote 'The accident' in the late 1960s and published it in 1972 in *Coming of the Dry Season*. At this period armed resistance to the Smith government in Rhodesia was gathering very slowly; the story reflects life in Salisbury before the clear possibility of independence had emerged. From the beginning, this story has elicited different readings. In 1974 the government banned and prohibited the collection, largely on the grounds that it was 'designed to cause hatred and ill-feeling in African minds against Europeans and that the circulation of this book [was] likely to harm relations between the white and black sections of the public'.[6] A principal objection was made to 'The accident', which the Censor Board held 'was likely to bring a section of the public, i.e. the police force, into contempt and it was likely to harm relations between sections of the public, i.e. the African and European sections'. The story clearly implies 'that the police are biased in favour of Europeans to the extent that they habitually fail to take action against European offenders, [and this] must bring that force into contempt in African eyes'. The Board also notes that the European is described as a 'comic-strip type bully' and that his actions suggest 'that *all* Europeans are automatically indifferent to tragedies of this sort'. They further note that the 86-cent Heinemann-Nairobi edition, issued in 1972, 'must be aimed at the African market'. Otherwise, they argue, complaint about this work must have come to the attention of the Board much earlier.

[6] Copies of the Censor Board's initial opinion, the appeal from the Department of English, and the Board's response are on file in the Department of English, University of Zimbabwe. Dr Musaemura Zimunya graciously allowed me access to them.

The Board is aware that the African is still tremendously influenced by the written word and that many cannot distinguish between written fact and fiction. The Board does not, of course, believe that this book will cause Africans to take overt action against Europeans, even though attacks by African spectators on European motorists involved in accidents wherein Africans are victims are not unknown, in fact one such attack took place the week after this book was banned. But the Board is of the opinion that this book is likely to have a most unfortunate effect on the minds of a substantial number of African readers and to imbue them with anti-European ideas.

The English Department at the University of Rhodesia challenged the decision to ban Mungoshi's collection, arguing that

The book is a serious work of literature. It is written not as a political harangue or diatribe . . . It seeks to educate the reader into a balanced and discriminating moral awareness of the issues raised, not to offer simplified ideological solutions . . . The Board have, on their own admission, misunderstood the story which they find offensive. In so far as the author is criticising anyone in this story, his attention is directed to the crowd and not the police. Whereas the police are shown to behave with the efficiency and correctness, the immature and emotional response of the crowd is shown for what it is.

The purportedly 'universal' values of literary theory (specifically of the 'new criticism' of the 1950s) inform the defence which the English Department made to the Censor Board. The Department argues that Mungoshi's work is 'serious', and that the author's intent, far from being politically inflammatory, was to educate readers 'into a balanced and discriminating moral awareness'. By way of illustrating this balanced awareness, the Department asks the Board to notice that the story presents the police as 'efficient and correct', the crowd and straw hat man as 'immature and emotional'. In its reading the Board had ignored material in the story that could generate a critical perspective on the Black crowd; however, in its defence, the Department also avoids comment on material that could generate a critical perspective on the Europeans. Drawing upon the values of 'new critical theory', the English Department was able to present the story to the Censor Board as 'safe' for (White) society.

The Board, however, remained suspicious. That 86-cent edition suggested to them that another audience, beyond the university, had been targeted. The Board sees this audience, the African public, as childlike, unable to distinguish fact and fiction. Although this public's response to the story will constitute a 'misreading' by academic standards, that response will, nonetheless, constitute a danger to society, whose interests and security the Censor Board seeks to protect. In responding to the English Department's appeal, the Board observed that university lecturers were

better able to judge the effect of the stories on the university student rather than the man-in-the-street. We consider that it is essential not to confuse the average reader with the student who will study . . . under the expert guidance of the English lecturer or professor.

'Unsophisticated' readers, the Board fears, will not bother to notice that the man in the straw hat is prepared to testify about something he did not see. 'The impression left on readers will be that there is great hatred among Africans towards Europeans, even if the hatred is an unreasoning hatred' and this will 'harm relations between sections of the public'.

Almost two decades later, 'The accident' continues to generate radically different responses. I first led a discussion on 'The accident' at a selective private high school in Harare which has a racially mixed student body. However, in the first class I visited, there were 15 White students and one Black student. Initially the class generated virtually the same reading as that of the Censor Board 17 years earlier. I asked students to write for five minutes, capturing their initial response to the story, before beginning discussion. One student wrote, 'The European is accused by an African man with a really bitter kind of racist attitude . . . his sole aim is to attempt to humiliate the European man'. Another student wrote, 'The incident is nothing more than an accident but the crowd that forms around changes it into a vast racial incident that blames the European . . . the rumours . . . among the crowd immediately cause racial bias to fill the passage'.

Discussion began with students reading these freewrites and quickly became heated, with a number of students expressing resentment about the story itself. One complained about the 'usual stuff about balding Europeans, putting them down that way'. Another considered the story 'a politically-orientated piece of propaganda' and resented that it was being seriously considered as a 'decent piece of literature'. Another commented, 'Since this is written by a Black man, then it is probably biased but then it might also be true and direct.' This assumption that because the author is Black the story is 'probably biased' held sway for some time and then began to be displaced by evidence that the narrator's view of the Black community might be critical. The interpretation which then began to emerge with a good deal of support was that both the European and the crowd were to be faulted for failing to show compassion to the victim. Some freewrites capture this view:

Human beings' responses are clouded over by prejudiced views regardless of their skin colour. The story is about how racial feelings can cloud a person's judgement. Everyone is involved in slandering or immersed in his thought, nobody cares about the dead man, his dignity is not preserved, not even fellow Africans make a move to see if he is alive.

This interpretation stressed the view that racism occurs equally in both Whites and Blacks and is deplorable because it intervenes to block ordinary human concern for the dying man.

At this point two students suggested that the man in the straw hat might be using the only means available to confront an unjust system and that on this account he and his companions are heroes to the crowd. 'The story helps people to comprehend the gravity of the [colonial] situation. It shows that for one to resist a system one must do so at every opportunity, and even though morals are cast aside here, it is a chance and one that must be used.'

This view, however, was vigorously rejected by the majority of the class. One student identified the story as a means/ends problem and argued authoritatively that ends never justify means. For most, the story was about individual probity (or lack of it); his own racist response had led the man in the straw hat to an unjust attack on an innocent European. It appeared to me that this interpretation allowed students to retrieve (and now justify) their initial resentment of a story that disparaged Europeans; they seemed energized by a line of argument that allowed them to criticize the Black characters. I was keenly aware throughout the class that the sole Black student, who in a previous workshop had been a vigorous contributor, said nothing; I discovered later that the student had not handed in either the initial or the summary freewrite which I collected from the others. Whatever his views, in this situation the student chose to keep them confidential.

I went immediately to another class at this same school; here the students included ten students of colour, one from South Africa, and four Whites. One of these four began discussion with an articulate statement about the evil of racism in any quarter.

> . . . all the people seem to ignore the man and not one steps forward to help him. They just stare and make accusations based on racial hatred and this in my eyes is extremely wrong. People should have stopped their political agitation and helped a fellow human being.

This student appeared to be well regarded by all the class, and this persuasive statement about putting individual human concern before politics held the floor for some time. Black students participated in the conversation by exploring reasons for why the Africans had not tried more to assist the victim, offering the view that they may have 'naturally deferred' to a European in this situation. Unlike the earlier class, these students found it easy to place themselves in the mind of the crowd which cannot 'read' the European's face. Throughout the discussion, the other three White students looked blank and remote; the first speaker pressed the humanist view, while several Black students contributed in low, hesitant voices, seemingly anxious not to displace the dominant reading that had

been offered. Finally, the South African student spoke up, drawing attention to the legitimate reasons why Blacks in the crowd feel themselves oppressed and to the injustice of the social and legal system of the period. This student suggested that one might need to oppose such power indirectly, using the accident as an occasion for resistance. While this view was not strongly supported in class discussion, two or three of the freewrites indicated that other students had been silently sympathetic to this view.

Moving from the low density suburbs of northern Harare towards the centre of town, I next taught the story in one of the best government schools in the city. Formerly a Group A or all-White school, it now has a nearly all-Black student body and a significant proportion of White teachers, many of whom have been there for decades. I was curious to see whether students in predominantly Black schools would see in the actions of the man in the straw hat a gesture of resistance to a general and pervasive injustice. The story connects the three witnesses with the idea of a movement, with 'ten more like them — men who can stand up and tell them that they are wrong'. Would students make the connection between these youths and those who joined the armed struggle?

The students in this class were markedly hesitant to offer anything more than a neutral summary of the story; none of the interpretations developed in the first two classrooms (racism versus compassion, means versus ends, truth-telling versus the need to resist the state) emerged. Race appeared to be virtually a taboo topic, possibly because I was an unknown White person and their teacher, who remained in the class, was an Englishman who had emigrated to Rhodesia some decades earlier. However, discussion became much more animated when their teacher cast the issue in terms of contemporary class divisions. The students were eager to explore what would unfold if a Mercedes driven by a Black government official were to hit a poor man; once again, they felt, an angry but impotent crowd would form, and justice would be subverted. This was a story they could connect with; this was a story they felt free to discuss.

From here I went southward into a township just off Cripps Road, the setting of the accident. This school was formerly an all-Black school by virtue of official segregation, and it remains an all-Black school today. The students' sense of connection to the story and especially to the crowd was immediate. They spoke about the speeding on Cripps Road, its width and the difficulty of crossing, the absence of call boxes and the distance from town, so that one would simply have to wait for an ambulance. No one raised the issue of either the crowd's or the European's failure to attend to the victim or saw the story's theme as involving a failure of compassion. Discussion focussed first on the European, the class dividing on the question of whether his anxiety stems from fear for his own safety from the crowd or from shock due to the accident. Several felt some compassion

for the driver despite his apparent impassivity. No one took him for a 'comic-strip type bully'. Attention then shifted to the man in the straw hat. One student said this character felt a 'natural hatred' for Europeans, indicating that he had no difficulty in empathizing with the character. Another noted that the crowd immediately supported the man in the straw hat, sharing the general sense of injustice done to their community by Europeans. The students accepted the view of the crowd at the end of the story that justice would not be done and that the European would 'get away unpunished', even though they acknowledged repeatedly that the story does not tell us that the driver had done anything wrong. They remained keenly aware of the individual situation of the driver, some quite sympathetic to him, and at the same time they were sympathetic to the outrage of the crowd. One student said of the man in the straw hat: 'I think he is very patriotic. He loves his people and his country. He is offended by the malpractices of the Europeans in this community. That's why he is dedicated to go and witness something which he hasn't seen.' However, another student responded that while he had sympathy for the straw hat man's wish to see justice done, he didn't believe that you could be just in this situation. Making the European the target for the general sense of injustice would not be right. 'It's dangerous to bring a generalization to bear on a specific case, especially when he can't be sure what happened.' The discussion continued to range between these views; this workshop was the most successful in capturing the 'balanced and discriminating moral awareness of the issues raised [and not offering] simplified ideological solutions' — what the English Department at the University had claimed was the story's strength.

Other Zimbabwean student responses to 'The accident' come from mock-examination scripts written in July, 1991. The work was done in a former Group A, now mostly Black, suburban government school; 55 scripts were produced in two O-level literature classes, each class taught by a Black Zimbabwean who had grown up in colonial Rhodesia. A new emphasis emerges strongly in these essays: solidarity and cooperation within the Black community. Many quote the final lines of the story, in which the crowd moves off to the locations, as evidence of how the experience of oppression in a segregated society has forged a bond among the crowd. Most stress strongly the spirit of unity in the crowd's support for the youths. Fifteen refer to the phrase that 'more people than were really necessary from the crowd stepped forward to help lift the man on to the stretcher' as evidence of the crowd's eagerness to help one of its own.

A student wrote, '. . . when the ambulance came more people went and lifted the man on the stretcher bed and into the ambulance and this showed that the Africans were beginning to unite among themselves and between them there was a growing of one's love.'

None of the 55 note that the phrase 'more . . . than were really necessary' can suggest the futility and belatedness of the crowd's response, a crowd from which no individual had emerged to cover the victim or touch his body until galvanized into action by the arrival of the ambulance. In one case, the urge to emphasize the theme of solidarity leads to some misstatements about the text.

The story also tells us that Blacks' societies were very cooperative. In the story... they gave their fellow Black first aid, they lied in order to defend him and when they were asked to carry him, 'more people than necessary' came forward. It shows that Blacks sacrificed for their fellow Blacks. (This examination got quite low marks for such errors.)

For readers who see the story as primarily about solidarity, one character takes on considerable importance: Constable Tayengwa, the only character given a proper name. Many students felt they needed to account for his complicity in oppression of fellow Blacks, but they make significantly different moral judgements:

'The Black policeman was a victim of circumstance because he was rude to his people so as not to lose his job.'
'The Europeans also used Black subjects to oppress their own people . . . '
'The Black policeman was tamed by his bosses to discriminate his fellow friends.'

While this group of students insistently connected the youths in the story with the idea of a 'movement', they differ on the relationship between these youths and the crowd. All agree that the crowd is supportive of the youths. Many connect the spirit of solidarity with fellow Black men which inspires compassion in the crowd to the youths' desire to bear witness on behalf of the victim and ultimately to the young men who would join the armed struggle to fight racial oppression.

The society which lived at that time was beginning to be maybe bold enough to speak out their feeling like the young man in a straw hat. Somebody in the crowd said 'If only we had ten like him.' This statement shows how the person was wishing for more people to join the young man and maybe fight for their country.

Others contrast the courageous youths who are willing to speak out with the fearful, passive crowd; one student explains that such fear is why armed resistance becomes necessary to lead the masses.

In this society they were united but very few were willing to really stand out and tell the Whites point blank about the wrongs they were doing. They were still a bit frightened and not willing to speak out. People like the young man in a straw hat were the very few who were willing and they maybe changed the society and maybe this then led to many joining the army to fight for their country.

In one way or another, the connection between the youths in the story and the guerrillas is made in more than half the essays.

It is evident from the marginal comments on all the scripts that both teachers had stressed the fact that the young man in the straw hat is testifying falsely; they expected students to take note of this element. While a few ignore this aspect entirely, most allude to it but do not see it as an important ethical issue. Rather, they see the lie as a necessary act to defend and support the Black community.

> The Blacks had to lie in order to stand or support their fellow Blacks . . . these three did not see the man being hit but they knew they had to do something, they did not want the White man to get away with it. They lied in order to defend him . . .

The important debate, for these readers, is whether in their actions the youths are acting on behalf of the crowd or whether they are 'out in front of' the consciousness of the crowd in fighting oppression.

Several questions emerged from this material for which I have no answers. The uniformity in the essays is striking both in the general emphasis on solidarity and the choice of specific passages to cite as evidence. Did the teachers teach the story in a way that allowed students to see the false testimony as a moral problem (and therefore to see the man in the straw hat in a somewhat critical light)? Did the students then prefer to adopt the view that the lie was unimportant? Students in all of these classes are too young to have any memory of the armed struggle, nor was it a topic widely or easily discussed in Zimbabwe. For this reason it is probably not surprising that no student in the classes I taught thought to connect the youths in the story with the guerrillas; nor is it surprising that the teachers (for whom this struggle will have been a central piece of history) would teach the connection. They are doing what teachers everywhere do: passing on narratives of the past to the next generation. To some extent the students seem to speak with one voice about the meaning of that history: the story illustrates the unity of an oppressed people. It is impossible to know how much the pressure of producing a 'correct' reading for an examination had to do with this uniformity and how much had to do with a shared preference for this reading. Within that unifying theme, students offer different explanations for the role of the Black constable and different understandings of the relationship between the crowd and the youths.

Students in this fourth school who wrote the mock-examinations were interested in (or encouraged by their teachers to attend to) the background of the story — the location, the attitude and actions of the crowd, the behaviour of the Black police officer, the relationship between the youths and the crowd. They understood the accident, the death of a poor Black man hit by the car of a White driver, as yet another instance of long-

standing inequity and injustice. In these essays, at least, they do not respond to the cues which separate this incident from the fabric of inequality, which signal it is an 'accident' rather than an act of oppression. They make the background the central focus of attention. The first class from the first school, the nearly all-White class, focussed on the conflict between two individuals: the European and the man in the straw hat. The background was not relevant to the way in which they constructed the moral dilemma about lying and about means and ends. These students ignored moral questions which preoccupied the fourth group, namely the issue of complicity with an oppressive power (constable Tayengwa) and the relationship between potential revolutionary leadership and the masses.

As I have continued to teach this story in the United States, trying to find order in the myriad responses of my students there and in Zimbabwe, I have come to make a broad distinction between two kinds of readers. Type A readers, like those at the first school, are absorbed by the stories of autonomous individuals. Some of these readers focus on the victim and notice that no-one offers assistance or succour to the man who lies bleeding in the road. For these readers the story shows how racial tension obtrudes to interfere with ordinary human compassion; an 'accident' is blown up into a 'racial incident', obscuring fundamental, shared humanity. The moral of the story is that racism (shown to occur in both Whites and Blacks) is deplorable.

Other type A readers focus on the relationship between the driver and the youth in the straw hat who is willing, perhaps even eager, to testify falsely. Whatever they think of the motives of the youth, for these readers he is acting wrongly. For some, he is a racist demagogue eager to stir up trouble, and they will point to the inflammatory language which he uses ('the bloody baboon', 'this . . . Boer') and to his disregard for the truth. Others may see him more sympathetically as a frustrated but ultimately misguided youth who is trying to rectify social injustice by scapegoating an innocent man. All type A readers will pay attention to the fact that the straw-hatted youth is lying. We have heard many Zimbabwean readers' responses to the story. Here are two American students capturing these distinctions among type A readers. The first is a White American male, writing at the time of the Los Angeles riots. (These riots had followed the verdict dismissing charges against White police officers who had beaten a Black man, Rodney King, for allegedly resisting arrest.)

> The man in the straw hat is, I think, the sort of person who feels so bitter and threatened by the treatment of his people that he will defy and condemn Whites as a whole institution, rather than realizing that the individual is not to blame. I think the man in the straw hat would be one of the people looting Los Angeles right now.

An African-American woman commented, 'I think the man in the straw hat is totally wrong for the way he goes about trying to find justice. I feel he is lying to get at all Europeans through the mistake of one. Also the young man just wants to be heard.'

Type A readers see this as a story about individuals who have come together accidentally in a world which is tragically fractured by racial difference. For these readers, these fractures lie outside the main actors — driver, victim, and putative witnesses — and are illegitimately brought to bear on this accidental point of contact. The figures in their picture are individual agents, each capable of moral purposes, and the ground is, in fact, background.

For type B readers, the background is the figure, the focus of attention. For them the setting itself, evoked in dispassionate, neutral language by the narrator, is charged with meaning. That some walk and others drive is not an 'accident', but a function of class and race divisions which separate those who have power in all its forms from those who do not. The setting, a thoroughfare on which Europeans in cars rapidly move past the nearby township, oblivious to the footweary populace, signifies the apartheid of colonial Rhodesia. Here are two, mutually incomprehensive worlds — the crowd can't 'read' the driver's face, he can't understand their language. In these two worlds representatives of justice and the state evoke totally different reactions. The European anxiously awaits the arrival of the police, and the crowd takes note of how he moves close to the White officer, how they speak 'in low, almost friendly tones'. The episode merely convinces the crowd that, once again, nothing will be done.

For type B readers, the youth in the straw hat is not an autonomous moral agent but a spokesman for the disempowered crowd. He is the kind of person who, when he sees the mangled body of the victim and notes his poverty, feels anger at 'the system', at the pervasive conditions of injustice acknowledged by everyone in the crowd. For him this is no 'accident', but rather the ongoing crushing of Black victims by powerful, privileged Whites. The youth represents the possibility for mobilizing resistance within a community that seems amorphous, helpless.

Type B readers see the context as more determining than the acts of individuals. Some will see the youth as having a painful choice between truth-telling and solidarity. A Zimbabwean student commented, 'The Blacks had to lie in order to stand or support their fellow Blacks.' Strong type B readers understand the straw-hatted youth's behaviour as an intentional subversion of the apparatus of justice (police and court system) which sustains ongoing political, economic and social inequity. For these students, the youth is not choosing between two goods, truth and solidarity. Rather he challenges the legal system of justice, which maintains an unjust political and social order, by refusing to accept a crucial premise: that it is wrong

to accuse falsely innocent people. It is rare for students to adopt such a critical reading; the South African student I mentioned earlier in this essay suggested this possibility as did one student in the township school who found the youth's detestation of the White power structure 'natural'. Some African-American students who define themselves as militants entertain this reading. One such student forcefully opened discussion of the story by quoting Malcolm X's dictum, 'By any means necessary'. Fight racism with any means necessary in order to achieve change. In another class a student wrote:

> The young man in the straw hat represents the part of the African community who has the capability of confronting the European White male — the power structure . . . He has the ability to defend his right as an African. Whether or not he saw the accident is irrelevant in order to attain his means. He wishes to acquire a balancing in the system, although this character realizes the likelihood that his attempt will become statistical. It becomes a personal effort for the character to stir the community.

'The accident' generates multiple readings, ranging from the humanitarian response that care for the victim should command our attention rather than racial differences, through various formulations of moral dilemmas faced by the characters, to the militant reading that brings to the fore the need to fight 'by any means necessary' against injustice. I think it is useful for students to hear each other lay out the logic of these different readings and to connect them with different kinds of social experience. Yet one of the most constructive aspects of such discussion is that student responses are by no means predictable. I began this project with the idea that different communities of students would produce different readings: I expected to find Black students more ready than Whites to make a positive connection between the youths and those who fought for Zimbabwe's independence. Yet in every classroom there were contesting views, and in the township classroom where I had anticipated the most sympathetic reading of the youths, the specifics of the situation of the European driver continued to claim attention even as the view of the man in the straw hat as 'patriotic' emerged. In the United States, I had in one class two students who identified themselves as militant Black Muslims. I have quoted both in this paper, one identifying the man in the straw hat as a hero, 'capable of confronting the European White male — the power structure'. The other wrote that the straw-hatted man is 'totally wrong for the way he goes about trying to find justice'.

The value of this story lies in its ability to generate these contesting interpretations. It is constructed in such a way that (as with a recursive figure) there are at least two images to be seen, depending upon the relationship of foreground and background, and it is this interplay between

figure and ground which should command our attention, obliging us to teach each other how to 'see' the two 'images' in the story. The most productive classroom, it seems to me, will be one in which students can come to see the coherence and validity of competing organizations of the data and can appreciate that different readings can focus productively on different, but equally pressing and complex debates.