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Teachers' approaches to teaching Patrick Flanery's novel *Absolution* to Grade 12 learners at two IEB schools in Johannesburg.

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17th March 2017

Declaration of Own Work

I declare that this research report has been composed solely by myself and that it has not been submitted, in whole or in part, in any previous application for a degree. Except where states otherwise by reference or acknowledgment, the work presented is entirely my own.

Signed _____ Date: 7/09/2017

Contents

Abstract 4

Chapter 1: Introduction and Rationale 5

1.1 Introduction 5

1.2 Rationale 7

1.2.1 Absolution: The complexity of style and genre 7

1.2.2 Patrick Flanery: A post-apartheid South African context 8

1.2.3 Style and Genre 11

1.3 Research Site 12

1.3.1 The Question 12

1.4 Chapter Outline 13

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework and Literature Review 14

2.1 Introduction 14

2.2 Theoretical Framework 15

2.2.1 Introduction 15

2.2.2 Language Model 16

2.2.3 Cross-cultural Model 18

2.2.4 The Personal Growth Model 20

2.2.5 Postmodernist Literature 22

2.2.6 Post-apartheid 27

2.3 Literature Review 29

2.3.1 Absolution – book reviews 29

2.3.2 A glimpse into the intentions of Patrick Flanery – an Interview 30

2.3.3 Conclusion 32

Chapter 3: Methodology 32

3.1 Introduction 32

3.2 Ethics 33

3.3 Research Design 33

3.4 Selection of Participants 36

3.5 Data Sources 37

3.5.1 Questionnaire 37

3.5.2 Focused Group Interviews 37

Chapter 4 Data analysis - findings 38

4.1 Introduction 38

4.2 Data findings – the Questionnaire 38
4.2.1 Suitability of the novel and teachers first impressions of the novel 38
4.2.2 Reactions to the novel – issues of race and culture 40
4.2.3 Approaches and Literary Theory 43
4.2.4 Affective development of learners – relating to the novel 46
4.2.5 Results – Focused Group Interview 47
4.2.6 Data analysis – focused group interview 52
4.2.7 Validity of this study 53
4.2.8 A comparative study of approaches to teaching Absolution 54
Chapter 5 Conclusion 56
Bibliography 58
Appendices 61
Appendix A: Book Review Absolution 61
Appendix B: Book Review: Absolution 62
Book review: 'Absolution' by Patrick Flanery 62
Appendix C: An Interview with Patrick Flanery 64
A Q&A with Absolution author, Patrick Flanery 64
Appendix D: Questionnaire English Teachers 69
Questionnaire: Grade 12 English teachers - Absolution 69
Appendix E 70
Ethical Approval 70

Abstract

As a prescribed Grade 12 IEB (Independent Exams Board) English Home Language (HL) text, *Absolution* written by Patrick Flanery (2012) has proven to be a very difficult text to teach. It is for this reason that I have chosen to conduct research into the various ways that Grade 12 teachers have approached the teaching of this novel. In my experience as a Grade 12 English teacher my engagement with a vast variety of IEB prescribed English texts has been wholly accessible to learners and teachers, offering complete engagement and understanding of the various concepts explored within each text. As IEB (Independent Exams Board) prescribed English texts remain prescribed for the duration of two years, each year provides an opportunity to further develop my experience in conveying the nuances relating to theme, character and style. In my experience, such a process has always been achievable, satisfying and highly rewarding; however the option to select *Absolution* as the Grade 12 English Home Language set text for 2015 and 2016 presented challenges due to the complexities of both style and content inherent in this text.

The unusually dense nature of this text has made it extremely difficult for Grade 12 learners to engage with the novel in a profound way. It is for this reason that I would like to conduct research into the methods and underlying models for teaching literature that IEB English teachers have used when approaching the teaching of this specific text in their Grade 12 English classrooms. Drawing on the models for teaching literature as first proposed by Ronald Carter and Michael Long (1991) as well as Gillian Lazar (1993), various teacher approaches will be investigated.

Using a qualitative method of research, questionnaires were completed by two teachers from an independent school for girls and three teachers from an independent school for boys. Focused group interviews were conducted with one teacher from each of the schools as a way of clarifying certain responses to the questionnaire that was initially completed. Careful analysis of the data provided through both the questionnaire and the focused group interview, led to the conclusion that understanding literary theory as well as the context in which the novel is set is fundamental in allowing for an intensive study of the novel as well as a clear understanding of the nuances contained within the novel.

Chapter 1: Introduction and Rationale

1.1 Introduction

The Independent Exams board or the IEB is a South African independent assessment board that it well known for setting examinations for the school leaving National Senior Certificate (NSC). The IEB examinations are generally considered challenging, expecting a high degree of critical thinking from Grade 12 learners. It is within this context that one of the requirements of the Grade 12 IEB English Home Language Paper 2 examination is to study a prescribed novel and to respond critically to a literary essay question in the examination. The IEB present a choice between two texts. The 2015 and 2016 choice included *Absolution* by Patrick Flanery and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles: A Pure Woman Faithfully* by Thomas Hardy. The school in which I teach selected the former option. I will not be using my own school as a research site. Furthermore, I will not be studying my own teaching although at times my own voice may be apparent due to my own personal involvement in teaching this text. My experience in teaching the novel has provided me with insight into some of the difficulties experienced by fellow English teachers. It is for this reason that my interest in this research project has been prompted.

Absolution (2012), written by Patrick Flanery is an unusually complex text that requires a level of engagement that is difficult to accomplish for both teachers and learners. As a postmodernist text, the deconstruction of truth claims, the presence of multiple points of view, fragmentation of structure and ambiguous thematic concerns are some challenging aspects that teachers and learners of this text grapple with. The window that Flanery (2012) presents into post-apartheid South Africa is sometimes mystifying to a born free generation for whom apartheid may seem distant while at the same time over taught. One result of this is the possibility of addressing an intergenerational gap. Although a political novel, in essence, the lens and perspective in which the issue of South African politics is portrayed becomes highly personal to both the characters and the learners. Flanery (2012) shows that in South Africa both during and after apartheid, the political and private realms are inextricably connected. This parallel between the political and private is a concept that learners struggle to identify with. Postmodernist texts would appear to coerce learners into immersing themselves into a political context that is to a large extent unfamiliar and insignificant for many. The mere fact that learners of the born-free generation have not suffered the events that accompanied both apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa, could lead to a detachment between the political context in which they presently live and their

own personal life experiences. Despite the apparent detachment that learners may feel when studying the context of this text, it would appear a more relatable option in comparison to the alternative IEB text, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles: A Pure Woman Faithfully* written by Thomas Hardy. Attempting to encourage learners to immerse themselves in a Victorian context would create a far greater challenge for teachers. Therefore, one might say that the novel *Absolution* is more relevant and relatable to learners of the born-free generation. Living in a democratic country, where racial diversity is embraced and white guilt, a dissipating factor, learners of this generation may experience difficulty in finding a correlation between a world of freedom that is their personal experience of life in South Africa in 2016 and the tumultuous political climate of both apartheid and post-apartheid that forms the political backdrop of Flanery's *Absolution* (2012). Thus, encouraging learners to close the chasm between their own experiences of the current political circumstances in South Africa and that of the post-apartheid political climate in the text appears to present a challenge for many teachers.

A novel articulating such complexity of style and content must be supported with an immense bank of resources about the novel that teachers can consult when teaching this literary text. Although there are many resources that teachers may access regarding the apartheid era and the struggles that ensued throughout South Africa during this tumultuous time, there are very few resources that can be used to assist teachers and learners in the literary analysis of the novel *Absolution* (2012). In addition to this an understanding of the models for teaching literature that each teacher may have opted to use when teaching the novel will also form part of this research. As the content of this novel both intrigued and mystified me, it became of interest to me to conduct research into the approaches that were taken by other teachers of this text. Although the novel was phased out at the end of 2016, it may return at a later date in which case there is the possibility that this research may be used as a teaching resource.

1.2 Rationale

1.2.1 *Absolution*: The complexity of style and genre

> Assume nothing. Read attentively but also read sceptically, which is to say, do not assume that the truth is ever being spoken by a character. Sometimes it is, sometimes it isn't' (Patrick Flanery, 2015, South African Schools World Tour, The English Experience).

This statement made by American writer Patrick Flanery (2012) during a South African school tour in 2015 and recorded by The English Experience articulates the nature of the novel *Absolution* (2012). No definitive answers are offered at any point during the novel, resulting in a progression of events and a conclusion that tends to be open-ended and frustrating for some teachers and learners. The obvious lack of a resolution at the end of the novel further appears to exacerbate the confusion and annoyance experienced by learners and teachers.

One of the challenges I experienced when teaching this novel was the literary style and genre in which it is located. As a postmodernist text, stylistics elements inherent in the novel are difficult for learners to understand due to the general complexities associated with postmodernist writing. This research will briefly discuss the characteristics of postmodernism that no teacher of this specific text can ignore. This is borne out of the interview conducted with Flanery and appears to hint at the difficulty and complexity of the genre of this text both of which may contribute to the challenges that teachers may experience when approaching this novel. *Absolution* (2012) will be analysed to demonstrate that as a postmodernist text, stylistic elements such as fragmentation, structural incoherence, the use of paradox and an unreliable narrator are clearly evident. Highly applicable to *Absolution* (2012) as a postmodernist piece of literature is the focus on truth and the contention that truth is by no means absolute but rather relative and something that is constructed within the human mind. Terry Eagleton (1983) accurately describes the postmodernist movement as one that veered away from 'grand narratives of truth, reason, science' (Eagleton, 1983, p. 200) and that sought to free history from a 'conceptual straitjacket' (Eagleton, 1983, p. 200). Although an apparently liberating concept, the practical implementations for teachers of this novel may not be as easily achieved.

Given the complexities mentioned above, the approaches taken by teachers are important. The approaches taken by Grade 12 teachers in addressing postmodernist elements in *Absolution*

(2012) is important in understanding how learners may have reacted to literature that resists the tendency to draw definitive conclusions about the subtle issues raised in the novel. For a Grade 12 learner accepting such a concept may be difficult but an investigation into the ways in which Grade 12 English teachers approach issues relating to human experiences as unstable, inconclusive and ambiguous will be discussed. Further to the philosophical aspects of postmodernist texts, an investigation into postmodernist elements (accentuated by post-apartheid complexities) that learners have to grapple with when studying this text is addressed. Thus, an investigation into the ways in which other Grade 12 teachers identify and explain postmodernist narrative technique evident in the novel is necessary in allowing for a full appreciation of the novel. To fully appreciate the novel, it would be necessary for learners to engage with the expectations that accompany a postmodernist literary text and to find ways of engaging with content which may be de-familiarising for a generation of born-frees. Therein lies the challenge for teachers which is to approach the novel in such a way that the novel is given the value it is worthy of. Part of this research, considers how teachers approach this novel in such a way that learners appreciate the meaning and relevance of this text.

In discussing the challenges of stylistic features inherent in this novel, an investigation into various models for teaching literature that may consciously or unconsciously underpin some of the teaching complexities associated with this novel will be considered. Ronald Carter and Michael Long (1991), present various models for how and why literature may be taught. These may provide insight into how a controversial and complex novel of this sort may be approached. Closely linked to these models will be an investigation into the value of literature teaching and why and how literature can be taught to secondary school learners. Gillian Lazar (1993), explores various ways of teaching literature in the classroom that are instrumental in enriching learners' knowledge of the world around them, thus enabling them to appreciate the text and successfully find meaning in what they are reading. This research will also investigate how Grade 12 teachers may have adopted approaches to teaching the novel that correlated with the models for teaching literature as proposed by Carter and Long (1991) and Lazar (1993).

1.2.2 Patrick Flanery: A post-apartheid South African context

Patrick Flanery (2012) and his decision to set his story within a South African post-apartheid context also forms part of this investigation as well as the approaches teachers took when

discussing a South African context viewed through the eyes of a partial foreigner. Although a partial foreigner, Flanery (2012) clearly stated during his South African World Schools Tour that:

> The relations between blacks and whites in America are not a perfect parallel either to the historical context of apartheid or to its material results, but the historical crimes of apartheid, underlying the imposition of apartheid in South Africa, and slavery and the ongoing social and institutionalized racism in America, are surely of comparable severity' (Patrick Flanery, 2015, South African Schools World Tour)

The above comment made by Flanery provides a degree of legitimacy of his understanding of race relations in South Africa both during apartheid and post-apartheid. His own personal experience with the tumultuous effects of institutionalized racial segregation in his native America is highlighted in the novel but through the lens of a South African context. The extract below exemplifies the reality of life for both blacks and whites living within a post-apartheid context. Despite the official collapse of apartheid as an institutionalized system, South Africa continues to reel from the legacy of racial inequality. The white guilt felt by the character of Clare is demonstrated when she attempts to convince herself that she has evolved into a woman who does not elevate herself above people of colour:

> I don't want to be thought rude, even by him. Especially by him, I mean – by someone like him. I don't want to be like my mother was. I don't want to be the imperious white madam who can't help being an autocrat with the servants. (Flanery, 2012, p.72)

The very obvious presence of inequality and the ramifications of apartheid are seen through the eyes of Sam as he feels uncomfortable with the presence of beggars on the streets of Cape Town.

Through an investigation into background information relating to Flanery (2012) and through a discussion of the various approaches taken by teachers when considering the legitimacy of a partial foreigner writing a novel set in South Africa some of the complexities of this novel may be exposed. The data collected suggests that learners questioned why Flanery (2012) would choose to write a novel of this nature.

This discussion investigates Flanery's (2012) unique style of writing as well as the intriguing relationship that he shares with South Africa as an American with a South African partner. While it is clear that Flanery (2012) did extensive research into South Africa, some of my learners questioned the authenticity of his portrayal of South Africa. Flanery's novel (2012) forms part of a growing body of post-apartheid literature and, although elements of post-apartheid literature will be investigated, it is beyond the scope of this investigation to include a highly detailed investigation into this growing field of literature. Suffice to say, Flanery (2012) shares what other contemporary writers share; an ongoing interest in the complexities and failed resolutions of the post-apartheid era. An investigation into the context in which the novel is set as well as the various stylistic and thematic concerns is important in teaching the novel. Part of this investigation, considers Flanery's (2012) portrayal of post-apartheid South Africa as well as what he intends to achieve through depicting this context from a semi-foreigner experience as in the case of the character, Sam. This investigation considers the intricate link that exists between Flanery, the writer, a semi-foreigner and Sam, the character, an 'insider outsider' who opted for self-exile during the apartheid era. The question of apartheid's legacy is a central concern in the novel but Flanery (2012) also attempts to investigate how most societies and individuals are haunted by a tainted past.

A consideration of Flanery's (2012) exploration of truth, memory, forgiveness, fear and identity in contemporary South Africa will also be undertaken as a way of identifying some of the intriguing aspects of this novel. Pertinent extracts from the novel will be included to demonstrate some examples of Flanery's (2012) dexterous, yet complex skill of interweaving historical, social and personal realities.

Research into Flanery's (2012) perspective on South Africa, his general choice of South Africa as an ideal place in which to set his novel as well as what he wishes to achieve through a plethora of voices scattered throughout the novel, also forms an integral part of this investigation, attempting to establish the complexities in teaching this text to seventeen-year-old learners. Although, Flanery's (2012) intentions may be partially clear, it is ultimately his orchestration of these intentions that have resulted in a conundrum of sorts for both teachers and learners. Although a foreigner, part of this research project addresses issues related to addressing the past both within a country such as South Africa and perhaps on a more personal level. One of the points mentioned by Flanery (2012) in his lecture conducted at an IEB school was:

> The past, and its legacy, is inescapable. The question is: how does a nation, how do people, deal with the weight of history? How do they redress past wrongs?' (Patrick Flanery, 2015, South African Schools World Tour).

This research considers the extent to which Grade 12 English teachers addressed the possibility of the existence of a parallel between the legacies of apartheid that 21st century South Africa is still reeling from and that of the individual lives of young teenagers who may also have a personal past, perhaps inherited from the experiences of their parents that continues to haunt them.

1.2.3 Style and Genre

Although research into the approaches taken by Grade 12 English teachers in addressing issues related to style, genre and the place of a partial foreigner writer in describing an authentic South African context are important to this investigation, so too are the methods teachers use in assisting leaners to understand the complex and often unfamiliar use of language and vocabulary in the text. While this research report is not a textual analysis of the novel, the following examples offer some of the linguistic and literary challenges associated with the teaching of this text. Literary complexity is seen in the example below as Clare expresses her desperation to find her daughter Laura, even considering embarking upon a spiritual summoning of Laura's body from the underworld. The allusion to Greek mythology further intensifies some of the challenges associated with teaching the text.

> Would that I had a sorrowful song to sing, *un si pietoso stile*, to win back, as Orpheus and Eurydice. I offer you a cup, what to drink, a song of prayer, wish for you to cohere again, *Etemmu*, the wandering soul. (Flanery, 2012, p.110)

Linguistically, Flanery (2012) makes use of complex vocabulary, coupled with metaphorical representations that result in a degree of difficulty in understanding the nuances inherent in the novel. The extract below explains Clare's perplexity as she considers the lack of official records that exist in relation to the disappearance of her daughter, Laura:

> There are periods for which no one can account, missing ligatures of motivation and event and development between more or less established fact, without which bones of

> the story would make no sense, fall to the ground have no possibility or unity of structure, no life. I need to will those ligaments into being, put flesh upon the face, decide whether it is serpentine monster or a ten-armed goddess. (Flanery, 2002: 83)

1.3 Research Site

My research is located within two independent schools in Johannesburg. The first is an all girls' school and the other an all boys' school. Both schools contain students who are predominantly first language speakers of English and who come from privileged backgrounds. Although both schools are multicultural, all students are from economically privileged backgrounds. Second language speakers are part of the school but are expected to cope with the demands of English Home Language. The choice to select these two schools was based on the contacts that I had within both schools as well as the fact that both schools had selected *Absolution* (2012) as the IEB English Home Language text for 2016. The convenient location of each of these schools also influenced my choice of using both these schools as suitable research sites.

The decision to select one girls' school and one boys' school was influenced by my interest in the possibility of different reactions that may arise from boys and girls in response to the novel. As will be explained later in this research report, the data revealed that there tended to be more inquiry and interest in the novel for the girls as opposed to the interest exhibited by the boys. This propelled me to investigate whether in terms of gender studies that the existence of particularly strong female characters in contrast to the insipid and fragmented male characters in the novel may have elicited a different response from the boys and girls in the selected schools. This will be further discussed in the data analysis section of this research report.

1.3.1 The Question

The main question of this research report addresses the approaches teachers from two independent schools take when teaching the novel *Absolution* (2012) by Patrick Flanery to Grade 12 learners.

Given the rationale and context outlined above, the main secondary research questions will consider the following:

1. **What are some of the challenges teachers experience when teaching the novel *Absolution*?**

2. **How do teachers address these challenges?**

3. **What approaches do English teachers take when teaching this specific novel?**

4. **What are the underlying models which inform these approaches and how do they contribute to learners' personal and cognitive development?**

1.4 Chapter Outline

In this chapter, I have explained the rationale for the research which aims to investigate the approaches Grade 12 English teachers take in addressing the content, style, genre and context of the novel *Absolution* (2012). Also mentioned in this chapter is the context in which this research was conducted.

In chapter 2, there will be a discussion of the theoretical framework as well as the literature review used to describe and analyse the approaches taken by teachers when teaching the novel *Absolution* (2012). I make reference to various models for teaching literature as well as discuss the postmodernist aspects of the novel that also contribute to the challenges associated with the teaching of this text. Chapter 3 outlines the methodology used in gathering data required for this research project. The tools of analysis as well as the participants used in the study will be discussed. Chapter 4 provides an analysis of the data collected as well as an analysis of the models of literature teaching that each teacher used when teaching this novel. In addition to this, there will be a suggestion as to how the novel could be taught based on the approaches taken by other teachers and my own personal experience in teaching the novel. Finally, in Chapter 5, conclusions are made based on the information that has been presented in this project as well as a reinforcement of the significance and implications of this research project.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This first section of the chapter outlines the theoretical framework of the study, offering details on the relevant theories and concepts that have informed this research. The research examines the models for teaching literature as initially proposed by Michael Long, Ronald Carter (1991) and Gillian Lazar (1993), however it also offers some more recent research into models of literature teaching by considering the theories presented by Frances Christie and Mary Macken-Horarik (2007). In addition to this, insight is offered into the challenges that accompany the analysis of a postmodernist text such as *Absolution* (2012).

Postmodernism is a term ascribed to literature written after World War 11. Postmodernism tends to present concepts that act in accordance with modernist views of a world that was considered as fragmented and chaotic due to the effects of two world wars. Postmodernist literature therefore not only involves a continuation, carried to the extreme of the traditional experiments of modernist writing, but also attempts to break away from modernist forms of writing. One of the main features of postmodernist literature is to subvert accepted modes of thought and experience and to create literature that offers no concrete conclusions or a sense of certainty and finality at the end of a novel. Instead a postmodernist text would tend to challenge readers to piece together a fragmented series of concepts and to create meaning that is entirely subjective.

Referring to various aspects of postmodernist writing as presented by Terry Eagleton (1983), Robin Usher and Richard Edwards (2002) such challenges will be explored. Elaborating on the aspects of postmodernist literature as proposed by Eagleton (1983) will be the ideas and concepts proposed by Joseph Trimmer (1992) and Allen Carey-Webb (2001) in relation to postmodernist literature. Closely related to the models of literature teaching will be a discussion of the cultural studies and reader response theories as presented by Stuart Hall (1992). Integral to this research is a discussion of post-apartheid literature. Drawing on the work of Ronit Frenkel and Craig Mackenzie (2010), aspects of post-apartheid literature in *Absolution* (2012) will be examined.

The second section of this chapter, reviews the literature that has informed this research. Drawing on book reviews offered by various reputable newspapers as well as two interviews

that were conducted with Patrick Flanery, further insight is provided into the approaches taken by teachers in addressing the concerns of this novel in a Grade 12 English classroom.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

2.2.1 Introduction

It appeared necessary that in order to investigate the various methodologies that could be adopted when teaching the novel, *Absolution* (2012), it was necessary to establish the value of promoting the teaching of English literature as a subject. There will be a reference to some literary theories that are compatible with the three models for teaching literature discussed in this paper. Research into this aspect, allowed for consideration of the fundamental importance of teaching the novel *Absolution* (2012) not simply as an academic requirement but also for the personal benefits it may offer teachers and learners. Michael Long and Ronald Carter (1991) as well as Gillian Lazar (1993), propose three major models for the teaching of literature. Long and Carter (1991) argue that the way in which literature is taught can vary from teacher to teacher and that there is a profound difference between the 'knowledge *about* literature' and 'knowledge *of* literature' (Long & Carter, 1991:4). The former places importance upon the accumulation of literary theory that will generally ensure a successful result in externally assessed examinations whilst the latter focuses less on imparting knowledge related to facts and more on developing a love for literature where the ultimate aim is concerned with instilling a sense of enjoyment in studying the set text. This research report will consider whether the teachers of this text have approached the novel in such a way that the learners have acquired an adequate understanding of the text that would allow for a pleasing result in their final IEB examination or whether teachers may have approached the novel in such a way that they were able to find a direct connection between their own lives and that of the events and characters in the novel, allowing for a more relevant and valuable understanding of the text. Long and Carter (1991) suggest that knowledge of literature tends to generate active learners as opposed to passive ones. Postmodernist and reader-response theory tends to encourage active leaner engagement. This research will investigate the approaches teachers have taken when teaching *Absolution* (2012). In this report, there will be also be a discussion of whether the 'knowledge *of* Absolution or knowledge *about Absolution* was the more effective method in allowing for a meaningful understanding of the text.

2.2.2 Language Model

The first model presented is that of the language model that appears to win favour from Long & Carter (1991) and Lazar (1993). Although there is a general consensus amongst all three theorists that this model of literature teaching could become 'mechanistic' often using 'language activities in place of genuine engagement with the work as literature' (Long & Carter, 1991, p. 2), they also agree that the language model equips learners 'with the tools they need to interpret a text and to make critical judgements of it' (Lazar, 1993, p. 5). This model therefore allows for a more student centred approach to accessing meaning in literary texts. Lazar (1993) further stresses the importance of this model in its ability to allow for greater adeptness in English. Such a model encourages learners to engage linguistically with the text, developing skills in identifying literal and figurative language techniques as well as encouraging a more sophisticated way of using diction in both oral and written tasks. Thus, it could be said that this model bridges the gap between linguistic understanding and the nuances contained in literary texts. The language of *Absolution* (2012) is highly sophisticated and this research serves to highlight how many learners tended to view the use of language in *Absolution* (2012) as an impediment to understanding the deeper implications of the novel. Thus, my interest lies in how teachers chose to overcome some of the difficulties that learners may have encountered when studying *Absolution* (2012). An example of the complexity of the use of language is highlighted in the quotation below. In this extract, the protagonist Clare makes use of a metaphor to describe the intrusiveness of self-censorship

> I – and doubtless many other writers in the same or similar positions – found that the censor infected my consciousness, like a worm. It lived in the brain, ate around the skull, living side by side with me, inside me, occupying the same mental space. It exerted a kind of psychic pressure that I experienced physiologically, right here in the sinuses, between and behind the eyes, and in the frontal lobe, pressing against the brow. (Flanery, 2002, p.45)

This extract is an example of the complexity of the use of language in the novel. The complex interweaving of vocabulary and figurative language evident in this extract is testimony of the complexity of language that is present throughout the novel. In this case the theory of postmodernist writing becomes relevant to the language model in that it is able to foreground multiple meanings of truth using dense and complex language to express these ideas. Through

the use of complex language, an exploration of postmodernist elements of multiple truths and multiple voices are apparent. Thus, postmodernist theory and the language used in the novel become closely aligned in this particular literary text.

The interweaving of voices informs the postmodernist technique of using multiple voices and offering multiple perspectives. Linguistic complexity successfully allows for such multiplicity of voice and perspective. As the chapters of this novel move between the voices of Sam the adult, Sam the child, Clare the cynical interviewee and Clare the writer of her semi-fictional novel, *Absolution*, the constant change in perspective facilitates the fragmentation that postmodernist writing provides. The following extracts from the novel demonstrate different perspectives and versions of the truth that the novel offers, a technique that further intensifies the linguistic challenges of this novel. The extracts below relate to Bernard, the relative who became Sam's guardian after the death of his parents. Both extracts reveal different versions of the way in which Bernard died thus resulting in the existence of truth that is essentially unreliable. The first perspective written in the third person suggests that Sam singlehandedly killed Bernard whilst the second perspective written in the first person, suggests that Laura and Sam killed Bernard together.

1. The boy put the truck in gear and accelerated. He was afraid that starting the truck would wake Bernard but then the wheels were on top of him before the boy knew it and before Bernard knew it. (Flanery 2002, p.95)
2. I put my hand on the gearshift but she removes it, puts it down on the seat. I hear the key turn in the ignition; she depresses the clutch, puts the truck into gear, and accelerates. The bump is the same, and the crunch that comes after…I realize in this moment, that I finally know the truth of that night. That we did it together. (Flanery, 2002, p.375)

This research investigates how and if teachers make use of this model when teaching the text. Despite the challenges in teaching a text that contains such complex language, it seemed useful to consider Long and Carter's (1991) reference to teachers' as enablers, successfully 'working with students and creatively intervening to ensure relevant and meaningful experience through a direct contact with the text' (Long & Carter, 1991, p.7). This may suggest the ability of this approach to use an analysis of language within the text to generate a more profound literary interest in the novel

2.2.3 Cross-cultural Model

The second mode for teaching literature is referred to as the cross-cultural model and this model places emphasis on understanding and appreciating the cultural orientations of others. This particular model appears to accurately emphasize how literature can offer a window into other cultures thus allowing for a cross-cultural understanding. Long & Carter (1991) and Lazar (1993) highlight the importance of the ability of this model to entice learners to transport themselves over historical periods into unfamiliar cultural spaces in an attempt to understand how other cultures operate either differently or similarly to that of their own. This model appears to apply strongly to the cultural multiplicities in *Absolution* (2012). Issues relating to racial conflict as well as a sense of white guilt that seemed to permeate a post-apartheid climate in South Africa are cultural aspects that are effective in creating a set of authentic views of South Africa post 1994. Although an important model to consider, all three theorists suggest that this model of literature teaching tends to be theory laden often focusing more on a teacher-centred approach. Some recent literary theory has pushed our understanding of the multiple lenses and interpretations that any piece of literature may have to offer. Understanding and positioning learners within a cultural context which is not their own presents a challenge for teachers of this text but from a pedagogical point of view allows learners to access windows into other cultures. Literary theories that may allow for this accessibility and serve to inform the cross-cultural model of literature teaching may include reader-response theory, feminist theory and post-colonial literature that will be discussed briefly but not in great depth as both theories are beyond the scope of this study.

Although the post-apartheid cultural context of this novel may appear unfamiliar to learners of this generation, the use of the cultural model in teaching *Absolution* (2012) would allow for 'a transfer of meaning from one moment of history into another' (Rivkin & Ryan, 2004, p. 12). Through reader-response theory, individuals will create their own meaning of the context through their engagement with the text. Similarly, Wolfgang Iser (1978) in his discussion of reception theory suggests that, 'Reading is guided by the text and influenced by the personal, literary and cultural history of the reader' (Thomson, J, 1992, p.12). In this way to dismiss the literary value of this text based on the fact that learners of this generation may not relate to the events associated with both an apartheid and post-apartheid context within South Africa would not be valid given the fact that individuals will create meaning from the text regardless of the generation from which they hail.

Both postcolonial and feminist literature informs the postmodernist aspects of this novel by creating a cultural context in which otherness and self-identity are an important aspect of society. The presence of Laura in the novel suggests aspects of feminist literature that challenges the patriarchy of men. Her bold and rebellious character is viewed as unconventional in a cultural context that, to some extent still remains predominantly dominated by men.

Similarly, the postcolonial aspects of the novel serve to highlight the dominance and exploitation of people of colour in South Africa both during and after apartheid. Therefore, to a large extent the cross-cultural aspects of this novel would propel learners to consider these literary theories in understanding and engaging with the cultural context of *Absolution* (2012). Using literary theory such as feminism and post- colonialism, the following extracts from the novel serve to demonstrate the cultural context that is evident in Flanery's (2012) text. The first extract describes Laura, a political, fearless activist functioning within a male dominated and tumultuous political context. Clare describes the political activism of Laura from a young age through describing Laura's handwriting as 'radical and unruly' (Flanery, 2012, p.82); her ruthless involvement in political affairs within a post-apartheid context, described by Clare, 'Perhaps it is the cold-bloodedness of what you did, the extraordinary determination in the way you carried out your mission' (Flanery, 2012, p.83). The postcolonial context of this text is further highlighted in the presence of otherness that is reflected through Clare's interaction with her gardener, Adam.

The dialogue below highlights a cultural context that although supposedly a liberated one, still elevates whites above those of colour. The extract describes Clare's gardener, Adam, suggesting that Clare's desire for a vegetable garden will not be possible:

> Adam: 'It is not a good thing. These plants will not grow'
>
> Clare: 'We're going to try it this year', Clare said, trying to make herself sound resolved at the same time that Adam's vehemence opened up a fissure of doubt in her mind.
>
> Adam: 'It is a bad idea.'
>
> Clare: 'It is not a bad thing... You will see... But you must let me grow what I want,

Adam, otherwise we will only come to grief, and in the end I should have to ask you to leave.' (Flanery, 2012: 108)

These extracts provide insight into the cultural context of this novel. Despite the official abolition of apartheid, the conversation between Clare and Adam suggests that racial difference was still prevalent during the time in which the novel was set. It is within this cultural context that learners of the born-free generation are to immerse themselves.

This report will consider the approaches that teachers may or may not have taken when approaching the cross-cultural model of literature teaching.

2.2.4 The Personal Growth Model

All three theorists tend to consider the language-based approach and the cross-cultural model as working harmoniously to maximise the experience that learners have when studying a literary text. The third model, the personal growth model focuses more on enriching a learner's love for literature and encouraging Long and Carter's (1991) process of *engagement.* The commitment and enjoyment as well as the potential for ethical growth gained through this model can only be achieved once learners have acquired a basic decoding of the text. For second language speakers, this is not always guaranteed given the complexity of language and content of the novel. This approach tends to veer away from the expectations of an examination, focusing more predominantly on contributing to the personal growth of learners as individuals. Rather than augmenting rigid requirements of an external examination that demands a high level of linguistic ability and a very close understanding of different cultures, this model aims to develop a learners' lifelong enjoyment and appreciation for literature in such a way that a learner may feel that their own life has been impacted by the literature they have studied. Long and Carter (1991) refer specifically to this model that acts as 'a special resource for development and growth, an aim being to encourage greater sensitivity and self-awareness and greater understanding of the world' (Long & Carter, 1991, p.3). Literary theory such as reader-response and reception theory are also relevant to the personal growth model. The overlap that is evident between the cross-cultural model and that of the personal growth model is seen in the expectation of learners personally identifying with the text, projecting their own life experience into the cultural context of the novel. Iser's reference to the use of reception

theory as one that positions readers 'not as consumers but active performers who bring texts to life in their minds' (Thomson, 1992, p.12) is relevant to this model as it focuses primarily on the importance of subjectivity in allowing learners to gain meaning from any literary text. This model is possibly the most difficult to conceptualise since affective development in learners cannot always be accurately measured, however this research attempts to ascertain how teachers may approach this model when teaching the novel *Absolution* (2012).

More recent studies proposed by Christie and Macken-Horavik (2007) discuss the personal growth model as gaining popularity in the 1960s. According to these two theorists, the personal growth model developed rapidly in opposition to progressivist models of educational theory and constructivist models that sought to impose ideologies on learners rather than to allow them to develop an individual understanding of the world around them. Thus the personal growth model as discussed by Christie and Macken-Horavik (2007) suggests an approach to teaching literature that encourages teacher facilitation rather than instruction suggesting that persons should fashion their own knowledge and experience (Christie & Macken-Horavik', 2007, p.162). Following on from this theory is Christie & Macken-Horavik (2007) suggestion that without a close reading of a literary text, personal growth within a learner cannot be achieved. Thus, this research aims to also to investigate the manner in which *Absolution* (2012) was approached by teachers and to evaluate the extent to which this novel was able to impact the affective development of learners. This would include questions of empathy and ethical engagement with the text. Data collected during the research process indicated that the girls appeared to make a correlation between the relationship between Laura and Clare in the novel and that of the relationships that they shared with own mothers. In this way there appeared to be some sense of bridging of an intergenerational gap. This research investigates the model or models that teachers of this text deemed most appropriate when teaching this specific novel. Lazar (1993) offers an evaluation of all three models and offers advantages and disadvantages associated with each model. These suggestions will be evaluated and investigated in relation to the teaching of *Absolution* (2012). Michael Long (1991) indicates that all three models are not 'mutually exclusive' which in relation to the novel *Absolution* (2012) appears fitting since all three models can be consulted when teaching this novel. Long (1991) further suggests that often teachers use these models of literature as a way of accommodating the expectations of an 'academic, institutionalized setting' (Long, 1991, p.3) instead of using them as a means to develop a personal connection with literary texts. This research investigates how this concept can be applied when teaching *Absolution* (2012). In my teaching experience, the end result of

approaching this novel is simply to meet the demands of a final external examination. This research investigates if other teachers of this novel may approach the novel in such a way that it does encourage personal growth in learners. A useful element to consider in this regard is a discussion of Carter and Long's (1991) view of creating literature classrooms that encourage a learner-centred approach as opposed to teacher-centred approach. My data findings aim to probe the models other Grade 12 English teachers may have used when teaching this novel.

Long's (1991) article entitled, 'A Feeling for Language: The Multiple Values of Teaching Literature', addresses the importance of literature as a way of developing critical thinking and the ability to respond confidently to various issues explored within literary texts. His article also suggests that although critical responses to literature texts are the main focus in a literature classroom, it is this very notion of encouraging learner responses that becomes problematic. He refers to the 'teaching of literature as an arid business unless there is a response' (Brumfit & Carter, 1992, p.42). It seems that a response can only be elicited from learners, if they understand and fully engage with the literature text in question. The notion of investigating various methodologies that could be adopted in encouraging such a response to the novel, Absolution (2012) forms part of my research. Gillian Lazar (1993) further suggests that although literary 'texts have a powerful function in raising moral and ethical concerns in the classroom' (Lazar, G, 1993, p.3), they can also render learners powerless if they are unable to engage with some of the complexities of the text. Lazar's (1993) suggestions may appear valid when applied to the teaching of Absolution (2012) in that it is a text that can offer immense cognitive and personal growth for learners but without an awareness of possible models on the part of the teacher, the actual teaching of this text may become frustrating, intimidating and unenjoyable for both teacher and learner

2.2.5 Postmodernist Literature

The understanding of the literary theory in which the novel *Absolution* (2012) is located appeared fundamental to this research in that it investigates some of the challenges that teachers encounter specifically when addressing the complexities of postmodernist writing. The complexity of language, the instability of the truth, the multiplicity of voices and perspectives are elements of postmodernist writing that are all features that can be located in all three models for teaching literature. The language-based model, the cross cultural-model and the personal growth model all reflect postmodernist techniques that add to some of the difficulties associated

with reading and understanding the novel. The three models discussed earlier all reflect the demands of postmodernist writing particularly in the sense that there is a multiplicity of subjectivities in the novel, *Absolution* (2012). This facilitates the need for learners to engage fully with the text and in doing so adopt an ethical position that can be defended. This Terry Eagleton (1983) states that, 'Without some kind of theory, however unreflective and implicit, we would not know what a 'literary work' was in the first place or how we would read it' (Eagleton, T, 1983, p. viii). This assertion would appear important when investigating approaches that could be used when teaching *Absolution* (2012). As a teacher myself, there is always the tendency to consciously or unconsciously use literary theory when teaching literary texts. This research considers the conscious or unconscious models of teaching literature by teachers of *Absolution* (2012). Without an understanding of the complexities of literariness inherent in this novel, it would appear that teachers would possibly struggle to teach the text in a meaningful way.

I felt it useful to incorporate into the literary framework of this research, brief references to literary theories such as cultural-studies, postmodernism and its connections to deconstruction as well as reader-response theory, reception theory, feminist theory and post-colonial theory Using the influence of the work of Joseph Trimmer (1992) and Allen Carey-Webb's (2001), this research considered how teachers may have approached cultural aspects inherent in the novel. Stuart Hall's (1982) focus on culture as an important consideration when assessing power relations within society appeared to have some relevance when assessing the way in which issues of race and class were approached when teaching this novel. Hall's (1982) theory considers issues relating to hegemony, influence and power. His theories consider who and why people hold a sense of dominance within various societies. This theory is relevant to certain aspects of the novel in that it foregrounds a post-apartheid context that was hegemonic in the sense that despite the legal abolition of apartheid, there was still a clear divide between people of different races. The white people in South Africa clearly still held all the influence and expected a degree of subservience from people of colour. Hall's theory (1982) engages readers in such a way that they are propelled to decode the hegemonic structures that are inherent within the text. Again, an understanding of Hall's cultural studies theory facilitates the importance of the cross-cultural model of teaching literature which in turn would propel readers to decode the language as a way of discovering a subjective perspective of the text in question. The interweaving of Hall's (1982) cultural studies theory enhances the importance of

post-modernism in this novel in that it generates an understanding that meaning is not fixed but rather fluid in that people create their own meaning of a text.

Trimmer's (1992) article mentioned earlier, places specific emphasis on the concept of cultural criticism that emerged as a major paradigm shift in the 1950s. His article appeared useful in considering the cultural and social organisation of people as an important factor when determining power relations within a society, an aspect of the approach to teaching *Absolution* (2012) that required clarification.

Carey-Webb's (2001) article was also useful when investigating the possibility of creating a harmonious relationship between Hall's (1982) cultural studies theory and later his reader-response theory when addressing social and cultural issues in the novel. Hall (1996) discusses postmodernism as the 'so-called collapse or implosion of the real' (Hall, 1996, p.133). In this chapter Hall (1996) discusses the changes that postmodernist theory brought into society. These included a renewed approach to the issues related to race, ethnicity and the social positioning of people. He discusses the removal of all rationality that accompanied the principles of modernism. Hall's (1996) theory appears important to this research as it tends to encapsulate some of the postmodernist issues of race and class that are an important consideration in the novel *Absolution* (2012). In conjunction with this is Hall's (1996) reader- response theory that places emphasis on the reader's response to a literary text as opposed to a focus on the author on the content contained within the text. This would suggest a need to approach a postmodernist context that is no longer 'grounded in some single, ultimate, unimpeachable principle' (Eagleton, 1983, p.201). The reader-response theory would demand a need for readers to consider the 'plurality of cultures and narratives which cannot be hierarchically ordered or 'privileged' and which must consequently respect the inviolable 'otherness' of ways of doing things' (Eagleton, 1983, p.201). These aspects of postmodernist writing would appear useful in determining the approaches teachers adopted in addressing the complexities suggested here. Using both these theories appeared imperative to this research as it informed my investigation into the approaches that teachers may have taken in attempting to merge these two theories when approaching the novel.

The challenges that accompany the technical aspects of postmodernist literature appear to coincide with the instability of the cultural and social environments contained in postmodernist texts. As a postmodernist text, *Absolution* (2012) is challenging due to the intense deconstruction and decoding that is required in allowing for the creation of some form of

logical understanding of the text. The fact that postmodernist texts have no fixed or stable meaning inherent in the text further informed my research as it underpinned a number of difficulties that teachers faced in addressing this issue. The lack of a fixed or conclusive ending to any postmodernist text distorts the original existence of truth and reason that accompanied modernist texts. The worlds created in postmodernist texts tend to present a version of truth that is transient, uncertain and unstable. Terry Eagleton (1983) provides a clear explanation of this when he says:

> Knowledge is relative to cultural contexts, so that to claim to know the world 'as it is', is simply a chimera – not only because our understanding is always a matter of partial, partisan interpretation, but because the world itself is in no way particular...Truth is the product of interpretation... the human subject...a diffuse, self-divided entity without any fixed nature or essence. (Eagleton, 1983, p.201)

The approach that teachers take in addressing the different versions of the notion of truth displayed by postmodernist literature is an important consideration of my research. The novel clearly presents truth as subjective and even changeable, both of which are features that are evident in postmodernist literature. The way in which the chapters are narrated from multiple points of view is testimony of the various versions of truth that appear scattered throughout the novel. The extract from the novel indicated below, suggest the slipperiness of the truth that pervades this novel. In a letter that Clare's daughter writes to her she states:

> I only offer this document as *my* version of the truth, a truth among many. Bernard's truth would be different, but he can't speak. Sam's truth would be different still, and he may speak. (Flanery, 2012, p 173)

The portrayal of truth in this novel would serve to remind a reader that none of these versions of truth can be accepted without question. Each narrator in many ways offers an unreliable source of truth. The instability of truth as presented by Flanery (2012) in this novel form an important part of my investigation into how teachers of this text may choose to teach young learners that there is no evidence of conclusive or definite element of truth throughout this novel.

This representation of the nature of postmodernist writing is complex yet allows for a relatively free and individual interpretation of a text. This description informs my research in that it will

assess the approach that teachers may have taken in allowing learners to access the freedom of interpretation that postmodernist texts afford.

Using an article written by Usher and Edwards (2002), investigate the technical complexities of analysing a postmodernist text such as *Absolution* (2012). From a technical point of view, the article addresses the existence of a fragmented narrative structure, multiple voices, intertextuality and open-ended conclusions that accompany postmodernist texts such as *Absolution.* Eagleton's (1983) reference to the eclectic, hybrid, decentred and fluid characteristics of post-modernist writing are aspects that require intense negotiation between teacher and learner, text and reader.

Postmodernist and constructivist theory also confront evolving issues relating to gender. There is the suggestion that since reality cannot be confined to one single meaning but rather multiple meanings then differences between males and females will not be established in the ordinary, biological sense that places men as more superior but rather in the postmodernist view, will suggest that 'differences between males and females are seen as culturally and historically fluid' (Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1988, p.456). Therefore, postmodernist literature would entice an individual to view the characters of Sam, Clare, Greg, Mark and Laura in the novel in terms of their understanding of gender. Rachel T. Hare-Mustin and Jeanne Marecek (1988) consolidate this notion by suggesting that 'We do not discover reality, we invent it' (Hare-Musten & Marecek, 1988, p. 457). Such characteristics dismantle any notions of a reality that are based on a sense of certainty. Part of this research considers the methods teachers use to teach the complexities associated with the technical conventions of postmodernist writing

and how they approach issues relating to ideas of gender that may to a large extent be preconceived. This research will also discuss the possible use of the reception theory as an active shift of attention to the reader, allowing learners to develop ideas about the content of the novel independently rather than simply assuming that conclusions will be given to them. Since postmodernist literature does not present a definite resolution to the ending of a novel, individuals would need to create their own meaning.

2.2.6 Post-apartheid

Understanding the features and characteristics of post-apartheid literature can be a daunting task for Grade 12 learners who are essentially members of a born-free generation and therefore more distanced from the historical events that occurred during the apartheid era in South Africa. However, understanding that social problems such as poverty, racial tensions, crime and violence that still persist as legacies of the apartheid regime are issues that teachers may address when teaching *Absolution* (2012) as a post-apartheid text. After experiencing the fear of a home invasion, the character Greg, remarks that:

> when you face the man who wants to take everything from you because he doesn't have anything himself, and sees us whitey's living like pharaohs, I don't know how to get over that. (Flanery, 2012, p.158 – 159)

This extract further supports the importance of teachers addressing the post-apartheid elements of this novel given the fact that crime as described by Greg in the extract above is largely as a consequence of economic disparity. This reminds readers of this novel that white South Africans still enjoy a higher standard of living even after the dismantling of apartheid. So although white people are no longer the perpetrators of an unjust social system, they are still enjoying a life of privilege. Thus, discussing the elements related to post-apartheid literature is an important element of this research project. My interest lies specifically in how teachers of this novel approach the teaching of a post-apartheid context that so obviously dominates a large portion of this novel.

As part of this research project I thought it useful to include the analyses offered by David Attwell and Barbara Harlow (2000). In their article entitled, 'Introduction: South African Fiction after Apartheid', they make reference to the focus that seems to pervade most post-apartheid texts:

> A great deal has been said about the so-called "miracle" of the South African transition. The corollary to the notion of a miracle is the continuing legacy and discomfort of compromise: the effort to rebuild a society whose underlying social relations and even attitudes remain substantially unchanged. (Attwell, D & Harlow, B, 2000, p.1)

This statement reflects some of the complex issues that arise in the novel *Absolution* (2012). Although written many years after the abolition of apartheid, Flanery's (2012) novel alludes to

a legacy of racial conflict that South Africa is still reeling from. The character of Greg as representative of a white man who chose to return when South African politics was at its most tumultuous point is very clearly pitted against the character of Sam who opted to seclude himself from the conflict that permeated the country. His white guilt is continually exacerbated through his fixation with beggars:

> His jeans are frayed to above the ankles and both his shoes are both missing the heel and quarter, the entire back part of the shoe, so they're more like clogs, flapping and thwacking the floor with each step. I watch him leave and go back to eating my twenty-rand muffin, which tastes like the best muffin I've ever had and has been served with a ramekin of grated cheese and an individual pot of jam. (Flanery, 2012, p. 158)

The very obvious difference that Flanery (2012) highlights here is the guilt that is further exacerbated by the dichotomous presence of those who *have* economic stability and those who *do not have* economic stability in the novel. This is representative of the post-apartheid context that Flanery presents in this novel. Further to this is the very real conflict that is evident between the character of Clare and her gardener Adam which again serves to highlight racial tension and the reality that white people like Clare living in a post-apartheid context are still the 'imperious white madam who can't help being an autocrat with her servants' (Flanery, 2012, p.72). Below is an extract that highlights the interaction that ensues between Clare and her gardener Adam, who suggests that planting a vegetable patch in her garden will not be successful:

> It is not a bad thing. It is merely different. You will see. And if you are right, then I shall see. But you must let me grow what I want, Adam, otherwise we will only come to grief, and in the end I should have to ask you to leave. (Flanery, 2012, p.108)

Through instances in the novel such as the ones mentioned above, Flanery (2012) presents a post-apartheid novel that reiterates and reminds 21st century South Africa that 'We inhabit a culture of largely 'unresolved difference', of 'radical heterogeneity', a site where 'difference and sameness are hitched together, always uneasily' (Chapman, M, 2009, p.1).

Using an article written by Ronit Frenkel and Craig Mackenzie (2010), 'Conceptualizing 'Post-transitional' South African Literature in English', an investigation into the features of post-apartheid literature appeared highly imperative for the purposes of this research. Frenkel and Mackenzie's (2010) reference to post-apartheid literature's preoccupation with 'buried

histories, the legacy of resistance, suppressed identities' (Frenkel & Mackenzie, 2010, p.4) are evident in the novel *Absolution* (2012). This research investigates the approaches teachers take in addressing a post-apartheid context that for many 21st century learners would appear relatively distant and perhaps even difficult to conceptualise given the freedom that some individuals of their generation now enjoy.

2.3 Literature Review

2.3.1 *Absolution* – book reviews

Refer to Appendices A and B

The theoretical framework used in this investigation closely informed the literature review of this research project. Various reviews of the novel *Absolution* (2012) from reputable international newspapers, successfully reiterated many of the theoretical concepts consulted in this investigation. A review written in *The Telegraph* in March 2012 (Appendix A) describes the novel as one that 'examines the slipperiness of the truth' (*The Telegraph*, 2012). This description relates to the references made to postmodernist writing that tends to offer a skewed perception of the truth, a truth that is unstable, unpredictable and unreliable in many instances. This review also makes reference to the post-apartheid context in which this novel is set, referring specifically to the post-modern tendency to avoid a linear pattern of events, opting instead for a non-chronological series of events that move fluidly between 'Eighties apartheid, when writers played cat and mouse with the Board of Censors and the South Africa of today: A pretend paradise of 'luxury bunkers' (*The Telegraph*, 2012). The review concludes with an emphasis on the lack of truth and certainty that is apparent at the end of the novel, that 'like truth, not all things can be fully known' (*The Telegraph*, 2012).

The London-based *The Telegraph* (Appendix B) presents a review of this novel that focuses specifically on the multiplicity of voices that pervade this novel. A sense of fragmentation and hybridity present in this novel again speaks to the characteristics of postmodernist literature, serving to support the lack of rationality and uncertainty in the world. The review makes reference to the complexity of the alternating chapters in the novel once again highlighting varies versions of truth, none of which can be trusted. Further to this discussion is the very obvious reference to the unstable nature of the post-apartheid context of this novel and the

notion that none of the characters can agree on what the new South Africa should look like. The review ends with the comment that, 'In the end, they arrive at an understanding of the new South Africa that is neither sentimental nor desolate – one that situates it in a postmodern world of excess and desire' (*The Telegraph*, 2012). A further reference to the unbridged chasm that appears to exist between the new and old South Africa is highlighted in a review written in *The Washington Post* that describes Flanery's (2012) novel as one 'detailing the violence and horror that surround daily life in both contemporary and apartheid era South Africa' (*The Washington Post*, 2012).

2.3.2 A glimpse into the intentions of Patrick Flanery – an Interview

(Refer to Appendix C)

Various interviews that were conducted with Patrick Flanery (2012) also serve to enhance the theoretical concepts that have underpinned much of this investigation. In an interview conducted by Christopher Holmes in 2013, a number of intriguing points were raised. The question of Flanery's (2012) decision to set his story in South Africa is clarified in this interview in which he describes the circumstances in South Africa and America that seem to parallel one another. He discusses the presence of racial conflict, inequality and historical guilt that both countries appear to be reeling from. Therefore, although a partial foreigner to South Africa, his experience of some of the difficulties attached to living in apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa are valid and well researched on his part. He admits in this interview that initially he felt rather uncomfortable delving into the politics of South Africa, referring to his exploits as 'brazen' but when assessing the similarities between his country and that of South Africa, he felt that he was able to create an authentic representation of life during and after the delegislation of apartheid.

In another interview conducted by an organisation called the English Experience during Flanery's (2012) school tour in May 2015, further reference is made to Flanery's (2012) decision to set his story in a country that was not his own. He clearly states in this interview that he was forced by his South African friends to change his mind set if he was to create an authentic portrayal of life during and post-apartheid. He describes this as follows:

> they demanded of me, of themselves, and the wider world, a more nuanced way of thinking, one that does not allow a casual objectification of the Other – which was the

> basis of relations in South Africa for so long – but which allows for awareness of otherness tempered by a comprehensive and vigilant acknowledgement of the agency of the other. (The English Experience, 2013)

This comment supports the theoretical framework in that it highlights the challenges associated with some of the post-modernist elements in this novel. These challenges reiterate the emphasis proposed by the reader-response theory that insists on the need to understand the presence of 'plurality of cultures and narratives which cannot be hierarchically ordered or 'privileged' and which must consequently respect the inviolable otherness of ways of doing things' (Eagleton, 1983, p.201). Continuing with the postmodernist theoretical framework used as part of the literature review in this research is Flanery's (2012) response to his decision to create a narrative that is multi-layered and fragmented. This serves to emphasize his way of displaying the tensions that exist between the characters and their different versions of the past. The use of this post-modernistic technique of writing also exemplifies the unreliability and instability of the truth. The stylistic responses offered by Flanery (2012) in this interview form an imperative part in determining the approaches that teachers used when teaching the complexities of postmodernist literature.

Flanery's response to the question of why he chose to set his story in contemporary South Africa offered an interesting response. He responded by saying that setting his novel in a contemporary South African context opened his novel up to many issues and themes that did not necessarily revolve only around politics. He mentioned how themes such as issues of memory, guilt and forgiveness were concerns that would enrich the affective development of readers. This speaks to the models of literature as proposed by Long and Carter (1991) and Lazar (1993) in which they discuss the personal growth model that compels learners to consider the impact that studying literature texts in a school environment may impact the way in which they view themselves personally as well as their outlook on the world around them. The approach that teachers take when teaching the novel will reveal whether or not the personal growth model of literature teaching was used when discussing the thematic concern of memories. When asked whether or not Flanery (2012) considered South Africa to still be reeling from a burdened past, his response suggested that South Africa cannot be seen in isolation from global concerns. He speaks of the universal burden of the past that all countries suffer from. His response takes into account the cultural model of literature teaching as well as theory associated with post-apartheid literature. Ultimately Flanery (2012) emphasises the need for the born-free learners of South Africa to realize that although they may struggle to identify

with an apartheid context, they can perhaps see the novel as one that is 'about the human condition' (The English Experience, 2013) that propels learners to look beyond the confines of politics and rather to consider that as humans we are always 'under surveillance, locked in our homes, fearing the unknown and suspecting those who are unlike us. (The English Experience, 2013). For the purpose of this research, an investigation into how teachers may approach this aspect of the novel was investigated.

2.3.3 Conclusion

In this chapter both the theoretical framework and literature review used in support of this research were discussed. Models of literature teaching as first proposed by Carter and Long (1991) and Lazar (1993) as well as more recent studies as presented by Christie and Macken-Horavik (2007) were discussed. Following on from this were theories used in investigating the characteristics of postmodernist and post-apartheid literature. The literature review presented in this chapter, focused on book reviews written by leading newspapers on the novel. In addition to this were comments made on interviews that were conducted with Flanery (2012) himself. Both the book reviews and the interviews presented as part of the literature review served to reflect the theoretical framework of this research project.

Chapter three provides an explanation of the methodology undertaken in this research.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The intention of this chapter is to provide a discussion of the research design as well as the selection of participants used for the purpose of investigating the approaches that Grade 12 English teachers take when teaching the complexities inherent in the novel *Absolution* (2012). This chapter will also describe the methods of data collection used as well as the tools of analysis that were used in this research project. In order to avoid bias in this research, this report is not an auto-ethnographic study; however my experience as a teacher of this novel has allowed me to generate questions for other teachers.

3.2 Ethics

Refer to Appendix E

Ethical clearance (appendix E) was granted for this research report. Signed consent letters were received from all five English teachers as well as consent letters from the principals from both schools. All five of the participants agreed to partake in this research if names as well as the school they taught at remained anonymous. This request was respected and therefore the names of both the girls' and boys' school have not been mentioned. In addition to this the personal names of each of the teachers that agreed to participate in the focused group interview have been withheld for reasons of confidentiality.

3.3 Research Design

For the purposes of this research project, a qualitative approach was taken. U. Flick (2009), suggests that there is a need to move some methodologies beyond a focus on broad, universal narratives and more towards accounts that are concentrated on revealing a richer more meaningful aspect of the research in question. Approaches to teaching a literature text are highly personal, allowing for a unique and subjective style of addressing the concerns of a literature text. Due to the unusual complexities evident in the novel, *Absolution* (2012), the approaches that Grade 12 English teachers took when teaching this text varied substantially. The complexities and broad scope of this the novel as indicated in the theoretical and literature review in chapter 2 of this research generated my decision to address this research in a more concentrated and in-depth manner.

For this reason a qualitative research method was selected in order to present a rigorous investigation into the variety of methodologies that may accompany the teaching of this specific novel. This method of research also served to locate this study in a real world as opposed to a quantitative study that would tend to analyse a particular phenomenon hypothetically. In this way the exploratory nature of this research is necessary in order to understand the opinions and challenges that a small group of individuals are encountering when teaching this specific novel. The use of a smaller group as is common with qualitative research is intended to uncover a deeper more meaningful understanding of this research problem.

Although quantitative research may in the future follow from this, it is necessary first to attempt to propose some ideas or hypotheses in relation to the unique approaches that English teachers are taking when teaching this novel. The subjective nature of a qualitative approach to research is also fundamental given the different individual teacher approaches that need to be considered during this investigation. The nature of this investigation is individualistic and therefore distinctive in that there cannot be one formulaic way of teaching any text. Thus such a research method allowed me to personally investigate the approaches of each of the selected English teachers. In this way, the challenges faced by each teacher when addressing complex conceptual difficulties inherent in this specific text could be given individual attention from me as the researcher.

This method of data collection therefore allowed for a more in-depth analysis of the models of literature teaching that teachers may have used in their approaches to teaching this particular text. Ostensibly this method of data collection should expose 'many dimensions and layers' (Leedy and Ormrod, 2010, p.135) involved in the approaches taken by teachers in this regard. Using this method of data research allowed for greater scrutiny of the degree to which the teachers of the novel may have used the models of literature teaching mentioned in the theoretical and literary framework.

In order to facilitate this research further, a qualitative method of data collection also enabled a description of the problem and an interpretation of how and why this problem may have emerged for teachers of this text. My personal teaching of this text as well as the challenges that myself and some of my teaching colleagues encountered prompted me to engage in a research project of this nature. Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin (2008), suggest that a researcher should 'relish the interplay between themselves and the data' (Strauss & Corbin, 2008, p. 5). This appeared very relevant to my approach to this research project. As an English teacher and an educator of the novel *Absolution* (2012), it often became difficult to remove myself from this investigation. Strauss and Corbin's (1990) suggestion that often researchers are afraid to draw on their own experiences as this does ultimately becomes the basis for making comparisons allowed me to realize my purpose as a researcher in this case. When using the qualitative method of research particularly the focused group interviews, I realized the intensity associated with a qualitative approach in terms of data collection. The answers presented by the interviewees were often a direct representation of the novel itself, complex and often unfathomable. Often the responses were in direct contrast to my own thoughts and so through implementing Strauss and Corbin's (1990) concept of Grounded Theory, I was able

to dismiss any preconceived ideas of the theory and instead allow for new theory to emerge from the data provided by the participants of this study, to step back and critically analyse the information being provided. This information became vitally important in assisting me in collecting data that did not allow for the intervention of my own theories on the subject. Lynn Rew, Deborah Bechtel and Aida Sapp in their article entitled, 'Self-As-Instrument in Qualitative Research' (1993) further enhanced the suggestions offered by Strauss and Corbin (2008) in that they listed seven important attributes to consider when conducting qualitative research. These included appropriateness, credibility, authenticity, intuitiveness, receptivity, reciprocity and sensitivity. All of these attributes succinctly summarised the importance of the validity of my selected research question as well as the way it needed to be approached. These attributes allowed me to conduct research that encouraged a responsive group of participants to offer perceptive ideas without me as the researcher, ignoring the sensitivity of some of the questions posed. Therefore, although this study will be based on the experiences of English teachers in other schools, as previously mentioned, from time to time my own voice may appear as a way of offering perceptions but not preconceived notions on how this novel is taught. My research also involves some close literary analysis of the novel in order to grasp its complexities and to consider how other English teachers' of this text approached some of these issues in their classrooms.

The research design methods used in this qualitative research comes in the form of a case study using a questionnaire that was submitted to five Grade 12 English teachers currently involved in teaching *Absolution* (2012). This questionnaire (see appendix D) is intended to probe pedagogical, literary and learner related questions. The answers provided to the questions used in the questionnaire, although detailed required further clarification in some instances. In this case, a follow up interview in the form of a focused group interview was conducted with two of the English teachers selected initially to complete the questionnaire. One teacher was from the girls' school indicated earlier and the second from the boys' school. Unfortunately, the opportunity to observe lessons in which teachers actively displayed their approaches in teaching this novel was not possible due to the limited time available on a Grade 12 timetable. This novel is also being phased out at the end of 2016 which unfortunately also impacted upon the amount of data collection that was possible. Nonetheless I felt that researching the approaches taken by other teachers of this novel would provide interesting pedagogical insight.

3.4 Selection of Participants

The selection of participants was based on a qualitative method of data collection. Two schools were selected as the basis for this investigation and five teachers from each of these schools were selected as the main participants of the study. Two of the participants came from the girls' school whilst the other three participants came from the boys' school.

All five teachers came with different levels of teaching experience. Two out of five of the participants were HODs of English and came with many years of English teaching experience. The remaining three participants varied from junior teachers to senior, long standing members of the English department in their respective schools. The more experienced teachers had very positive attitudes towards teaching English to their students and the fact that they had experienced living within an apartheid context informed their teaching to a greater extent than the younger, less experienced teachers who had not had direct experience of the tumultuous context of both apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa This naturally led to a less confident approach to teaching the contextual elements of the text. As a teacher of this text and someone who lived through the apartheid and post-apartheid era, it was important for me to take into account the perspectives of all my participants and to avoid making assumptions and presupposing what experiences they may have had both inside and outside of the classroom.

The decision to select these schools was based on a few reasons. The first reason was based on a matter of convenience; accessibility to both schools was possible due to the close proximity of both of them. Secondly, I was fortunate to have contacts in both schools which facilitated a smoother process particularly in terms of approaching teachers and acquiring the necessary ethical approval. Thirdly, my selection of single sex schools was purely based on my desire to see whether boys and girls may have had different attitudes towards the text. It was also of interest to me to see whether teachers needed to adapt their approaches to the novel in such a way that they accommodated the needs and interests of either the boys or girls they taught.

3.5 Data Sources

3.5.1 Questionnaire

Refer to Appendix D

In order to gain insight into the general perspectives that each participant had towards the teaching of the novel as well as to present some more in depth information on approaches that were taken in teaching the novel, I created a questionnaire (see appendix D) that propelled the participants of this research to engage fully regarding their attitude towards the novel, the responses they elicited from their learners and other questions that considered the literary theory inherent within the text.

The participants were given approximately two weeks to reflect upon the questions and to respond to the questions either in written or typed form.

3.5.2 Focused Group Interviews

Although the questionnaires presented some detailed responses to the questions posed, it was my opinion that greater detail was needed in certain areas. I was also interested in having a group discussion with some of the selected participants in the hopes of generating a debate of sorts that would tease out some of the complexities involved in teaching a novel of this sort. Although the ideal situation would have been to have all five of my participants together in a focused group interview, I was only able to have two of the participants present for a focused group interview. One teacher came from the boys' school (referred to as teacher 2 in the questionnaire analysis) and the other from the girls' school (referred to as teacher 1 in the questionnaire analysis). Some further elaboration was offered in response to certain questions posed in the questionnaire. In addition to this, there were some interesting perspectives that were unearthed regarding their approaches to teaching various aspects of the novel. Both participants reported that they had successfully created realities within the classroom that were different yet highly intriguing and viable options when considering approaches to teaching the text.

Chapter 4 Data analysis - findings

4.1 Introduction

The previous chapters have laid the foundation for the final result of this research report. I have discussed the theoretical and literary framework that underpins my research as well as discussing the research design methods that informed my collection of data. Through an integration of the three models for teaching literature, the language-based, cross-cultural and personal growth model, I will consider how these models of teaching literature may or may not have merged with the approaches that teachers took when teaching this novel. In addition to this the literary theories related to postmodernist, post-apartheid, postcolonialist and feminist writing will also be discussed in relation to the responses offered by the participants in this research. The questionnaire focusses on the responses of all five of the participants whereas the focused group interviews will include more detailed responses from two of the participants. This chapter will begin with the questionnaire and a close analysis and comparative study of the answers posed by each of the participants to the questions posed. Some of the questions indicated in the initial written questionnaire will be combined with other questions that focus on a similar aspect of the teaching of the text or the text itself.

The chapter will then move to an analysis and discussion of the results of the focused group interview.

4.2 Data findings – the Questionnaire

4.2.1 Suitability of the novel and teachers first impressions of the novel

The first two questions posed in the questionnaire concerned the suitability of the novel for Grade 12 learners and the teachers' initial impressions and perceptions of the novel. The response to the first question that focused on suitability tended to present ambivalent and dichotomous responses from teachers within the two schools. The teachers from the girls' school both considered the novel to be suitable in preparing learners for tertiary study particularly for those who were interested in pursuing a degree in journalism or literature. They also indicated that the depth of the novel developed critical thinking skills that again were important skills to develop in preparation for tertiary study. Some of the teachers from the

boys' school on the other hand indicated a contrasting opinion. They felt that given the length and complexities of plot and structure, the novel was not suitable for secondary level but would be more suitable for study in a tertiary institution. They suggested that this novel was geared specifically towards the academically gifted students thus failing to take into consideration the needs of the less able student.

My initial consideration of these responses suggested that perhaps gender was an important consideration as to why the teachers at the girls' school felt that the novel certainly was suitable for a Grade 12 learner. The idea of race as well as the learners' overall responses to the novel will be expanded upon in the next part of this chapter.

The second question regarding the initial impressions and perceptions of the teachers towards the novel also offered an array of responses. The teachers from the girls' school felt that the novel was rich in literary skill and that Flanery (2012) had written a fine piece of literature. They mentioned that they were intrigued by the accuracy of the perspective of a foreigner on the events associated with an apartheid and post-apartheid context in South Africa. They also suggested that the novel was unusual in that it was in many ways it offered a story within a story. The second teacher in particular mentioned that the novel did not only address the troubled past of South Africa but also propels an individual to consider the troubled past that most countries are reeling from but that may have been exempt from the sensationalism of the institutionalisation of apartheid in South Africa. She continued to indicate that the novel made her consider her place in both a micro and macro context. Their only negative response to the novel was that a great deal of information regarding historical events was unsubstantiated and unconvincing. One teacher mentioned the references to the bodies that the character Bernard disposed of. There appeared to be no evidence of this scale of killing according to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission because most people of colour died in townships or as a result of rural violence. The other conundrum for one of the teachers from the girls' school was the mention of the character Laura as being tortured in shark cages. Again she suggested that there was little historical evidence to indicate that this form of torture took place during this tumultuous period in South African history, although studies do indicate that this form of torture did in fact take place. They both seemed to feel that some of the events described in the novel were fictionalized and therefore difficult to justify or explain to learners.

The teachers from the boys' school offered varying responses to their first impressions of the novel. One teacher indicated that a foreigner's perspective on South Africa was refreshing and

that it was challenging and thought provoking to consider the various perceptions and perspectives that were offered in the novel. This they thought required active engagement with the text rather than simply reading and being able to predict the events of the plot. The other two teachers tended to think that the complexities of structure and content were confusing and essentially acted as an obstacle to learning. They indicated that the depiction of white post-apartheid was contrived and for the most part inaccurate and biased. They also suggested that the characters, particularly Clare, were not likeable or in the case of Sam, a complete enigma. Considering the different age groups and level of experience of the three teachers at the boys' school, the level of experience and the age of these teachers may have had an effect on their initial perceptions of the novel which in turn may have influenced their approach to teaching the novel.

My analysis of these two very general questions suggests that the personal attitudes of these teachers towards the novel played an integral role in influencing the way in which they approached the teaching of this novel. This comment relates quite closely to the theoretical section of this research report that describes the different approaches a teacher can take towards the teaching of literature. The different responses from these teachers also tend to lend themselves to the suggestions made by Carter and Long (1991) that there is a difference between Knowledge *of* literature and knowledge *about* literature. These two perspectives of literature teaching are important to consider when assessing individual approaches taken by teachers when teaching this novel. Some may tend to teach the novel in order to expand a learner's love for reading where as others may address a novel in such a way that they simply fulfil the expectations of an English curriculum. My second comment in regards to these two questions is that it appears as though the more experienced and slightly older teachers tended to have a more mature and enthusiastic approach to the novel. This will be expanded upon when discussing the responses to other questions posed.

4.2.2 Reactions to the novel – issues of race and culture

A third question posed to the five participants was concerned with the demographics of each Grade 12 English class and whether or not learners of varying races reacted similarly or differently to the events, characters and context of the novel. The responses to this question varied immensely between the girls' and the boys' schools and the answers appeared to suggest

the possibility of both a lack of understanding of a post-apartheid context as well as a general lack of interest in both an apartheid and post-apartheid context.

Beginning with the teachers from the girls' school, their responses to this question included a description of the general lack of empathy on the part of some of the black learners towards the white people who were also victims of terrorist attacks during the apartheid period. They cited the chapters that discussed the traumatic experiences of both Jimmy Sukwini, an innocent young black man and Louis Louw, an equally innocent white man. The learners indicated sympathy towards the black victims of these attacks but offered no sympathy for the similar plight of the white victims of these attacks. One of the teachers from the girls' school indicated that the black girls in the class were particularly militant and attempted to intimidate the white girls, who for the most part felt that apartheid was a historical period in South Africa that had been over-taught and dwelt upon for too long a time. The teachers did mention however that the arguments presented by the militant black learners were largely unjustified and futile. The scenario described by the teachers of the girls' school suggests more than a simple grudge towards the white learners and the entire institutionalised system of apartheid. In terms of literary theory, the attitude towards the novel may also have arisen as a result of a general lack of understanding of both an apartheid and post-apartheid climate perhaps on behalf of the teachers themselves. In terms of Hall's (1982) cultural studies theory, learners may not have been guided to consider the changes that postmodernist writing bought to the literary world. It appears as though a lack of clarification of a cultural studies and reader response approach to the text, denied the learners in this class the opportunity to provide a more individualistic response to the text as well as to remove the preconceptions that they may have had about the conditions surrounding a post-apartheid context in South Africa. For learners who felt that apartheid was a historical period that had been largely over-taught, a simple clarification of how post-apartheid literature not only provides a more literary description of this period but that since meaning is no longer fixed, it invites learners to respond to the events of the novel more subjectively. An investigation into the post-apartheid climate described in the novel may also have encouraged learners to question truth in relation to the lives of both whites and blacks during this historical period in South Africa. Learners would perhaps then understand that some white people were also victims of apartheid and that the legacy of apartheid haunted many white people as shown through the continual reference to white guilt as a major thematic element mentioned throughout the novel. The rather hostile response to the novel with regards to race, may also suggest that the teacher may not have made use of a cross-cultural approach

to teaching this text due to the lack of understanding and empathy towards cultures that the learners in the class may have been unfamiliar with.

The responses from the teachers from the boys' school appeared more positive, suggesting that teacher one possibly engaged her learners in debates around the notion of culture and how the differences between cultures is an important thematic concern in this novel. The first teacher indicated that the debates were constructive and the final consensus reached by this particular class was that the difference between cultures could be related more specifically to forgiveness and the need to confront the past. In other words, to seek ways of moving forward from the turmoil associated with the apartheid era. Teacher two indicated that the boys in her class were largely unaware of the horrors associated with apartheid as well as the unstable environment that accompanied a post-apartheid context. Pinpointing instances in the novel that showed that inequality existed even after the delegislation of apartheid was useful as it allowed learners to dispel preconceived ideas that they had about this period in history. This in turn allowed learners to respond with an opinion that reflected an individual perspective. In this sense, it appears as though this teacher made use of the elements of postmodernist literature to allow for a more practical and self-motivated response to the issue of race and culture in the novel. The fact that there appeared to be little animosity in both these classrooms may suggest that a more cross-cultural and personal growth approach to teaching the text was taken as learners appeared to make connections between the context of the novel and the importance of other elements such as issues related to forgiveness even within their own lives. The last teacher at this school suggested a slightly different perspective in response to the reactions of her learners to the novel in general. She suggested that the learners in her class were more preoccupied with fulfilling the expectations of an external exam than actually engaging with the novel on a more personal level. She suggested that a number of the boys in her class were from affluent homes and therefore showed little to no empathy towards both black and white South Africans who may have suffered during both the apartheid and post-apartheid period in South Africa. This response indicates that perhaps this teacher adopted a more language-based approach to teaching this novel due to the predominant focus deciphering the complex language and content that would in turn equip learners with the skills to respond to a prescribed essay question in an examination. There is also a suggestion that the focus in this classroom may have been more concerned with generating knowledge *about* literature as opposed to developing knowledge *of* literature as proposed by Long & Carter (1991).

4.2.3 Approaches and Literary Theory

The three models for teaching literature as proposed by Carter and Long (1991) and Lazar (1993) were carefully applied and assessed in relation to the responses offered by the five teachers in response to questions 4 and 5 of the questionnaire. Both questions focused on approaches teachers took to teaching the novel as well as the challenges that they encountered whilst teaching the novel. The data collected in relation to these questions offered an interesting incorporation of postmodernist aspects of the novel as well as post-apartheid literary theory and reader-response theory.

In terms of approaches to teaching this novel, both teachers at the girls' school tended to adopt all three approaches to teaching literature albeit to a small extent, but teacher two seemed to stress the need for learners to take control of their own learning to a much greater extent than teacher one. Both teachers indicated that they taught some of the principles of postmodernist writing before embarking on a study of the novel itself. In response to the question regarding the methods taken when teaching the novel, their approach included an introduction to some of the characteristics of post-modernist writing such as the presence of an incoherent structure, multiplicity of perspective and voice and an ending that was largely inconclusive. In addition to this, both teachers indicated that they provided some background information on both the apartheid and post-apartheid context in South Africa. However, the response by both of these teachers, suggests that there was little depth or development in their teaching of the political context given the conflict that erupted when discussing issues of racial inequality in the novel. Teacher two indicated that she displayed some information on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that may have informed the learners' understanding of context to a certain extent. Once background knowledge on the novel had been presented, teacher two then insisted that the learners read the novel by themselves as per a reading timetable, whereas teacher one adopted the approach of reading all the chapters in isolation from one another. In this instance she believed that such a method would avoid the confusion of teaching a novel that moved consistently from one perspective to another. Both teachers also indicated that seeing Patrick Flanery in person during a world tour also clarified some of the issues in the novel. Teaching the characteristics of postmodernist writing as well as providing a brief introduction to post-apartheid literature would indeed filter into the expectations of both the language-based and cross-cultural approaches to teaching literature. However, the extent and depth to which this was taught is questionable and therefore further questions were posed during the focused group

interview. The animosity that arose between the black and white girls in the class suggested that a cross-cultural approach may not have been fully developed by the teacher. Teacher two and her decision to teach all the chapters independently from one another tended to defeat the objectives of postmodernist writing. In separating the chapters, the importance of reacting to different perspectives and questioning the truth of these multiple voices, dispelled the beauty of discovering that truth is indeed slippery and unreliable. In many ways, separating the chapters may have also defeated the purpose of engaging with a fragmented puzzle that again would suggest the uncertainty of the future that is a major characteristic of postmodernist literature. Both teachers indicated that their greatest challenge in teaching the novel was concerned with assisting learners to unfold the many layers of the story as well as to entice the learners to follow a plot that is not structured in a traditionally chronological manner. Teacher two indicated that her greatest challenge was characterisation. Many learners failed to identify with Clare and struggled to understand what was real and what was not about the characters in the novel. Teacher two also indicated that the black girls in the class felt that the absence of any black characters in the novel further elevated the importance of white people within this context. My analysis of this data suggests that given the methods used as well as the challenges faced, these teachers may not have taught the necessary literary theory to the extent that it should have been taught. The challenges clearly suggest that postmodernist techniques were not fully understood by both the teacher and the learners. Although both teachers seem to have covered the expectations of a language-based approach to teaching this novel, in that they attempted to bridge the gap between linguistic understanding and some of the literary nuances of the novel, they did not appear to expand upon the importance of the characteristics of postmodernist writing which in essence led to a nullification of both the cross-cultural and personal growth approaches to teaching literature.

The three teachers at the boys' school appeared to engage the learners more effectively thus allowing for a more developed version of the reader-response theory. The degree to which post-modernist techniques were taught as well as a closer understanding of culture and context seemed to be more developed in contrast to the data collected from the girls' school. Teacher one appeared to adopt a rather robotic approach to teaching the text. In response to the questions on approaches and challenges, she indicated that the approach taken was in the form of reading with the boys in class and then making summaries of each chapter. There was also an analysis of character and theme that seemed to be prescriptive. Teacher one indicated that teaching structure was difficult and that many themes such as dreams, appeared to be outlandish and

thus difficult to teach to the boys. Teacher two and three offered responses to approaches and challenges that suggested that they had used methods that had engaged the learners visually in order to develop a better understanding of the novel. Both teachers used a crime board which was created on the walls around the classroom. After each chapter was read, the boys were invited to write their perspective on the events that had occurred in the novel in that particular chapter. Each perspective may have differed but it is my opinion that this may have been a highly effective way of teaching the elements of postmodernist writing. In physically writing different perspectives for each chapter on one piece of cardboard, the boys would most likely engage with a postmodernist approach to thinking as well as to realize that there is no single truth, no single perspective inherent in this novel or life in general. This again would reinforce the principles of this genre of writing and allow learners to remove any preconceived ideas they may have about various issues, thus allowing for the creation of a subjective opinion that would possibly transcend the culture and ideology they had come from. Teacher three even mentioned reading a book entitled *Creating Cultures of Thinking* written by Ron Ritchardt (2002) that further enhanced her understanding of how she could encourage her learners to think beyond the text allowing for the development of independent responses to the text. She also made use of a CSI board in which she encouraged the learners to attempt to solve the many versions of some of the incidents described in the novel such as the death of Bernard and the disappearance of Laura. Again through this method it would appear that learners would be motivated to unpack the multiplicity of ideas in the novel and in so doing, create a sense of understanding of the fragmentation that is specific to post-modernist writing. The challenges indicated by teacher two and three were concerned largely with the fact that many of the boys simply did not read the novel and that despite the innovative approaches taken by some of the teachers towards this novel, many boys simply did not enjoy it. This appears to indicate that despite the efforts of both these teachers to entice the learners to understand the novel by incorporating a combination of all three approaches to teaching literature as well as developing their knowledge in terms of postmodernist and post-apartheid literary theory, there were still challenges in motivating the learners to enjoy the novel as a whole.

4.2.4 Affective development of learners – relating to the novel

An analysis and description of the responses to the novel as well as the reactions of the learners to the novel and approaches and challenges associated with teaching the novel led to the final few questions posed to the five participants in the written questionnaire. These questions revolved around the degree to which learners related to the novel as well as the extent to which their affective development was enhanced.

In terms of the girls' school, teacher one suggested that, despite the literary challenges that accompanied the novel, the girls in her class related to the mother daughter relationship between Clare and Laura suggesting that they could identify with this conflict due to the generational gap that exists between them and their own mothers. In many cases, it made them think about the importance of harbouring a good relationship with their mothers given the dysfunctional relationship that existed between Clare and Laura in the novel. The learners in this class also felt that despite the conflict between the black and white girls in the class, they all agreed that crime is still a reality in South Africa and possibly closely associated to the legacy of apartheid that South Africa is still reeling from. In this way, they could relate to the character of Greg in the novel who, in many ways, represented a 'mouth piece' for the reality of crime on a local and global level. The girls also suggested that guilt, trauma and regret are universal concepts that any generation can relate to. Teacher two in contrast to this responded by saying that her girls did not relate to anything in the novel and that the characters were appreciated the least. They mentioned that Clare was mentally unstable and Sam weak and spineless. Many suggested that the novel had no relevance in their lives and was labelled as 'boring'. In terms of the contribution to the affective development of the girls, teacher one indicated that from a linguistic point of view, the learners' vocabulary was extended and from a cognitive point of view, the ability to think critically may have been extended. In most classes, the teachers suggested that only the top achievers felt that the novel was beneficial to their personal and social development. From an academic point of view, the top achievers were extended but they felt only a grudging respect for the novel at the end. For the weaker students and those who were not avid readers, a deeper understanding of the novel was simply not achievable.

The data collected at the boys' school in response to these questions suggested that, although learners were impacted somewhat by the novel, the majority of the boys could not relate to the

novel and apart from linguistic and social contributions to their affective development, the teachers indicated that they were not profoundly affected on a personal level.

Teacher one indicated that the History students were interested in the novel and were quite analytical about various issues relating to the context depicted in the novel. She also indicated that some of the boys were quite philosophical about certain issues in the text and so engaged in debates surrounding complex concepts. Therefore although these students questioned certain occurrences and characters in the novel, they did not really relate to the characters or the academic issues that they chose to debate. Teacher one also suggested that many of the boys failed to understand how the past had explicitly shaped the present and so in that sense could not relate to the relevance of studying a novel set within a post-apartheid context. Teacher two further emphasized this previous comment by suggesting that although a space was created for the learners to engage in a discussion about South Africa's past, since the majority of these learners came from affluent homes, they felt removed from the issues of white guilt, regret and absolution featured in the novel. Teacher three further reiterated the lack of relevance to the boys in her class, suggesting that although they felt that crime may be relevant to their lives in South Africa, they could not relate to any of the characters particularly Clare. They also could not understand the concept of censorship discussed in the novel because many felt that freedom of speech and press is a reality for them in 2016 and so attempting to comprehend a past where people could not write, think or speak freely was largely inconceivable to them. In terms of affective development, all three teachers indicated that from a linguistic and cognitive point of view the boys were forced to develop if they were to achieve the expectations of the final Grade 12 examination. From a social and personal point of view, most of the boys felt that it did not offer any value to their personal lives.

4.2.5 Results – Focused Group Interview

The responses to the questionnaire offered some interesting perspectives on the approaches that the five participants took when teaching the novel. However, there were a number of responses that I felt required elaboration in order to achieve a clearer understanding of the approaches taken in teaching this novel. Due to time constraints, only two of the participants were available to participate in a focused group interview. These participants included teacher one from the girls' school and teacher two from the boys' school. The transcript of this focused group

interview follows. To facilitate this interview, I will be referred to as the interviewer and the participants as Natalie from the girls' school and Anne from the boys' school (real names withheld for reasons of confidentiality).

1. **Interviewer**: Hello ladies. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. The questions that I would like to ask you today revolve specifically around clarification of the use of literary theory in the novel and the level of importance you would attribute to it. Natalie, given the conflict that appeared to erupt in your classroom when addressing context in novel, how did you introduce the girls in your class to a post-apartheid context?
2. **Natalie**: Um, context is important when teaching any literary novel but when it comes to providing background on apartheid and post-apartheid, I felt that many of my girls were familiar with this political period in South Africa and so did not need a rehashing of information that they had heard time and time again.
3. **Interviewer**: So, what aspects of context did you address?
4. **Natalie**: I showed them some youtube videos of scenes from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings which were interesting to some but uncomfortable for others.
5. **Interviewer**: Which students experienced discomfort and how did they react?
6. **Natalie**: The black learners in the class felt a degree of resentment listening to the transcripts of black victims of apartheid who had clearly suffered tremendously.
7. **Interviewer**: So the conflict that you mentioned in the questionnaire erupted as a result of this?
8. **Natalie**: Yes
9. **Interviewer**: Did you create a link between the videos shown and the novel *Absolution*?
10. **Natalie**: Yes my intention was to introduce my girls to the theme of white guilt as reflected through the characters of Clare, Sam and Greg and to provide insight into the inequality that existed in South Africa post-apartheid.
11. **Interviewer**: Do you think that providing detailed contextual information is important to understanding this novel?
12. **Natalie:** No I think that the way in which the novel is written is far more important than spending time on teaching context.
13. **Anne**: Sorry could I make a comment at this point?
14. **Interviewer**: Yes of course

15. **Anne**: I would just like to say that although my boys were partly familiar with the historical period of apartheid in South Africa, they were not familiar with some of the horrors associated with apartheid. So for me, it was important to provide some detail on this period in history and find ways to connect it to the novel and what Flanery attempts to achieve.
16. **Interviewer**: Do you think Flanery would want teachers to spend a great deal teaching the elements of post-apartheid literature?
17. **Anne**: Definitely because we are teaching kids that are so removed from this historical period due to the privileges a vast majority of them enjoy. They need to know what happened during this time and understand that we are still living in a post-apartheid era. I think Flanery wants the younger, born free generation to engage ethically and empathetically with the novel.
18. **Interviewer**: What do you mean by ethical and empathic engagement?
19. **Anne**: Well, I think Flanery would like learners to remove themselves from the comforts of their cultural context and integrate themselves into a past that has some relevance to the present. So what I mean is that learners need to understand that South Africa is not free from conflict especially in terms of race. All the problems in the past have not been solved.
20. **Interviewer**: How did you approach some of these contextual concerns in the novel?
21. **Anne**: Through studying the behaviour of characters such as Clare and her interaction with her gardener Adam. Their relationship is a clear indication of a hierarchical structure that existed and still exists between races in South Africa. Sam's fixation with beggars displays a sense of white guilt that privileged white people still feel today.
22. **Natalie**: Sorry can I just say at this point, that although I agree with some of your points regarding the importance of teaching the context of the novel, should we not be encouraging our learners to move forward from the past and rather consider other themes in the novel other than historical and political issues?
23. **Anne**: I don't think we can ignore South Africa's tainted past because I think it acts as a microcosm of a much larger macrocosmic realm that is linked to the character of Sam.
24. **Interviewer**: Sorry Anne, please can you explain what you mean by this connection between South Africa's past and the character of Sam?
25. **Anne**: Well, I think that South Africa's haunted past is related to Sam's haunted past by being neglected by Bernard and rejected by Laura and Clare. It also relates to past mistakes that may haunt individuals on a personal level.

26. **Interviewer**: Okay so your answer leads me to my next question. This is directed at either of you. Do you think that the associations of a post-apartheid era in South Africa contribute to shaping the characters in the novel?
27. **Anne**: Of course. We cannot teach context in isolation from characterisation. Sam represents the haunting of a personal past in relation to a political past. Clare represents regret, personal regret for not being a good mother to Laura which, I think parallels the regret she and other writers of her time feel about not doing enough to oppose the suppression and inequality advocated by apartheid.
28. **Interviewer**: And Natalie, what do you think?
29. **Natalie**: I think that this novel can be taught in two ways, either focusing on context or focusing on plot, theme and character. I opted to focus on the latter because rehashing the past only leads to conflict and is largely irrelevant to learners in 2016.
30. **Anne**: I cannot agree with you unfortunately.
31. **Interviewer**: Moving on from these questions and responses. Did you address the fact that *Absolution* is an example of post-modernist writing?
32. **Anne**: Yes
33. **Natalie**: I did not specifically use that term but spoke about some of the features of this genre of writing?
34. **Interviewer**: Okay so Anne, what importance do you think post-modernism as a theory has to this novel?
35. **Anne**: Well, as a literature major in University I was always guided with the notion that without theory, there can be no true understanding of any literary text. So what I mean is that learners must understand how postmodernist writers write if they are to understand the nuances contained within any literary text. For example the structure of the text reflects postmodernist writing because the consistent arrangement of chapters makes learners aware that there is not one voice here but many and that in itself is a post-modernist technique. Learners need to remove themselves from the naïve belief that there is a single truth contained in everything they see and read. Postmodernist literature assists learners in adopting this rather sceptical yet realistic approach.
36. **Natalie**: Yes, although I never used the literary term, 'postmodernism'. I did speak about the non-linear structure and the different voices in the novel which would result in there being a lack of clarity for the learner at the end. I really don't think that at secondary level, complicated terms such as postmodernism need to be used.

37. **Interviewer**: So Anne and Natalie, although you both mentioned how you taught some of these postmodernist techniques in the questionnaire, it would be great if you could elaborate on these approaches and perhaps explain what you think the learners achieved from this?
38. **Anne**: As mentioned in my response to the questionnaire, I tried to get my boys to think outside the box so to speak. I think this novel challenged learners to make their own meaning and to solve all the mysteries in the novel by themselves. So for me, using a type of a crime/perspective board seemed to help many learners to make their own assumptions about the events described in the novel.
39. **Interviewer**: So how did this crime/perspective board actually work?
40. **Anne**: Although a tedious process, I would read a chapter with my class and then in groups, ask them to write their perspective of the chapter on pieces of cardboard that are attached on the wall around the classroom. So for example, there was a chapter that dealt with the conflicted relationship that Clare had with her sister Nora. Some groups wrote that Clare's opinion was biased because only her opinion was offered where as other groups felt sympathy for Clare, even condoning her actions in revealing the whereabouts of Nora to her assassin.
41. **Interviewer**: How do you think this may have benefitted your boys?
42. **Anne**: Well, it forced them to think critically which is a requirement of the IEB exam and of course it fulfilled what postmodernist writing requires of learners, to question everything they read and see and experience because there is no such thing as absolute truth.
43. **Interviewer**: Thanks Anne and Natalie how did you go about teaching the complexity of structure and other postmodernist features?
44. **Natalie**: Given the already difficult nature of this novel, I chose to teach all the chapters separately so we would read all the Sam chapter right to the end and then go back and read the Clare chapters and so forth. I felt that this avoided the confusion of switching from one perspective to another. My aim was to help the girls in my class address an essay question that would possibly centre on character and theme rather than structure.
45. **Interviewer**: And what do you think you achieved from this method?
46. **Natalie**: I think that I made the reading of this novel easier for my kids. As we read one set of chapters, we were able to focus specifically on one perspective at one time rather than trying to juggle many perspectives all at once. At the end of the day, the students need to understand the novel so avoiding a focus on too much literary theory.

47. **Interviewer**: Thank you both for your time. Your responses have been most intriguing.

4.2.6 Data analysis – focused group interview

The focused group interview clarified a number of issues that first arose from the written questionnaire. The interview presented two very different perspectives. Anne appeared to think that teaching post-apartheid literature and postmodernist writing techniques were vitally important to an understanding of character and theme. Natalie on the other hand, felt that teaching theory was overwhelming for her learners and so did not really inform issues of character and theme in the novel. My analysis of this focus group was that Natalie perhaps lacked adequate knowledge of postmodernist techniques due to the fact that she did not actually use the term in the classroom. She merely alluded to structural incoherence which is in essence a postmodernist feature. Essentially Natalie appeared to teach some of the features of postmodernist writing without actually realizing that she was teaching literary theory. Sadly her decision to read the chapters separately defeated the postmodernist requirements of this novel but from a positive perspective assisted her learners in understanding the basics of character and plot. It is my opinion that teaching each chapter separately may also have deprived learners of the privilege of understanding the themes of truth and acknowledging the fact that all the perspectives offered in the novel are questionable since no one really knows what the truth is at the end of the novel. From this interview, I can deduce that Natalie was concerned with preparing her students for the exam but perhaps not extending them beyond these demands. In carefully deconstructing all of the complex language by reading each chapter separately, Natalie was able to offer a language-based approach to teaching this novel but in avoiding a detailed acknowledgement of the importance of context in the novel, she failed to address the expectations of a cross-cultural approach. Although she briefly addressed the expectations of postmodernist writing, her inability to expose the learners in a more detailed way to this genre of writing, possibly lead to the learners missing an opportunity to offer their own opinions as well as finding connections between the novel they are reading and their own personal life experiences. In this way, the personal growth model may have been neglected to a certain extent.

Anne appeared to exhibit a greater level of knowledge and expertise in the field of literature teaching. Her contribution to this interview suggested that she had made a good attempt to

incorporate all three approaches to teaching this literary text. She displayed a need to prepare her learners for this exam but was also interested in extending their knowledge beyond just the physical text. Her approaches to teaching this novel tend to indicate that she was thorough in her teaching. Her explanation of the importance of theory appeared logical since a novel of this kind possibly cannot be taught without understanding the post-apartheid context of the novel as well as the postmodernist elements that are apparent throughout the text. It is my opinion that Anne has approached this text in such a way that the reader-response theory could be activated in this classroom. Since postmodernist writing would encourage learners to understand that meaning is not fixed but rather unstable and constantly changing, then this would naturally allow learners to create their own subjective perspectives of various incidents that occur within the text. Since post-modernism also encourages learners to use their voice as opposed to being passively influenced by a teacher, Anne has taken a visual approach to teaching this text through the use of her crime board. This method appeared to not only allow learners to contribute a personal perspective to a discussion but in seeing various perspectives written on the crime board, would enable them to acknowledge the instability and unreliability of truth. In carefully addressing a post-apartheid climate in South Africa, Anne also appears to have laid a good foundation for her learners to interpret the actions and thoughts of the characters in the novel. In placing importance upon the circumstances that surrounded South Africa during an apartheid and post-apartheid context, Anne has successfully fulfilled the expectations of a cross-cultural approach to teaching literature. The crime board allowed learners to express an opinion which in turn would contribute to the expectations of the personal growth approach. In approaching this novel culturally and personally, Anne appears to have laid the foundation for decoding the linguistic challenges of this novel. In including a language based approach to teaching this novel, Anne would also equip her learners with the ability to unravel the complex language of this text and unearth the literary nuances of this text.

4.2.7 Validity of this study

My choice to conduct research into this was prompted firstly by my interest in the ways in which other English teachers had approached the teaching of this text. The literary and theoretical framework of this study suggested that this study is important to the current

curricula in South Africa. An exposure to the context that is post-apartheid South Africa as well as post-modernist writing is important to the youth of South Africa.

From a historical point of view, although the current generation of learners were unaffected by apartheid and even a post-apartheid context, the born-frees still remain very affected by this political period. The militant response from some of the black girls in the girls' school is testimony of this. It therefore becomes necessary that these learners' understand that the past has affected them. This will allow for the development of a sense of empathy for the difficulties that some South Africans have experienced in the past as well as to realize that their freedom and equality is to be appreciated. Although this text is different and challenging, it is highly beneficial to developing a sense of introspection for learners. Realizing that literature texts such as *Absolution* (2012) do not dictate meaning but rather allow for subjective meaning is an important consideration for learners who may often feel compelled to respond to a text according to the expectations of a teacher or an external examining body. This study is also valid in that it presents readers with an understanding of literature as an area of study that has relevance and value in their lives.

The data collected from both the written questionnaire and the focused group interview suggests that literary theory is an important consideration when teaching a literary text. The results of the data collection also serve to highlight how without a clear and detailed understanding of theory, learners cannot develop a full understanding of aspects of character, plot, theme and context. This study is important in generating an understanding of the necessity for careful preparation before embarking on the teaching of a complex text such as *Absolution* (2012).

This study is also important because it has the potential to influence other English teachers in the sense that their approaches to teaching this text in the future can be informed by theory that can generate interest for both themselves as educators and their learners.

4.2.8 A comparative study of approaches to teaching *Absolution*

The culminating factor of this research report compelled me to reflect upon the results of the data collected as well as to consider the differences and similarities that existed between the approaches taken by the Grade 12 teachers who agreed to participate in this research and the

approaches that I, personally took as a teacher of this novel. The results of the data collected reflected many of the challenges and difficulties that I faced when teaching this novel, particularly for the first time. Many of the problems associated with approaching an unusually dense text both in content and structure were certainly echoed in some of responses offered by the participants of this research. Other similarities included some of the more proactive approaches that teachers took such as creating crime boards or CSI charts as in the case of the teachers from the boys' school. Such an approach was innovative and impressive as it provoked active engagement on the part of the learners. My approach mirrored this method to a certain extent in that my learners were encouraged to add a post-it note, with a message on to a designated chart on the wall of my classroom. Every time a learner discovered a new piece of the puzzle or had an opinion on a particular matter, they wrote a message and added it to the chart on the wall. At the end of novel, we were able to examine each message and engage in a series of debates surrounding the comment that had been made. This allowed learners to immerse themselves in the novel and to actively participate in generating an understanding of the events of the novel.

Some of the teachers from both the girls' and boys' school expressed the importance of teaching context to the learners before even attempting to decipher the events of the novel. This approach is very similar to the one I took. Discussing apartheid and post-apartheid conditions in South Africa allowed learners to locate themselves in a particular political period. Some teachers considered context to be less important than teaching content and it is here that my approach differed quite substantially. Laying a foundation or at least creating a scene for learners to envisage, is for me vitally important in allowing for an understanding of the actions of characters as well as the reasons why the plot enfolds in the way it does.

Some of the teachers felt that teaching literary theory was imperative to the understanding of the novel whilst others felt that simply focussing on plot development and character profiles were an adequate approach to teaching this novel. My approach tended to support the need to introduce students to the elements of postmodernist writing as this determines the multiple voices and perspectives that tend to permeate the novel. Teaching the novel simply to fulfil the requirements of an external examination featured as a major difference in the approach that I took. Although, I believe that preparing students to address the demands of an external examination are important, I do believe that learners need to engage with a text and perhaps even find ways of identifying with a character, theme or event in the novel. It was very clear that some of the teachers of this novel truly involved their students in the analysis of this novel,

finding ways of physically involving them as active participants in the study of this text. My approach was very similar to teachers who taught the novel in this manner. Attempting to generate genuine interest in the novel is for me important in achieving success both on a personal level and on an academic level where learners must fulfil the requirements of the IEB examination. Leaving learners to their own devices in requiring them to read the text outside of the classroom was an approach that I had not considered whilst teaching this novel. Although it may propel learners to take control of their own learning, a novel of this complexity requires mediation from the teacher.

The approaches taken by the teachers who participated in this study were not vastly different from the approaches taken in my own personal capacity. However, as an advocate of active learning in the classroom, I learnt a great deal from some of the innovative approaches taken by some of the teachers. These approaches have encouraged me to approach all novels in this manner as well as to continue considering the importance of both context and literary theory in the teaching of complex texts such as *Absolution* (2012).

Chapter 5 Conclusion

Drawing upon the literary theories of postmodernism, post-apartheid literature, reader-response theory, cultural studies theory and the models for teaching literature as proposed by Carter & Long (1991) and Lazar (1993), insight into the approaches that teachers have taken when teaching the novel *Absolution* (2012) has been presented in this paper.

The collection of data has suggested that a novel of this kind requires much preparation on the part of the teacher. The level of complexity attributed to each text tends to determine the extent to which teachers need to prepare for each lesson. As a novel prescribed for Grade 12 learners, *Absolution* (2012) is immensely challenging and from the data collected from both the questionnaire and the focused group interviews, it appears that although some teachers embraced the expectations of the novel, there were other participants who felt frustrated when approaching this text. A combination of the data collected from the five participants in this study as well as my own teaching of this novel, has led me to the conclusion that when teaching this novel or any literary text, literary theory cannot be ignored. Without equipping learners with the knowledge of the features associated with post-modernist and post-apartheid literature, learners will fail to approach the novel according to what the author intended. Sheridan Blau

(1993) in her paper entitled, 'Building Bridges between Literary Theory and the Teaching of Literature', empathises the importance of acknowledging authorial intention of a text. Although authors do not purposely locate their texts within a particular literary theory, readers could consult various literary theories as a way of better understanding the text or allowing them to open up new perspectives on a particular text. Therefore, it would be useful for teachers to attempt to locate a text within a particular literary period as a way of assisting learners to achieve a more profound understanding of the text they are studying.

The novel *Absolution* (2012) appears to be an appropriate text to introduce postmodernist writing as well as to introduce learners to the features of post-apartheid literature as well as cultural studies theory. If approached with a clear focus on the presence of literary theory as providing a foundation for the understanding of more complex issues presented in the novel, Hall's (1996) Reader-response theory or Iser's (1978) reception theory can become a reality in a literature classroom. The postmodernist elements inherent in this novel should not be ignored due to the active responses that it can elicit from learners. The mere concept of learners having the opportunity to deconstruct the incoherent structure of this text as well as an attempt to create their own sense of truth as well as a subjective conclusion at the end of the novel are imperative in generating independent learners. The ability of postmodernist writers to skilfully sway learners away from the notion of the location of one single truth within a novel, reinforces the comment made by Beth Wilson (2014) in her paper, 'Teach the how: Critical Lenses and Critical Literacy', when she states that, 'students often think that texts generate meaning in a single, albeit complex way' (Wilson, 2014, p.71). Introducing learners to theories such as postmodernism can develop their ability to question the material that they engage with. The benefits of this theory may impact other realms of their academic careers both during and after school. In my opinion, the essential role of teaching literary theory when approaching the novel *Absolution* (2012) is to develop a better understanding of the intention of Patrick Flanery as well as to, 'put students in the driver's seat, making them more active in their own learning, giving them more voice and choice in their work' (Wilson, 2014, p.68). By ignoring the existence of literary theory, only the minimal requirements of understanding a text such as *Absolution* (2012) can be achieved; however, then it is the teacher's responsibility to equip learners with the literary theory that will enable them to wade through the complexities inherent in a novel such as *Absolution* (2012).

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Appendices

Appendix A: Book Review *Absolution*
The Telegraph (2012)

By Lucy Beresford
10:49AM GMT 06 Mar 2012

At a time of intense media focus on global political protest, Patrick Flanery's sophisticated debut explores the personal and political legacy of such action in South Africa. The healing omens for places like Syria do not, at least in the short term, look good.

Sam has returned to Cape Town to interview spiky, elderly writer Clare for her biography. Both characters skirt around each other's pasts, unpacking the creative process as they spar. Clare hopes for absolution for betraying her sister and neglecting her activist daughter, Laura. Sam has his own peace to make: with his dead parents, his murdered guardian and with Clare.

Wriggling with secrets, the gripping narrative swings back and forth between Eighties apartheid, when writers played cat and mouse with the Board of Censors, and when Laura may or may not have been on anti-government operations, and the South Africa of today: a pretend paradise of "luxury bunkers", panic buttons in the bedroom and simmering interracial mistrust. It makes for uncomfortable reading, as the brutal struggles of the past are seen to be the midwives of contemporary violence.

The idea of the sleuthing biographer may not be original, but setting the tale in South Africa is inspired, allowing Flanery to play insightful games with ideas of self-deception and amnesty. The prose surges with enjoyable debate about the slipperiness of truth, the nature of forgiveness, and whether fiction is more honest than non-fiction.

If the final pages don't quite pack the punch the well-plaited build-up demands, this is perhaps because, like truth, not all things can be fully known. And if Clare is an irritating old stick, that is because, like most of us, she is well-defended. Her barbed demeanour is her armour plating. We are all, Flanery suggests, only ever trying to protect ourselves.

Appendix B: Book Review: *Absolution*
The Washington Post (2012)

Book review: '*Absolution*' by Patrick Flanery
By Scott Esposito July 5, 2012

Patrick Flanery's first novel, "*Absolution,*" sets out to combine diverse threads into one gripping plot: rebel activities in apartheid-era South Africa, the fraught relationship between a mother and her murdered daughter, the life of a writer under a regime of censorship and day-to-day living in one of the most economically unequal, dangerous societies in the world.
The central figures in this story are Clare, a famous but reclusive South African author, and Sam, a South African expatriate from her past who has returned to write her biography. With the explorations they make together, along with excerpts from Clare's most recent novel, titled "Absolution," Flanery builds a structure that allows him to place Sam at the center of the story's numerous plotlines. Narrative momentum is provided by the question of what exactly happened to Clare's murdered daughter.

Flanery is at his strongest when detailing the violence and horror that surround daily life in both contemporary and apartheid-era South Africa.

One stretch relates the eerie, salesmanlike way the regime showed off a set of mechanical cages along the beach that are used to torture captured rebels through simulated drowning. "It is a simple system, ladies and gentlemen," says a government agent, "not unlike a fishing rod, but with an almost opposite purpose."

Moving into the present era, Flanery creates suspense while narrating the break-in of a luxurious estate. The mere description of the complex security systems that wealthy South Africans cower behind makes them sound like prisoners in their own homes: "Once the alarm is set nothing must fall down, nothing must drop, nothing must stir, or you'll have the guys down here in no time."

Flanery excels here, but other parts of "Absolution" are weaker.

The prose is generally serviceable, but far from inspired and at times poor. For instance, the author tries too hard to give a sense of Sam's alienation by exposing the differences between

destitute South Africans and his relative wealth. Clumsy passages like this, which portrays Sam's guilt after a beggar asks him for money, are common: "His jeans are frayed to above the ankles and his shoes are both missing the heel and quarter, the entire back part of the shoe, so they're more like clogs, flapping and thwacking the floor with each step. I watch him leave and go back to eating my twenty-rand muffin, which tastes like the best muffin I've ever had and has been served with a ramekin of grated cheddar cheese and an individual pot of jam."

Appendix C: An Interview with Patrick Flanery

Making sense of our present through their past

A Q&A with *Absolution* author, Patrick Flanery



Author Patrick Flanery shares his ideas on the main themes he set out to address in the work, the questions that interest him most as a novelist, what students might gain from reading the novel and why he believes that fiction that paints the world as a safe place is deeply dishonest.

English Experience: What prompted you to write the novel?

Patrick Flanery: I was doing research on censorship for my doctoral thesis and began to think about the ways that writers who are subjected to different forms of censorship might find of surviving, or of accommodating themselves to a system that was designed to thwart free expression.

EE: How long did it take you to write?

PF: I began writing what would become the book in 2005, and worked on it off and on for a couple of years before putting it aside. I returned to it again in 2009, finished it over the course of several months in 2010, and edited it in the first half of 2011.

EE: What are the main themes you set out to address in the work?

PF: Apart from freedom of expression and censorship, I was conscious of wanting to write a book about memory, about the ways that people with shared experiences remember things differently. I also wanted to write about different forms of terror: political terror, criminal terror, the terror of surveillance, inter-personal terror, the terror that comes from finding oneself powerless; also the terror of realising one's power over other people. It is a profoundly complex and multifaceted phenomenon, terror: not just an emotion, but a quality, and perhaps, sadly, the presiding spirit of our times.

EE: Why did you choose this subject matter for your first novel?

PF: Although I have not said this elsewhere, this is a novel that in a great many ways was born out of the sense of trauma and terror I felt after the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, which produced, for me, a feeling of total disempowerment and vulnerability (I had been working in New York City until mid 2001). I knew that I needed to write a book that would help me understand this experience, but also begin to make sense of the ways in which individuals might be complicit, either naively or by design, in acts of atrocity against others.

EE: How did you decide on the title of the novel?

PF: The title was late in coming. I started off thinking it would be called *Complicit*, but it had a number of working titles, including *The Cast Out*, *Dissidence* (with its play on 'dissidents'),

and *The Invaders* (which the publishers thought sounded too much like science fiction), until my editors and I settled on *Absolution*. As soon as we thought of it, it felt right, like the most appropriate title the novel could possibly have had. 'Absolution' becomes, then, both a governing theme and the goal towards which the characters are moving.

EE: Why did you opt to use a complex, multi-layered narrative to tell the story?

PF: I felt as though this was the best way of animating the tensions between the characters' competing versions of the past. But it also works as a way of reflecting the fact that truth, particularly in the context of the late stages of Apartheid, was itself complex and multi-layered (indeed, that truth is always so).

In part, I was also trying to write into the novel some of what the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) sought to do: that is, to allow for multiple *kinds* of truth. The TRC imagined four varieties of truth: forensic (the *objective*, scientific version of events); narrative (the individual's *subjective* version of events); dialogic or discursive (which I understand to be the 'truth' that emerges from the interplay between the forensic and narrative forms of truth); and, finally, restorative truth (the version of events that is necessary for resolution, perhaps one might think of this as a kind of 'therapeutic' narrative).

EE: Why did you decide to set the novel in contemporary South Africa?

PF: When I was still in the very early stages of writing the book (a book that, in some ways, I did not know was going to be a novel), I began to see that I was dealing with a range of themes and issues (censorship, liberation struggle, terrorism, torture, memory, forgiveness, complicity in past crimes) that might have been pertinent to any number of national or regional situations. Because I started by thinking about government-sponsored censorship and could not find a way of writing the book without this being a part of it, this limited my options for setting. For a while I thought about setting it in a kind of 'nowhere' country, an allegorical place, or even in a near-future America, but I soon began to realise that the landscape I was describing in the early drafts was already the South African one I had come to know intimately from 2003 onwards. Moreover, South Africa experienced institutionalised censorship under Apartheid, and the other themes I was trying to explore seemed to fit most naturally in a South African setting. Once I decided that I was writing a South African story, all the pieces began to fall into place.

EE: What research did you undertake when writing the novel?

PF: I first visited South Africa in 2003, and made many subsequent trips with my South African partner while I was writing the book. Each time I stayed with my in-laws in George, visited friends in Cape Town and Grahamstown, and spent a great deal of time driving through the Eastern and Western Cape Provinces. I visited Johannesburg for the first time in 2010, and much of what I write about Johannesburg in the novel is informed by my experiences there.

I also undertook substantial historical research, reading histories of South Africa, the TRC, and the African National Congress (ANC). I also read countless pages of TRC transcripts from the Human Rights Violations hearings. South African novels were also important because I wanted my own book to be in conversation with what I regard as some of the best South African fiction. Books by J.M. Coetzee, Marlene van Niekerk, Zoë Wicomb, Ivan Vladislavic, K. Sello Duiker, and Nadine Gordimer were particularly important.

EE: One reviewer describes the way South Africa is portrayed in the novel as 'brutally unsentimental' - do you agree with this assessment?

PF: If 'unsentimental' means looking as objectively as possible at the reality of a given place (while still being conscious that absolute objectivity is perhaps impossible), then I suppose that this assessment might be thought to be accurate. My second novel, *Fallen Land*, is about contemporary America, and I hope it would also be regarded as 'brutally unsentimental'.

Generally, I am suspcious of sentiment, particularly in fiction, because I think it often betrays an attempt by the author to hide the truth, however that might be construed, or to accept a single 'version' of it. For most people life is not sweet and easy, it is not cosy and secure, and fiction that paints the world as a safe place without serious systemic, institutional, and interpersonal problems is, for me, deeply dishonest.

EE: Do you believe that South Africans are still burdened by the past and, if so, in what ways?

PF: As an outsider, even one with strong family and intellectual ties to the country, I am cautious about answering this question. In a way, I think all countries, all nations, are burdened by their particular pasts. America is burdened by its history of slavery and racism; Britain is burdened by its history of empire and its ongoing class system; Germany by the Holocaust; France by its partial complicity in the Holocaust and by the aftermath of its own empire (especially its violent handling of the independence movement in Algeria); Spain by the dictatorship of Franco; Ireland by its ongoing division ... one could go on and on. The past, and its legacy, is inescapable. The question is: how does a nation, how do its people, deal with the weight of history? How do they redress past wrongs? These are some of the questions that most interest me as a novelist: how we live through the burden of history, and how history inflects (and sometimes infects) everything we do in our given present..

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EE: How do you imagine South African students will respond to *Absolution*?

PF: I hope they will see aspects of their world depicted in ways that are recognisable. But I hope, too, that they will find their world slightly de-familiarised, which is to say that I hope *Absolution* might also help them see their own lives in subtly different ways.

I suspect, and hope, that their experiences of growing up in democratic South Africa-of being part of the 'born-free' generation-will be distinct in important ways from the kind of life that Sam had growing up under Apartheid.

This is not just a novel about Apartheid or the past; it is also very much a novel about South Africa in the present. Also, of course, it is a novel about the human condition more generally, about the present in which we find ourselves: under surveillance, locked in our homes, fearing the unknown, and suspecting those who are unlike us.

EE: What advice would you give students to help them understand the work?

PF: Assume nothing. Read attentively, but also read sceptically, which is to say, do not assume that the truth is ever being spoken by a character. Sometimes it is, sometimes it isn't.

EE: Could you describe the inspiration behind the complex character of Clare Wald?

PF: Clare is not based on any one person; my writing does not work in that way. Usually a character draws traits from various people I have known or encountered. Sometimes that process of amalgamation is conscious, sometimes it functions at a much deeper level.

I had various writers in mind as possible models for Clare, and in particular the British novelist Muriel Spark, who had a difficult relationship with her son, a contentious one with her biographer, and a close relationship with her female assistant. In terms of personality, though, Clare is a blend of my maternal grandmother and several teachers I had over the years (it is not coincidental that Clare has been a teacher in the past, and her relationship with Sam is as much one of mentorship as anything else).

Clare's psychology, the way she *thinks*, is more often than not my own, and in this respect she is the more autobiographical of the two main characters, even though Clare and I share little to nothing in the way of common life events or experiences.

EE: There are several strong female characters in *Absolution*. Was this important to you?

PF: Yes, on two levels. First, as a male writer, creating strong and believable female characters is a challenge I take seriously. I am not and will never be a writer only or even chiefly interested in men. Second, for the purposes of this book in particular, it was important to me that the role of women (perhaps especially exceptional women like Clare and Laura) in a masculinist society, one which has historically sought to limit the roles of women to the domestic, be depicted in its full variety, to demonstrate the entire spectrum of female subjectivity (meaning identity), all the ways in which women have lived and worked and loved in South Africa from the years of Apartheid through to the present. I don't claim to have achieved this, but I hope I have shown that women may be not only wives, sisters, mothers, and daughters, but that within and alongside those roles they may also be fighters (of various kinds), professionals, and so forth, in the same way that men are. I am a feminist; I wish more men were. I hope that my work reflects this.

EE: The novel contains harrowing scenes depicting torture methods employed by the state. To what extent are these portrayals factually based?

PF: It is important to be aware of the fact that the primary torture scene, near the end of the novel's first part, is Clare's nightmare vision of what *might* have happened to her daughter. It is, in fact, entirely imagined, and Clare knows it is imagined. That is not to say that torture of extremely brutal (and brutally creative) character did not take place under Apartheid, though this particular one is a work of the imagination. Clare tries to imagine the *worst* possible end for her daughter, and the idea of Laura caged on a beach is what her mind conjures. She knows it is a nightmare, but also knows that the full history of Apartheid atrocities has not necessarily been brought to light.

EE: What reactions to the novel from readers have surprised you the most?

PF: Among the most moving-and most disturbing-were the experiences of an elderly couple in Camps Bay whom I've come to know since publishing the book. Their daughter was involved in the liberation struggle and for years they were unaware that she was living only minutes away from them, just as Clare is unaware in the novel that Laura is living so close to her. This same couple had also suffered a break-in, as Clare does, that left them feeling profoundly shaken (they were held hostage for some time), even though they came out of it physically unharmed. In these two respects, in particular, they felt that Absolution resonated with their experiences of living through the long years of Apartheid, the transition, and experiencing some of the more distressing realities of life in the country today.

EE: What aspects of South African culture have had the strongest impact on you?

PF: I wouldn't know where to begin. The literature of the country has, obviously, been of huge importance for me, but so have countless other aspects of the culture that stem from everyday life: language, food, music, a way of being in the world. As I write this, though, I am conscious of the ways in which there is not a single South African culture, but many overlapping and sometimes contiguous cultures that have some shared aspects. I feel at home here in a way that is analogous to my feeling in America; I certainly feel more at home in South Africa than I do in Britain. South African culture (or cultures) makes sense and is familiar to me at a very visceral level. In terms of places, the Western Cape feels most familiar, most like home. This has something to do, I think, with the ways in which Afrikaans culture in particular is very like the frontier cultures of my childhood in the American Midwest, while, at the same time, the landscape often reminds me of California, where both sets of my grandparents settled. Despite these familiarities, every time I come back to the country I learn something or notice something new about it.

EE: Finally, are there any particular works or authors you would recommend to students who are keen to explore the issues you raise in *Absolution* further?

Appendix D: Questionnaire English Teachers

Questionnaire: Grade 12 English teachers - *Absolution*

1. Is this novel suitable for Grade 12? Provide reasons.
2. What are your perceptions of the novel?
3. Considering the demographics in your Grade 12 English class, explain the varying / similar reactions of learners to the novel in general.
4. In terms of methodology, describe the various approaches that you took to teaching this novel.

5. What were some of the textual and pedagogical challenges (for example content and structure of the text) you encountered in the teaching of this novel?
6. To what extent did learners relate or not to the text?
7. How did you approach the ethical debates offered by the novel about guilt, truth and absolution in a post-Apartheid context?
8. Since the novel runs as a set Grade 12 English text for 2 years, did your approach in the teaching of this novel differ in the second year that you taught it? If so explain how the approach changed and why?
9. Were modifications put in place to accommodate the needs of second language speakers? If so explain what methods were adopted in this case.
10. What feedback have you received from learners on the novel?
    10.1 Judging by this feedback from learners and from your own appraisal, has the text contributed to the learners' development (for example personal, social, linguistic and cognitive)?

Appendix E

Ethical Approval

Wits School of Education



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4 August 2016

Student number: 9309096F

Protocol Number: 2016RCE045M

Dear Megan Lisa Pooley

Application for ethics clearance: Master of Education

Thank you very much for your ethics application. The Ethics Committee in Education of the Faculty of Humanities, acting on behalf of the Senate, has considered your application for ethics clearance for your proposal entitled:

Approaches to teaching Patrick Flanery's novel Absolution to Grade 12 learners in three IEB schools in Johannesburg

The committee recently met and I am pleased to inform you that clearance was granted.

Please use the above protocol number in all correspondence to the relevant research parties (schools, parents, learners etc.) and include it in your research report or project on the title page.

The Protocol Number above should be submitted to the Graduate Studies in Education Committee upon submission of your final research report.

All the best with your research project.

Yours sincerely,

M Makeh

Wits School of Education

011 717-3416

cc Supervisor - Dr Karen Lazar