The Discourse of Reading Groups is an AHRC-funded project that ran for twelve months and collected well over two hundred thousand words of informal literary discussion. Analysis of these data – an ongoing process involving discourse analysis, software-assisted qualitative analysis, and quantitative corpus analysis – reveals much about how readers interpret and evaluate literary texts.

Reading groups were recorded in discussion not only of works of their own choosing, but also of works chosen by the researchers, in this case providing a ‘natural laboratory’ that has enabled us to explore a wide range of interpretations of the same literary text, and also to draw contrasts between this form of ‘laic’ reading and the professional readings of critics and academics.

In this paper, we focus on a corpus of discussion produced by ten participating groups who read Steinbeck's *The Pearl* (Penguin Classics, 2000). Groups varied along several dimensions, including gender composition, age, experience of literary study, setting (meeting in members' houses or institutional settings such as a school, workplace and prison), and the extent to which discussion was mediated by a facilitator. We consider the diverse literary readings produced across these interpretive contexts, and how these readings intersect, in various ways, with the readers’ worlds outside the text. We argue that such analysis of locally-produced interpretations reveals the considerable context-dependence of the social practice that is the reading of literature.

Keywords: reading; literature; literary reception; discourse analysis