The Lens of Reader Response: The Promise and Peril of Response-Based Pedagogy

What a poem means is the outcome of a dialogue between the words on the page and the person who happens to be reading it; that is to say, its meaning varies from person to person.

—W. H. Auden

We must keep clearly in mind that the literary experience is fundamentally an unmediated private exchange between a text and a reader, and that literary history and scholarship are supplemental.

—Robert Probst, Response and Analysis

A poem is the map of a dream.

—Kevin, Grade 12

This poem has no meaning to me. Because I get no meaning, it is not poetry.

—Issac, Grade 12

A few years ago I served as an "insignificant" for an International Baccalaureate program in an urban high school in Minneapolis. My role as an outside examiner was to help students demonstrate their understanding of several canonical texts (Gulliver's Travels, Paradise Lost, The Grapes of Wrath, etc.) by asking them to prepare a brief explication of the text and then to respond to a series of questions. Particularly memorable was one discussion I had about The Scarlet Letter, or with a 16-year-old student named Ely. I asked about two or three sentences on plot summary and then exclaimed, "You know, if my man ever treated me the way Hester was treated, I'd be out of my life before you could say 'The Scarlet A'." I can't believe the chap Hester took. Actually,

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Editor's Response

by Deborah Appleman

Required reading: pp. 25-45, 55-55

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From Critical Encounters

Deborah Appleman

High School
last week my boyfriend Rob and I almost broke up. Okay, well, it all started when..."

Try as might, I couldn’t move our conversation back to Hester or to anything specifically textual about The Scarlet Letter or any of the other texts she had read for her IB English course. I felt that she had dived off the springboard of personal response into an autobiographical wreck (apologies to Adrienne Rich). Leah’s inability to craft a response that was textual in any way might have been facilitated inadvertently by her skilled and well-meaning teacher who encouraged personal responses to literature and de-emphasized more traditional forms of textual analysis. While this anecdote may exaggerate the “worst case scenario” of the personalized approach to literature, it does point out some of the potential weaknesses in how that approach has come to be practiced in secondary schools.

This chapter reviews some of the basic tenets of a reader-centered approach, discusses some of the many advantages of this particular lens, and explains how its practice may have diverged from its intentions. We then explore some of the limitations to the approach that have emerged recently as both students and canon have become more diverse. Finally, a close look at reader-response activities in two different classrooms reveals that we can use reader response with our students more fruitfully by (1) teaching it more explicitly, and (2) teaching it as one of a variety of theoretical approaches rather than as the only possible approach. This multiplicity of approaches will be explored further in subsequent chapters.

**BENEFITS OF THE READER-CENTERED APPROACH**

There can be no denying the power and purpose of a reader-centered approach to literature and the degree to which it has positively informed our practice. It has made the enterprise of literature teaching more relevant, immediate, and important. It has forced us to rethink what we do when we teach literature, why we do it, and whom we do it for. There is ample evidence of the soundness of the reader-centered approach; its advocates are influential and articulate—from Rosenblatt’s efferent to aesthetic reading to Langer’s engagement with literature to Robert Probst’s elegant and elegiac meditations on the importance of personal response. The value of the lens of reader response to literature study in secondary classrooms simply cannot be denied. And no one would want to.

As we look back at literature instruction over the past half century, it is easy to see how reader-centered teaching fit perfectly with the goals of constructivist education and with the progressive education movement. At the center of the educational enterprise was the student. No longer was the text itself or the author the most salient part of literature study. No longer could students’ individual responses to texts be considered “mnemonic irrelevances,” as I. A. Richards had claimed. Instead, the reader was the creator of meaning through a “never to be duplicated transaction” between the reader and the text (Rosenblatt, 1968, p. 31).

This new focus on the reader indisputably enlivened and irrevocably altered the teaching of literature. It changed or supposedly changed the power dynamics in the classroom and the role of the teacher, and it clearly changed what it was that we asked students to do when they read texts. The paradigmatic shift from a text-centered to a reader-centered pedagogy also changed our consideration of the kinds of texts we used. We found ourselves sometimes considering whether a particular text was teachable by the degree to which it might invoke personal responses from our students. From the point of view of most observers, at least, these were all changes for the better.

Five-paragraph themes gave way to reading logs; recitations of genre or structural aspects of the text gave way to recitations of personal connections to the text; and the traditional teacher-in-the-front formation gave way to the intimate and missapen circles with which many of us and our students are familiar. Of course, knowledge of the text was still important, but personal knowledge seemed in many cases to be privileged over textual knowledge. Rather than seeking out biographical information about the author or historical information about the times in which the text was written or took place, teachers began to spend time finding personal hooks into the texts they chose and frequently opened literature discussions with questions that began, “Have you ever...?”

**A CAUTIONARY TALE**

We met Rachel in Chapter 2. Rachel was an enthusiastic, if relatively inexperienced, practitioner of reader-centered pedagogy and had become increasingly frustrated as she watched her students measure, by their own limited experiences, the predicaments and decisions of Hester Prynne, George and Lenny, Daisy Buchanan, and Atticus Finch. On the one hand, she is grateful that they can find connections between their own lives and the lives of these literary characters. She knows that personal experience often provides the coattails students ride into a book. She also knows enough about reader-response approaches to the teaching of literature from her college methods class to realize that using one’s personal experiences to connect to the text can be a fruitful way for students to make meaning. She knows that personal response is the hook that many teachers favor for good reason. In fact, some of her colleagues contend it is the only way that really works.
And still... There is something about this personal approach to literature with which Rachel feels uncomfortable. Yes, she wants her students to read literature to gain insight into their own lives, to gain perspective into their own situations. Yet there is, Rachel believes, something limiting about that position, something that might trivialize the importance of the real differences that exist between the students' world and the world of the text. Are we really all the same? Is the purpose of studying literature only to clarify our own existence and underscore our unique personal attributes? We know the personal connection and engagement with literature that is gained when students measure the relationship of Hester and Chillingworth through their own dating experiences, or measure issues of adultery with contemporary scandals involving American presidents. But what is lost?

Rachel is not the only one who has been reconsidering the relative merits of reader response. Perhaps one of the most biting reappraisals of an individualized reader-centered approach is offered by Bruce Pirie in *Reshaping High School English* (1997). In a chapter tellingly titled “Beyond Barney and the Cult of the Individual,” Pirie reflects on the practice of valorizing individual responses in the literature classroom and the inherent dangers and complications of that approach. He argues that our focus on individuals may be overly simplistic. Even our definition of “individual” may be flawed; it does not acknowledge the contextual factors that help make us individuals. As English teachers we may have been guilty of overprivileging and romanticizing the individual at the expense of considerations of context. Pirie warns, “We now need to question the limits of the doctrine of individualism before our classroom practices harden into self-perpetuating rituals” (p. 9). This is, in part, what James Marshall (1991) refers to when he calls reader response our new orthodoxy.

Pirie notes Applebee’s (1993) observation that we shuttle between valorizing personal response as an end in itself and using it as a hook or motivation to get students interested in more serious literary analysis. Pirie (1997) also questions whether a personal-response approach to literature is justifiable from the perspective of academic rigor: “I am, however, suspicious of the suggestion that just expressing your personal response is a satisfactory educational attainment, or that such a response could be evaluated for its authenticity” (p. 120).

This failure to critique readings is also lamented by Michael Smith (Smith and Rabinowitz, 1998) when he says, “I think it’s important for readers and teacher to have a theoretical model that allows them to critique readings” (p. 121). In their provocative book *Authorizing Readers*, Smith and Rabinowitz remind us of the importance of authorial intention. If reader response is a transaction, at the very least we need to acknowledge that the text is an equal partner in that transaction. Meaning is a result of a kind of negotiation between authorial intent and the reader's response. It is not simply the question, “What does this mean to me?” that Smith says captures the essence of reader-centered theories. How can literature foster a knowledge of others when we focus so relentlessly on ourselves and our own experiences? Without some attention to authorial readings, Smith and Rabinowitz remind us, we give up the power of the text to transform.

**BE CAREFUL OF WHAT YOU ASK FOR; YOU JUST MIGHT GET IT**

Perhaps the excesses that alarm even some of the originators and strongest supporters of reader-centered pedagogy have to do with how atheoretical its practice has become. Students are not exactly sure what it is they are supposed to do when they respond to a text; they just know they are supposed to respond *personally*. A cynical tenth grader once confided, “My teacher likes it when we get gooey and personal—the gooier, the better.” They sometimes even overreact by saying things like Nathan did in an eleventh-grade discussion of *Snow Falling on Cedars*: “You really can’t tell me anything about this book since my *personal* response is the only thing that counts.” We may have “balkanized” the response-based classroom, thus precluding the possibility of questioning our personal experiences. Since our responses to literary texts are particularly and uniquely ours, then what is it that anyone, teacher or classmate, could offer that would either enrich or contradict them? Perhaps it is this phenomenon that frustrates Rachel so much when she tries to get a discussion going. Her students’ attitude seems to be, “If my response is uniquely mine, then what can anyone else tell me about it?” This also leads to the sort of autobiographical diving that Leah did with *The Scarlet Letter* in the anecdote that opened this chapter. Bonnycastle (1996) addresses this issue of reader response when he writes: “If each of us only pays attention to individual experience, the communal basis for the discipline will disappear and literature classes will have nothing to hold them together” (p.174).

Then, of course, there is the matter of students who may be uncomfortable with personal response. This may be more than a question of learning style; it is in some ways a privacy issue or perhaps a cultural issue. The sharing circle that characterizes much of our practice is also culturally determined (Hynds & Appleman, 1997). It makes assumptions about the amount of trust that students have in each other and in their teachers. It makes some assumptions about their relationship to the institution of schooling and whether they have experienced school as a safe place. Perhaps most important, it also makes some assumptions about the degree to which students’ lives are in “sharable shape.” And, of course, underlying all of these assumptions is our belief that the sharing of personal responses in the public sphere of school...
will bring students to a greater understanding of themselves and each other rather than underscore the depths of the chasms, of the inequality, that often divide us. This is the essence of the false promise of democracy in the literature circle.

CONFESSIONS OF A TRUE BELIEVER

As a high school teacher during the 1970s and 1980s, I was an enthusiastic practitioner of reader response. I tirelessly sought the personal connections that would engage my students with a text, whether it was To Kill a Mockingbird, Of Mice and Men, Ordinary People, Black Boy, The Hobbit, or The Great Gatsby. Like the teachers I described above, I began more than my share of literature discussions with that “Have you ever...?” opening. I have to admit, however, that while I considered myself to be a true-blue reader-response teacher for about 10 years of high school teaching, I never once explained to the students that what we were doing was called “reader response.” While I’m sure I explained or paraphrased the concept of a “transaction” with a literary text in general terms, I never was explicit about what exactly we were doing and why.

Sometimes the students themselves, noticing the tone of our classroom yet not being able to name the difference they felt, would refer obliquely or disparagingly to Ms. Engstrom’s sophomore American literature class or Ms. Debarge’s eleventh-grade British Literature class where there was clearly one meaning to a passage or even an entire text and feelings were never discussed. The students would reminisce bitterly about memorizing quotations, preparing for nit-picky objective tests, and embarking on wildly elusive symbol hunts. Even then I wasn’t clear about what was different in this class. Neither did I name the competing traditions of literary study nor admit to myself and to my students the validity and potential advantages of a more text-centered approach. As I prepared my reader-friendly lessons, journal assignments, and essays, I vilified the New Critics, making them the evil straw people of single-minded interpretations. Ben Nelms (1988) stated it well in this description:

I learned to think of the literary text as an edifice. Almost as a temple. Complete, autonomous, organically whole, sacrosanct. We approached it with reverence. We might make temple rubbings and we were encouraged to explain how its arches carried its weight and to speculate on the organic relationship between its form and function. But it was an edifice and we were spectators before its splendors. (p. 1)

I congratulated myself that I could never treat my students as “spectators” or the texts as “temples.” I felt comfortable and confident in my reader-response pedagogy—even superior. Looking back, from the viewpoint of multiple perspectives, I realize I was guilty of imposing a theoretical framework with no room for deviation. In my own way, although I could never see it or admit it then, I was as narrow-minded and singular in my theoretical vision as Ms. Engstrom or Ms. Debarge and their single-answer worksheets and symbol hunts.

I would like to be able to claim that I somehow saw the light and eventually learned to teach explicitly and theoretically while I was a high school teacher, but that is simply not the case. It was only when I began teaching about teaching that I started making response-based teaching explicit with my own version of “the naming of parts.” For those preservice and inservice teachers who had never been pricked by the needles of “porcupines making love” (Purves, Rogers, & Soter 1990), I began to think strategically about how to make the lens of reader response explicit. In other words, I didn’t simply want to encourage my students to respond to literature within a classroom context that was never articulated; I wanted to teach them about the theory of reader response and then encourage them to respond to literary texts with those responses enriched by their metacognitive awareness of that theory.

PULLING BACK THE CURTAIN

I began to pull the curtain back on reader response with my secondary methods students and realized, as I had with many other instructional strategies, that I had been withholding from the high school students themselves the power of being able to name what it was that they were doing. It was rather like wanting students to reach the upper levels of Bloom’s taxonomy but never teaching them about the taxonomy itself. I sometimes felt as if I had been teaching high school like the Wizard of Oz, trying to create magic and illusion, asking students to ignore the man behind the green curtain when all the time it would have been more illustrative and perhaps even more magical without the illusion, if I only had trusted them enough to take them backstage.

Taking them backstage wasn’t very hard. While there are many different forms and variations of reader response—as Beach (1993) categorizes them, textual, social, psychological, cultural, and experiential—I decided to focus primarily on a version of Louise Rosenblatt’s transactional approach. It is, in many ways, the most straightforward, sensible, and comprehensible to secondary students. And, thanks to the wonderful “translations” of Robert
Probst, it seems to be the version of a reader-centered approach to literature with which most secondary teachers are familiar. Rosenblatt views literary reading as a transaction between reader and text. She views responding to literature as an "event." As Richard Beach explains in his useful volume, *A Teacher's Introduction to Reader-Response Theories* (1993),

In contrast to the textual theorists who are interested in the competent or ideal readers' knowledge in general, Rosenblatt focuses on the uniqueness of a particular momentary transaction. While the textual theorists are concerned with achieving interpretation consistent with knowledge of appropriate literary conventions, theorists adopting Rosenblatt's transactional model are open to exploring their responses as reflecting the particulars of their emotions, attitudes, beliefs, interests, etc. (p. 51)

Beach (1993) illustrates some of the principles of reader-response theory by using the poem "Mushrooms" by Sylvia Plath. The poem is so oblique and ambiguous that it can illustrate nicely some of the basic tenets of reader response for secondary students. It can become an important part of a lesson designed to help "pull back the curtain."

*Mushrooms*

Overnight, very
Whitely, discreetly,
Very quietly

Our toes, our noses
Take hold on the loam,
Acquire the air
Nobody sees us,
Stops us, betrays us;
The small grains make room.

Soft fists insist on
Heaving the needles,
The leafy bedding,

Even the paving,
Our hammers, our rams,
Earless and eyeless,

Perfectly voiceless,
Widen the crannies.
Shoulder through holes. We

THE LENS OF READER RESPONSE

Diet on water,
On crumbs of shadow.
Bland-mannered, asking

Little or nothing.
So many of us!
So many of us!

We are shelves, we are
Tables, we are meek,
We are edible.

Nudgers and shovers
In spite of ourselves.
Our kind multiplies:

We shall by morning
Inherit the earth.
Our foot's in the door.

—Sylvia Plath

As Beach reports, readers respond with marked variety to this text and construct a wide range of interpretations. When the poem is presented to students without its title, even more interesting variation can result. For example, some students divine that the poem is about some kind of vegetation (from moss to trees), while others, especially female students, have mentioned that they think it's about unborn babies. Some students have suggested that it's about people who are oppressed—either people of color or perhaps women. One student ingeniously suggested that the poem was about rabbits and provided a line-by-line explication using such words as *multiply, silent,* and *edible* to prove that it was so. A few others reported magical and mysterious walks in the woods with their fathers or mothers. Some even denoted a trace of mental illness in the poem.

Here are some of the responses of eleventh- and twelfth-grade students after they were asked to write their response to the poem on an index card:

This poem is about conformity and how it jeopardizes our individuality.

It's about making a place for yourself in the world. That, or mold.

This poem is about an oppressed group of people. They are beaten, ignored, abused, used. There is some hope of things being OK for them. It comes in inheriting the earth. They are almost there.
These are slaves, escaping from plantations. They were just mindless tools before; now they are individuals.

Snow.

About a class of unnoticed underdogs who will come together silently and rise against the present power.

Trees, about to be made into different material things.

It's about the working class of people and how there are many more of them than the higher, richer class.

The voice of vegetation in the spring.

White carpenter ants.

I do believe this poem is about the birth of man in this planet.

It is about the seeds of cottonwood trees being dispersed in the wind during the night. They float through the air and when they land they push their way into the soil and begin to grow.

I think this is a dream. A dream is the uninhibited imagination and a poem is the same thing put to words. A poem is the map of a dream.

Together we are everything and together we are nothing.

Insects, cockroaches... It made me think of how they say that if there is ever a nuclear war, it would just be cockroaches left to cover the earth.

Mushroom-rotting fungus plaguing the earth.

Perhaps a minority or an oppressed people speaking up for their rights, learning to come forward, finally be recognized.

This is about individuality.

It could be our souls inside our head.

It's about woodland mice.

As these statements demonstrate, the range of responses to this poem is extraordinary, although some kind of cohort pattern sometimes can be detected—more women tend to see the unborn babies; college students seem to be more likely to see oppression. Students are usually amazed at the diversity of responses, and the activity itself makes the case for the notion that our responses to literature are almost as individual as a kind of literary fingerprint.

It is at this point, after they've responded to "Mushrooms," that I introduce the reader-response diagram to secondary students (see Figure 3.1). This diagram graphically illustrates the principles of Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reader response in the following ways. First, students are asked to consider what personal characteristics, qualities, or elements of their personal histories might be relevant to their reading of a particular text. We stress that the relevant personal qualities or attributes they choose are dependent on the particular text. For example, it is obviously relevant that I have red hair when I consider my response to Anne of Green Gables. However, the fact that I have red hair is irrelevant when considering my responses to A Separate Peace, All Quiet on the Western Front, or The Awakening.

On the right side of the diagram, students are asked to consider the textual properties that might affect their reading or response and to list those properties. They might, for example, list the presence of vernacular or other aspects of vocabulary, the length of sentences, use of punctuation or italics, or the narrative structure. I point out to the students that all of these factors do contribute to a reader's response to a particular piece, but they are characteristics of the literary work, not of the individual reader.

In addition to considering both textual and personal characteristics, students also are asked to consider what contextual features may have influenced their reading. In some respects, adolescent readers seem to have a difficult time differentiating between the contextual and the personal, a fact that would not surprise most observers of adolescents. The lack of bound-
aries between self and other typifies the kind of adolescent egocentrism that David Elkind (1986) has described. In this case, the word context is used in a fairly narrow sense, as the context or conditions under which the book was read. For example, people read differently under the florescent light of the classroom or on an airplane in close proximity to a stranger than they do when they are in the comfort of their own home and their favorite reading place. The amount of homework, what one has been required to do as part of reading, and what else may be occurring at school or at home are all factors that contribute to the reading context.

Next, we apply the reader-response diagram to the students' responses to the poem "Mushrooms." On the left or reader side of the diagram, students often list their affinity or lack of affinity for nature, their comfort and experience with reading poetry, awareness of being part of an oppressed or marginalized group, and whatever prior knowledge they might have about the poem. On the right or textual side of the diagram, students may list the following textual properties: There are only one or two words per page, the language is very concrete, the poem doesn't rhyme, it's "modern" and imagistic. Sometimes they mention that the poem is written by Sylvia Plath and offer some biographical information or insights (just the kind of thing that drove those New Critics crazy).

After we describe the mechanics of the transaction or dialectic between reader and text, we further discuss how that dialectic created individual responses for the readers that enabled them to construct their own personal meaning for the text. Given the range of responses to "Mushrooms," it is easy for students to see how they have imprinted their own experiences and understandings onto the text itself and rendered interpretations as diverse as their own life experiences. At this point, the case for reader response generally makes itself. Now, let's see how pulling back the curtain plays out in two different classrooms with two different texts.

**READER RESPONSE AND RUNNING FIERCELY TOWARD A HIGH THIN SOUND: "I AM NOT A LESBIAN; I AM NOT A JEW"**

Carolyn Bell's advanced placement class quickly forms the large circle that is the de rigueur formation of the class. Located in one of the most diverse high schools in the city of Minneapolis, the class of 30 doesn't fully reflect the heterogeneity of the overall school population, but it is more diverse than many of the advanced placement or college-preparatory classes elsewhere in the state. Juniors and seniors, males and females, preppies and goths, White students and students of color, brown hair, blue hair, yellow hair, jocks and poets, gays, straights, and bisexuals, they all assemble in their delicious and unpredictable individuality. Their regular teacher is a skilled and imaginative veteran with a taste for offbeat literature and a deep faith in her students' ability to be engaged and adventurous readers. When she is called to jury duty, she generously allows me to have her class for a week. The novel they will be reading has already been selected, since a visit from the author, who lives in Minneapolis, had been scheduled previously.

Never one to teach only the canon, Carolyn had introduced her students to a variety of literature, mixing some predictable AP or college-bound choices with more surprising ones. They have read *As I Lay Dying, Beloved, Stones from the River,* and now this, *Running Fiercely Toward a High Thin Sound,* a first novel about a Jewish family that is divided by the mental illness of one sister and the jealousy of the mother. Mental illness, family dysfunction, lesbian relationships, and Jewish family history and values are all salient themes of the book, which is set in New England in the mid-1970s. Its uniqueness of theme, form, and content make the discussion of this novel particularly suitable for a reader-response approach, since students are bound to have visceral and highly individualistic reactions to the novel.

While Carolyn's taste in literature is contemporary and unconventional, her pedagogy is a bit more traditional and highly effective. The class itself generally focused on some of the more traditional forms of literary analysis that students would be expected to use on the year-end advanced placement exam. The class had been introduced briefly to reader response by a student teacher, but the students seemed to prefer a more text-centered, teacher-led approach to literature. To deepen their collective repertoire of ways of interacting with literary texts, I decided to spend my week with the students using a reader-centered approach.

We began by reviewing some of the basic tenets of reader response with a handout (see Figure 3.2) adapted from an article by Lee Galdal (1983). Then I introduced the transactional diagram described in the previous section, very slightly adapted for the novel (see Appendix, Activity 5). I asked the students to fill the diagram out at home and to bring a completed diagram to class the next day. I then asked them to write some "meaning statements" on the back of the handout—one or two sentences that described the meanings they constructed as a result of the transaction between themselves and the text.

We discussed the reader diagrams the following day. Under the reader heading, students listed the following reader characteristics (or lack of characteristics) that they felt were important to their reading of the novel:

- I have a pushy mommy.
- My family has communication problems.
- My mom loves me.
What is reader response?

"A reader makes a poem as he reads. He does not seek an unalterable meaning that lies within the text. He creates meaning from the confrontation" (Louise Rosenblatt).

Philosophy or rationale

Reader-response advocates stress the interaction between the reader and the text. Reading is recognized as a process in which expectations operate to propel the reader through the text. Readers bring to the text their own experiences, morals, social codes, and views of the world. Because readers bring their meanings to the text, the responses are different. Response-based teaching pays close attention to the reader, respects the reader’s responses, and insists that the reader accept responsibility for making sense of personal experiences.

Response to literature: Theory

In Literature as Exploration, Rosenblatt (1968) presented her alternative to the belief that a text carries a precise meaning that readers must try to discern. She proposed that a literary text was simply symbols on a page and that the literary work, or "poem," as she later designated it, existed only in the interaction of reader and text. She defined the literary experience as a "synthesis of what the reader already knows and feels and desires with what the literary text offers" (p. 272). This transaction between reader and text consists of a reader’s infusion of meaning into verbal symbols on a page and the text's channeling of that meaning through its construction.

The realization of a literary work of art requires an active reader who constantly builds and synthesizes meaning, paying attention to the referents of the words being processed while aware of the images and emotions experienced. The text does not embody meaning but rather guides the active creation of meaning. Thus, within this theory, it becomes impossible to discuss literature without reference to the reader.

Figure 3.2 Reader Response. Source: Adapted from Galda (1983).

My father is not always present in my life.
I have friends who are gay; I know lesbians, how they live and what they are like.
My brother calls me crazy.
I am morally opposed to homosexuality.
I smoke a lot of weed.
I see things in black and white.
I go to a seder every year.
I feel completely exasperated and helpless with my mother.
I am not Jewish.
I am a heterosexual.
I’ve always wanted to go into a different world.

I am a lesbian.
I am bisexual.
I am an introvert.
I’m obsessive compulsive and know a lot about pot and depression.
I don’t like reading about any kind of sex.
I’m mentally unstable.
Nobody close to me has ever died.
I don’t usually enjoy reading a book that’s totally about somebody else’s problem.

Interestingly, on the diagrams most students seemed to focus more directly on what they were not than on what they were, a case of negative identity. I wondered whether this would have been true with any text or whether the students were particularly interested in disassociating themselves from being Jewish or lesbian.

The following textual characteristics were offered most commonly:

The book contains a lot of Yiddish words.
Explicit and graphic lesbian sex.
Going through mirrors, a surrealistic quality to the prose.
How the book changes from very realistic to very unrealistic.
Set in an era before my birth, but not forever ago.
So much sex.
All the stereotype of the radical lesbians.
Short chapter.
Magical worlds.
Multiple narratives or perspectives.

After the students listed both the reader traits and the textual characteristics, they were asked to compose several meaning statements that arose from their "unique transactions" with Running Fiercely Toward a High Thin Sound. The following meaning statements were impressive in their range as well as their gravity:
Books don't have to have redeeming, happy endings because a lot of lives don't.

Sometimes what you perceive is not always the truth.

Families are meshed, there is no changing part of them.

It's important to find the balance between fulfilling your needs and the needs of people close to you.

Mothers do not innately love their children. Society only thinks they should.

Homosexuality is real and important but it is not the book's most important theme.

You can't force your children to be what you want.

Forgiveness is not always possible.

People are often blind to each other's points of view

You should never become so self-centered that you forget you're not the center of the universe.

Accepting other people for who they are instead of what you want them to be is important in family relations.

Silence is dangerous.

I got nothing from this book, it made me feel as if I was reading some sleazy romance novel.

The best route to self-knowledge and enlightenment is to say, "To hell with all of you. I'm going out and doing something that matters! And the easiest road to misery is to vie for power in one's family."

The thing I got out of this book is the concept of love and cruelty, how you really have to love someone before you can hate them or truly be cruel to them.

I found little meaning in this book at all as it didn't apply to me.

**CONTRAST OF TWO READERS**

What then happens in the reading of a literary work? Through the medium of words, the text brings into the reader's consciousness certain concepts, certain sensuous experiences, certain images of things, people, actions, scenes. The special meanings and, more particularly, the submerged associations that these words and images have for the individual reader will largely determine what it communicates to him. The reader brings to the work personality traits, memories of past events, present needs, and preoccupations, a particular mood of the moment, and a particular physical condition. These and many other elements in a never-to-be-duplicated combination determine his response to the peculiar contribution of the text.

—Louise Rosenblatt, *Literature as Exploration*

If we are to give credence to this aspect of Rosenblatt's account of what happens in the reading of a literary work, which many of us have, we would expect that the individual characteristics of students would really come into play as they read a novel like *Running Fiercely*, one that is so clearly marked by definitive personal qualities, unusual lifestyles, and unique family history. We might, for example, expect students to have a wide range of responses to such an unusual text, given the diversity of the class. In addition, we might expect students whose "personality traits, memories of past events, present needs, and preoccupations" bear some resonance and similarity to the characters and events of the text to have a markedly different response from those students whose life experiences and memories stand in stark contrast to those that are represented in the novel. The student-response diagrams seem to call these assumptions into question. Although the text is not at all obviously theme-driven, many students seem to have similar transactions with the text, not at all like the never-to-be-duplicated combination that Rosenblatt predicted. While most of the students enjoyed the book, two students seemed unable to make meaning of or to have a positive transaction with the text. Of course, it is not particularly surprising that some students failed to respond to the book; as English teachers, we know that happens all the time. What is surprising, however, is how different these two students are. Their personal qualities are almost diametrically opposed and yet they experienced a similar response to the novel. Their shared resistance seems to call into question some of our assumptions about the relationship between personal qualities and their relevance in terms of how they might influence our responses to a literary text.

**Mark**

Mark is perhaps the most recalcitrant student in Carolyn's class. He is intelligent and competent, if somewhat surly. His relatively passive and unemotional air didn't seem to waver during the reading of the text, even when the author herself came to visit our classroom in all her radical lesbian splendor.
Like many of his classmates, Mark listed the relevant reader characteristics in the negative. As a reader he described himself: "not Jewish, heterosexual, introvert, small family." In terms of the textual features that would influence his response, he mentioned: "technique: metaphor, social ideas, Yiddish, and sexual content." See Figure 3.3.

Mark speculated that the novel might be about what he called the "inevitable conflicts between introverts and extroverts" and acknowledged the possibility that the author was telling a metaphorical story that meant something to her, that she was trying to educate the reader about an issue. Yet, in the end Mark came up relatively empty-handed in his transaction: "I found little meaning in this book at all; it does not apply to me."

It would be easy to dismiss Mark’s inability to find meaning in this text as having something to do with how different he is from the characters in the book and his difficulty in relating to them. But Mark’s classmate Ellen’s reaction to the same text cautions us against such a simplistic, if superficially sensible, explanation.

**Ellen**

Unlike all of her classmates, Ellen is Jewish and speaks Yiddish. Further, she believes that her parents are very much like the selfish, jealous, and woefully imperfect parents of the protagonist. Ellen doesn’t find the family dynamics of the novel strange; she recognizes them as being very much like her own. Ellen claims that the mother is bitter, jealous, and mentally unstable. One might think that Ellen’s shared characteristics with the characters and situations would make the text especially relevant for her. At the very least, we might expect that her response would be significantly different from that of a classmate who was as dissimilar from the characters as she was similar. This is not the case.

As did her classmate Mark, Ellen seems to have an unfulfilling transaction with the text (see Figure 3.4). Like Mark, she dismisses the author’s motive as being more writer-based than reader-based: “I think Judith Katz wrote this as therapy. I could tell it was based strongly on her life. She wanted to pull out everything that pissed her off and write about it.” Ellen fails to map her own experiences onto the text and instead concludes, “I don’t think there is a good meaning for this book,” a response remarkably similar to Mark’s. It may, in fact, be the first thing they have had in common.

The contrast between these two students helps make two points about the use of reader-centered pedagogy in the classroom. I am not suggesting that Rosenblatt argued that students would map their own personal qualities onto the text and that the better the match, the stronger the response would be. For the record, she never claimed anything like that. Our individual qualities, she claimed, would inform our responses to a text but would not necessarily dictate what they were. In practice, though, we have tended to select texts that in provocative ways provide matches between our students’ world and the worlds of the characters. While in many ways it may be fruitful to do this, it also may be dangerous, which this contrast points out. First, we may misinterpret how a student’s shared experiences and characteristics with those of the characters may affect the student’s response. In some ways, as Ellen’s case illustrates, the closer the students’ own experiences are to the text, the more likely they may be to reject the text. For example, adolescents dealing with suicide attempts of friends or family members might find Ordinary People too excruciatingly close to home to read. Second, we inadvertently may be giving students a dangerous message: If you can’t “relate” to the book, you may not be able to find meaning in it, or, as Mark so succinctly claimed: “I found little meaning in this book; it doesn’t apply to me.”

In Authorizing Readers, Smith and Rabinowitz (1998) address some of the issues that arise in what they call “the pedagogy of personal experience” (p. 119). They claim that an emphasis on the personality of the reader, which is at the heart of many reader-centered theories and pedagogies, may cause students to ignore diversity and respect for difference. Ironically, developing awareness of differences is one of the goals of our attempt to diversify the curriculum.

We also trivialize some of the profound and perhaps irreconcilable differences between us. As Smith points out, we may be able to appreciate a character’s situation but we never will be able to fully understand it. We reduce the power of literature and the representations of those experiences by pretending that we can. Smith claims that the pedagogy of personal response
can make it difficult for students to realize that one doesn’t necessarily have to be able to relate to a character to respond to a literary text. He believes it is unrealistic to expect the paths of our lives to map meaningfully onto the lives of characters. Our pedagogy of personal response, he claims, limits students’ ability to derive meaning from texts that describe worlds and experiences far different from their own, a reason, ironically, why many of us began to love literature in the first place. Smith quotes a student who feels she cannot respond to Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*: “I felt alienated by how their family interacted. I had no basis on which to relate or empathize.” Smith agrees that perhaps Toni Morrison is counting on exactly this to make her point—that you can never understand, and that’s exactly a part of what you need to understand. This point is especially important in the next section, as we consider the responses of a different literature class to Richard Wright’s *Native Son*.

Unlike Carolyn’s classroom, Martha’s twelfth-grade English class is located in a suburb, filled with white-collar families and three-car garages. As part of her advanced placement curriculum, Martha has introduced her students to critical theory. They have read a variety of works, both canonical and non-traditional, including *Beowulf*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *The Things They Carried*, *Hamlet*, *Frankenstein*, and *Snow Falling on Cedars*.

Martha’s students are familiar with the term reader response. In fact, they have completed the “Mushroom” activity and discussed some of the factors that influence their responses to particular texts. They also seem to understand that there are several approaches to a literary text, of which reader response is just one. On the other hand, they have a tendency to oversimplify the concept of reader response as simply meaning: What does this book mean to me? That is, they conflate the concepts of personal meaning with the identification of personal characteristics that may affect their responses. They need to clarify their understanding.

Martha has decided to teach Richard Wright’s *Native Son* and wants to approach the novel through a variety of critical lenses—Marxist (a natural for this novel), feminist, and reader response. Martha also hopes that the distance between her mostly White, mostly middle-class students and the novel’s African American and sometimes violent protagonist Bigger Thomas will help her students see that literary responses are not dependent on one’s similarity to a character. She believes, as Smith and Rabinowitz argued, that, in fact, the differences are sometimes precisely the point.

Martha and her students spend about 2 weeks discussing various aspects
of the novel. Then she divides the class into four groups and has them complete an activity called Theory Relay (see Appendix, Activity 6), where they visit a reader-response station, a historical/biographical station, a feminist station, and a Marxist station. The students are asked to describe how each of the four theoretical perspectives informs their understanding of Native Son. Each station includes some supporting documents such as biographical information on Richard Wright, explications of Marxist and feminist literary theory (see Chapters 4 and 5), and some quotations from the text that are particularly relevant to each theoretical perspective. Students move around the room from station to station as they listen to the blues.

When students arrive at the reader-response station, there is a description of reader response and a reader-response diagram tailored for Native Son (see Appendix, Activity 7). As did Carolyn's class, the students first listed what relevant reader characteristics came into play as they read the text. They then listed the textual characteristics that influenced their responses to the text. Finally, they listed the meaning statements that they derived from their reading transactions. Here is how Martha's students characterized those transactions with Native Son from the perspective of reader response.

Reader Characteristics

I’m female.
I’m White.
I’m educated.
I live in the 90s, not the 30s.
My religious background tells me that killing is wrong.
I think the death penalty should be applied in some circumstances.
I’ve never been told that I can't do what I want to do.

Middle-class suburban home.

Colombian mother.

A history class and my personal experience has taught me about hatred and oppression.
I haven't had to work in order to survive.
The fact that I alone am quite poor.
I am more liberal than the Whites in the novel but less exposed to the ideas of the novel than currently living Blacks.

I have strong views on justice and on taking responsibility for your actions.

I don't believe in the death penalty.

I obviously find myself in a difficult position, unable to help feeling a bit guilty for Bigger's plight and struggles because I am White.

Because I am White, the book was hard for me to relate with. Another large factor is my faith and belief, because I am not a communist it was hard to relate to Jan and Max. Other factors would be my society. I don’t have the same situation.

I’ve seen racism happen.

Knowing about history and the civil rights movement gave me a sense both about how far things have come and yet how similar some things still are.

The fact that I am White means that I’ll never be able to understand exactly how they felt but I can do my best to stop any oppressive thoughts I may have.

I find myself to be very open-minded. I do try to understand other people’s positions. I don’t see myself as being prejudiced so I can see both the Black fear and the communist positions well.

I've been oppressed myself in life.

My being against racism would have an effect because that would make me feel a different way about it, the fact that only women are murdered would have an effect as well. I seem to be very sympathetic to remorseful criminals.

I would definitely say that I am like the Bigger who took action. I agree with his desire to want to be in control of his life. I wouldn't murder, yet was it the only way he saw that he could control his life—because I go to the fullest extent in mine. Also so many times in the last 2 years I have wanted to grasp life but it felt so far away. It's really hard to explain or try to live a situation that confuses myself.

Given my personality and my environment, I can't really relate to the feelings Bigger has of fear and oppression. It doesn't really feel he has many options in life (the Whites restrict him) and I am at a point in my life, with high school ending, where I have many options.
I know that it is wrong, but sometimes I am racist and sometimes others are racist against me. I was picked on by a group of Black girls when I was in sixth grade.

I value intelligence.

I am Black in America.

I'm reading the book in class full of White students with a White teacher.

This book is very hard for someone like me to relate to because I don't know what it is like to live in the 1940s. I don't know what it is like to live in poverty. I don't understand Bigger. I look at him and I think, get off your butt and get a job. I understand the oppression but I think there are certain ways he could have escaped from it.

Text Characteristics

Since the story is told from Bigger's point of view, it's biased.

The author is biased about how Blacks were treated because as a Black he has experienced injustice and he also was a communist at the time that he wrote this book.

The closing statements put closure on the story, which made me feel differently about the story.

Persuasive arguments by prosecution and defense.

The preachy nature of the lawyers seem overdrawn and I lose interest.

The extremity of the author's attitude.

The time the story takes place.

The rape—I hate Bigger.

Vivid descriptions.

The way the book is set up from the beginning of White vs. Black.

How gory Mary and Bessie's deaths were.

Max's conversations with Bigger; with Bigger's thoughts that I could actually feel sorry for him.

African American characters; I don't completely understand their conditions.

The Whites in the book don't believe that Blacks are human.

Bigger's brutality inherent in everything he does.

The use of communism makes it difficult to relate with the "good guys."

The descriptive nature in which the author describes the murders and the racist treatment of the Black people; the detailed arguments of the lawyer, who try to give reasons for why things are the way they are also influences my response.

My response to this book has been swayed by racism on both sides. Everyone is blaming everyone else and it affects me. I feel that I am being blamed and I have done nothing to enrage anyone.

The use of three main colors red, white, and black used over and over and over.

Growing up in the 1990s most kids are taught to have respect for all races, and people try to be politically correct so reading the closing statements from the prosecutor and just that whole side of the case is really appalling, especially when Bigger is referred to as a beast and other things, which flat-out classify him as not being human simply because he is Black—not even because he killed two women—I was quite shocked.

Max's ideas and motivation to point out the truth and/or presence of racism took away some of the brutality of the murders. It's harder to think about the murders after Max's statement and the confinement of the African American people.

Meaning Statements

Even with oppression, free will can exist.

If society doesn't treat everyone with the same amount of respect, those lacking respect will rise up against society.

There will always be the resistant or rebellious element in human beings as long as they are oppressed.

Bigger's fear of Whites is what causes him to commit murder.

Although I see the injustice, I can't know what Bigger is feeling because I am not a minority.
I am not a communist so I feel no sympathy for Jan and Max’s views. Because of my Whiteness I feel more pain for the White society and don’t understand the Black plight. Because of my middle-class status I have no idea of the poverty that Bigger has suffered so I don’t feel it as much.

Because I am a White female, Mary Dalton’s case is just as tragic as Bigger’s if not more so because of her brutal death without any responsibility. Because I am educated Bigger Thomas owes much of his demise to his lack of education and could have done something, if only a bit, about this. Prejudice: Bigger Thomas was under tremendous emotional stress because he was targeted on the basis of his race alone and we should all sympathize with him.

Bigger represents the combination of external and the internal conflicts that Blacks endured because of societal and historical pressures of enslavement.

Bigger could not control his future or fate so he ventured to control instinct, but in the end only a belief system that transcended his doom could save him.

The murder of Mary Dalton and Bessie were symbolic. The former represented the oppressor’s voice of misguided goodwill and condescension, and the latter stood for Blacks’ willing to be down, subservient, and surrender their spirit.

I’m White so I felt guilty reading about the treatment of Blacks in this book.

This book was not relevant to us.

One’s White middle-class background makes it hard to relate to the text.

When things go wrong with Bigger, it hurts me too.

Social and economic pressures are ultimately destructive forces in society.

Society seeks a scapegoat, an opportunity to vent the frustration and hatred, and often puts these feelings in a single incident.

_Native Son_ is about the inability of Whites and Blacks to understand each other.

Sometimes the actions of an individual are controlled by the society he lives in.

I don’t think of myself as a prejudiced person, but from reading this I think there is some prejudice in all of us.

My feelings seem to be mixed up a bit about this story. On one hand I feel bad for Bigger because of his position but I despise someone who could do such a thing.

I feel Bigger Thomas was made into who he is by his society.

As White females it is hard to relate to Bigger; we relate to Mary instead.

I don’t understand how Bigger could commit this crime because I was taught to think before I act. His intelligence level was way low.

The racism in this book seemed so unfair to me because I have never really known racism.

I find it hard to relate to Bigger and what he felt because I am a White woman living in a different time period. His feelings and thoughts aren’t real to me.

Racism used to be much worse in society than it is now. Segregation is no longer legal, but people still segregate themselves.

The sadness I feel when I am studying the Holocaust indirectly relates to the feelings that Bigger expresses in the book.

Being female I understand the discrimination Bigger faced every day and sympathize with his feelings of rage and helplessness.

**DISCUSSION**

The reader-response diagrams helped Martha’s students isolate the features of the text as well as the personal characteristics that influenced their responses to _Native Son_. As we might expect, many of those responses clustered around issues of race, gender, and class (no wonder some of them invoked the O. J. Simpson trial). Students thought about not only their own race but their own feelings about race relations. They also confronted the intersection between race and gender. White females in particular felt torn between their sympathy for Bigger as an oppressed person and their disgust for his violence. Violence also affected students’ responses in terms of their feelings about the death penalty as well as in terms of their visceral reaction to the violence in the story. The reader-response diagrams forced students to think explicitly about the mechanics of their responses and to map those factors in terms
of what belonged to them and what belonged to the text. They made their transactions explicit to themselves, to their teacher, and to their classmates.

Sometimes, completing the diagram forced them to confront the degree to which they were unable or unwilling to have an emotional reaction to the book. For example, one student wrote: “My response as a whole has been quite unemotional. I read Wright’s work with interest, see his points, and it raises interesting questions, but I am quite uninvolved, probably largely as a result of my boredom with my life, especially school, and a number of distractions in my mind.”

Under the reader characteristics, she wrote: “As a young White middle-class female, I feel I am perhaps better furnished to sympathize with Mary than with Bigger. It is difficult to truly understand the factors in a life leading to such an end, as such pressures and oppression have happily been completely absent from my life.” Under the text characteristics, she wrote: “The brutalities Bigger commits are atrocious and while Wright succeeds in explaining Bigger's condition, it does not justify Bigger's actions. Wright intentionally makes his book confusing and therefore disturbing, raising questions about the collective versus the individual in racial issues.”

The reader-response station helped to make the mechanics of the reader response explicit and helped students locate the sources of the factors that contributed to their responses. Many students were able to empathize with Bigger despite the profound differences they named between their situations and Bigger Thomas's. Others, like Mark in Carolyn's class and the student quoted in Smith and Rabinowitz (1998), were unable to construct meaning because the text bore no relevance (or so they thought) to their protected and privileged, suburban middle-class lives. Hence, the frequency of meaningful statements such as: “This book was not relevant to us.” “One's White, middle-class background makes it hard to relate to the text.” “This is obviously very difficult for me to personally relate to.”

This dismissal because of difference is often where a reader-centered discussion ends: The text was not relevant to me; therefore, I found no meaning in it. As Smith (Smith & Rabinowitz, 1998) points out, this is the inherent irony and limitation in a pedagogy of personal experience, especially when we read multicultural literature or other texts that portray worlds far different from our students'. Martha's students could not simply come up empty-handed because of an unsatisfying personal transaction with the text. Because their reader-response exercise was situated within a multiple perspective approach, they were invited to find meaning in other ways.

In addition, the fact that reader-response was part of a multiple-theory relay allowed students to critique the relative usefulness of the reader-response lens. Martha asked her students to compare and evaluate the four theoretical approaches. She then asked which lens seemed to be most consis-

tent with the intention of the novel, which lens was the most difficult to apply, and which lens was the most informative. Not surprisingly, most students found the Marxist lens among the easiest to apply or the lens that seemed most consistent with the intention of the novel. Most students found it particularly difficult to apply the feminist lens.

While there was some general agreement about the relative usefulness of these two lenses in terms of Native Son, the students seemed much more divided about the usefulness of the reader-response lens, with some students reporting that it was the hardest lens to apply and others reporting that it was the most applicable.

DIFFICULTIES STUDENTS REPORTED AS THEY APPLIED THE READER-RESPONSE LENS TO NATIVE SON

I'm so used to having to write great statements of theme that when I was presented with an opportunity to simply state my opinions on meaning, I had great difficulty.

The lens that was most difficult to apply for me was the reader-response lens because I questioned what exactly I brought to the text. My experiences with African Americans have been few and far between in terms of person-to-person contact. I'm not consciously racist, but I wonder if I would be more afraid of a Black man walking toward me down a dark Minneapolis alley than a White man. And that makes me feel hypocritical. Because I came in with some mixed feelings about my inner psyche, I wasn't sure how to deal with the reader-response lens.

The reader response was the most difficult. We were reluctant to express our ideas. It does not help that the worksheet wanted us to find meaning through ourselves. I found that it was not possible to find brand new meaning, only twisting of original meaning.

One lens I found surprisingly hard to relate to was reader response. I feel like I haven't had enough experiences with oppression or racism to relate at all to this book. I can't relate to Bigger's feelings because I live in a world that has never limited my options... also the feelings of hate the Whites have for Bigger is incomprehensible for me. This is the first time reader response has ever been a difficult lens. It did, however, help me to look at the book in a new light.
SUCCESSES STUDENTS REPORTED AS THEY APPLIED
THE READER-RESPONSE LENS TO NATIVE SON

I think the reader-response lens went along with the book the best. When we had to fill the reader-response sheet, it helped me see how things in my life related to the book. For me, realizing that the connection between how I was reading the book and being a woman affected each other was huge. I think Wright wanted change and the best way to get that is to be able to relate to others. Reader response helps us do that.

The reader response seemed to be the most attractive to the text. I liked it because it was open-ended and I can use it to interpret Native Son as I wanted.

The reader-response lens seems to be the most consistent with the intention of the novel. Richard Wright is a Black man who writes about Blacks' points of view for White people. The Blacks already know what he is trying to say; it is the White people he is trying to make an impact on. He wants his White audience to think about their own lives and do the best they can to try to relate to the Blacks.

It seems that with the novel, as with any work of art, the artist (author) is most interested in the individual affect each reader experiences. Hence, it seems logical that the lens most consistent with Wright's intention would be reader response, gauging what one has personally gained from reading the novel.

After reading Native Son, our group decided that the reader-response lens was the most consistent with the intention of the novel. Depending on your own personal background and views on race and equality, your opinion of the book could be completely different. For example, in the O. J. Simpson case the Blacks thought that it was just another example of police brutality against Blacks and how Blacks are the scapegoats for everything and that this is just another example of their oppression. Whites seemed to think that O. J. Simpson was guilty and that he should be punished. Depending on your race, you can view something totally differently, especially when it has to do with race, like in Native Son.

TOWARD A SOLUTION: MULTIPLE VISIONS
AND THE NAMING OF PARTS

The reader-response movement was a friendly antidote to the tyranny of the text that characterized some of our earlier approaches to the teaching of literature. It provided students with a way to engage personally with literature, opened up the possibility of multiple interpretations of individual texts, and made our students the readers—the central element of meaning making with texts. In fact, to some the reader actually became more important than the author. But when reader response becomes not just a way of reading, but the way of reading texts, it is an ideology, regardless of how appealing that ideology might be. We need to challenge the overly simplistic notion of the individual that has characterized our "pedagogy of personal experience." As I have argued in this chapter, we can do this by directly teaching the elements of reader response.

Martha's and Carolyn's classes demonstrated the value of making our reader-response teaching more explicit. In addition, we've seen that by recontextualizing reader response within a multiple-theory framework, we can create a critical and comparative context that can help us use what is best about the lens of reader response and, at the same time, guard against its excesses by not having it be the only way we encourage students to respond to texts.

Martha's students did indeed consider their reading of Native Son from a reader-response perspective, but they did so as they concurrently considered three other theoretical perspectives as well—Marxism, feminism, and biographical/historical criticism. The students considered the viability of those other perspectives as well as their relative effectiveness in helping them make sense of the text. This multiple-theory or comparative perspective can help keep our practice from veering into dogma. The next two chapters deal with Marxism and feminism and how they can contribute to the larger systems that are at play as we read texts and learn to interpret our world through critical encounters.

SUGGESTED ADDITIONAL READINGS

Beach, R. (1993). A teacher's introduction to reader-response theories. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English. This volume addresses a variety of critical literary theories that focus on the response of the reader to the text. Theories of response that are discussed include textual, experiential, social, and cultural. The author also has included a chapter on applying theory to practice and making decisions about eliciting student responses in the classroom. A glossary and extensive bibliography are included.

includes an annotated bibliography provided by the Center for the Learning and Teaching of Literature.

This greatly expanded second edition is a very useful and readable collection of articles from a wide range of teachers and researchers. Some essays focus on the teaching of specific literary works and offer the teacher specific strategies for implementing reader-response pedagogy. A glossary and a reference section are included.

This book is an older volume planned by the NCTE Yearbook Committee. The subject of this dated but still useful volume is to reassert the central purpose of literature in the English curriculum. The book presents examples of varied response-based approaches to the teaching of literature in elementary and secondary schools.

In this widely used work, the author provides the teacher with suggestions for encouraging students to respond to texts. Probst elegantly and persuasively illustrates the usefulness of the work of Louise Rosenblatt for secondary teachers of literature.

Tompkins has collected a series of essays, which chronologically show the development of discourse around the broad conceptual critical literary position called reader response. The essays discuss the problem of determining the meaning of reader response and are drawn from New Criticism, structuralism, stylistics, phenomenology, psychoanalytic criticism, and poststructuralist theory.
DEBORAH APPLEMAN is the Class of 1944 Professor of Educational Studies and the Liberal Arts and director of the Summer Writing Program at Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota. Professor Appleman earned her doctorate in 1986 from the University of Minnesota. A former president of the Minnesota Council of Teachers of English, she currently serves on the executive committee of the National Council of Teachers of English’s Conference on English Education. She has been a member of NCTE’s Standing Committee on Research and served as co-chair of NCTE’s Assembly for Research as well as the special interest group in literature for the American Educational Research Association.

Professor Appleman was a high school English teacher for 9 years, working in both urban and suburban schools. She continues to work weekly in high schools with students and teachers. Professor Appleman’s primary research interests include adolescent response to literature, multicultural literature, adolescent response to poetry, and the teaching of literary theory in high school. She is the author of many articles and book chapters, and, with an editorial board of classroom teachers, helped create the multicultural anthology Braided Lives.
Chapter 7 "Reader-Response Criticism"

Theory into Practice
An Introduction to Literary Criticism

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Printed in the United States of America
2 4 5 8 7 8 9 06 05 04 03 02
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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2001095957
The more recent lineage of the reader-response critics can be traced to the work of I. A. Richards in the 1920s and Louise Rosenblatt in the 1930s. Richards, recognizing the wide variety of interpretations that a group of readers is likely to have for a single work, asked students at Cambridge to write responses to short poems so that he could analyze their approaches. At that point Richards backed away from becoming a fully developed reader-response theorist, however, because he went on to categorize the students' reactions according to their "accuracy." That is, he ranked them, depending on their closeness to or distance from what he deemed to be the correct interpretation. Rosenblatt, largely ignored by readers pursuing formalist principles of criticism at the time her first works were published, offered a "transactional" theory of reading. As she explained it, a given text is not always read in the same way. Instead, readings vary with the purpose, needs, and concerns of the reader, who adopts a "stance" toward a text, an attitude that determines what signals to respond to in a text so that certain results can be achieved. The two opposing stances are the "effector" one, in which the reader concentrates on information to be extracted from the text, and the "aesthetic," which involves senses, feelings, and intuitions about "what is being lived through during the reading event." A piece of literature comes into being when it receives an aesthetic reading, which is produced by a merging of reader and text. As Rosenblatt explained, "At the aesthetic end of the spectrum, . . . the reader's primary purpose is fulfilled during the reading event, as he fixes his attention on the actual experience he is living through. This permits the whole range of responses generated by the text to enter into the center of awareness, and out of these materials he selects and weaves what he sees as the literary work of art" (The Reader, the Text, the Poem, 27–28).

The early work of Richards and Rosenblatt received renewed attention with the appearance of Walker Gibson and Wayne Booth, who, around midcentury, raised questions about the roles readers play. Gibson, pointing out that a text asks a reader to become what he calls a "mock reader," reintroduced the reader who becomes a participant in the creative act by playing the role the writer has designed for her, and the issue of where and how meaning is created reemerged as a significant concern among literary theorists. Booth recognized that a writer controls a reader through rhetorical strategies but did not go so far as to give readers the principal responsibility for making meaning. By then, the question, simply put, had become, Does the interpretation of a text depend primarily on the reader, the text itself (which can manipulate the reader), or a combination of the two? Further questions ensued: What is a text? Is the reader the book holder? The reader conceptualized by the writer? An ideal reader?

Reader-response critics do not answer such questions with a single voice. In fact, their approaches cover such a wide variety of concerns that sometimes the term reader-response seems to refer to a chaotic jumble of theories that may or may not have anything to do with each other. They can, however, be said to agree on a few basic principles, the most important of which is that they are primarily interested in the effect that a work has on a reader and the strategies that produce that effect. Interpretation of meaning is assumed to be an act of reading, thereby making the ultimate authority not the writer or the text but the reader. A literary work becomes, then, an evolving creation, as it is possible for there to be many interpretations of the same
text by different readers, or several interpretations by a single reader at different
times. As Wolfgang Iser explained, “The significance of the work, then, does not lie
in the meaning sealed within the text, but in the fact that that meaning brings out what
had previously been sealed within us” (The Act of Reading, 157).

The result? When readers accept the assumption that there is no one true inter-
pretation, they discover rich, complex, diverse possibilities. When they recognize
that there is no right or wrong answer but instead a variety of readings that grow out
of individual experiences and feelings, literature becomes alive for them. When their
own lives intersect with the text, it takes on vitality. As Louise Rosenblatt explained,
“The reader brings to the work personality traits, memories of past events, present
needs and preoccupations, a particular mood of the moment, and a particular phys-
ical condition. These and many other elements in a never-to-be-duplicated combi-
dnation determine his interfusion with the peculiar contradiction of the text” (Literature,
30). The effect is not limited to the understanding of a text, however. It extends to
the understanding of the self as well. Because reader-response criticism calls for in-
troversion and reflection on one’s own values and beliefs, it can lead the reader to
deepen personal knowledge and greater cultural awareness.

Not surprisingly, some critics object to the intense subjectivity of such an ap-
proach. If a poem can have as many meanings as it has readers, they ask, can there be
any shared experience of it? Can there be an intellectual discussion of it? Others com-
plain that digressions into self-analysis diminish textual analysis. It makes the read-
er’s life the primary focus, rather than the literary work. Though such arguments may
have some merit, there is little doubt that in the end a reader-response analysis pow-
nerfully engages readers to move analytically both inward and outward, finding mean-
ing in the text, the self, and the world.

MAKING A READER’S RESPONSE

To understand the discussion that follows, you will need to read the short story

GETTING STARTED

For some people a reader-response approach is startlingly different from the approach
they are accustomed to taking. Instead of memorizing historical information, recogn-
zizing literary forms and techniques, or learning a prescribed interpretation, you will
be asked to look inside and around yourself for ways to make the work meaningful.

INTERACTING WITH THE TEXT

Although the focus is always on the reader, there are several ways of thinking about
the relationship he has with the text. Rosenblatt describes two of them, then advo-
cates letting them work together in an approach that she calls transactional. As she
explains it, in “the actual reading event” it can be said that the reader interprets the
text (the reader acts on the text). Or we can say, the text produces a response in the
reader (the text acts on the reader). Each of these phrasings, because it implies a
single line of action by one separate element on another separate element, distorts
the actual reading process. The relationship between reader and text is not linear. It
is a situation, an event at a particular time and place in which each element condi-
tions the other.

In preparation for making a transactional analysis, one that shows how reader
and text come together to create meaning, it will be helpful to consider how each of
the two “linear” processes works: how the text controls the reader and how the reader
makes the text.

The Power of the Text

When you examine how a text controls the reader’s responses, you acknowledge that
it is a powerful manipulator. As Henry James once commented, “In every novel the
work is divided between the writer and the reader; but the writer makes the reader
very much as he makes his characters” (“The Novels of George Eliot”).

To examine a text looking for how it produces certain effects on a reader means
looking at it in much the same way as the group of critics known as the structural-
lists do (see chapter 8). Both reader-response critics and the structuralists assume that
because readers come to a work with a certain literary competence, or what Jonathan
Culler calls a set of shared reading conventions, they recognize signals they are ac-
customed to finding there and use them to make the expected interpretation. They
know how they are expected to respond, and they do. They use the familiar cues to
make new interpretations. Looking at the text to see how it causes readers to react in
certain ways, then, involves asking how the codes, signs, signals, and rules work to-
gether to produce meaning. It means examining the relationships among the parts in
an effort to define the system, known as the grammar, that governs them. The able
reader recognizes the grammar because of her own life experiences and her reading
background.

If the meaning of a text is recognizable because “informed” readers know the ac-
cepted conventions that underlie it, a work cannot be subject to an infinite number of
interpretations, making it less important for readers to record their personal responses
than to make generalizations about how interpretation is governed by the system un-
der which the text was written. Although critics who have a structuralist bent recog-
nize that different interpretations will be produced by different readers, they focus on
the regularities they find in readers’ strategies. Such generalizations extend beyond
the text in question too, for it is not autonomous; it exists in the context of other texts,
with which it shares common elements and, hence, meanings.

It is important to realize that sometimes an author can use recognizable con-
ventions to “fool” the reader. As Stanley Fish points out in Surprised by Sin, a text
can use predictable responses, such as the expectations typically evoked by a par-
ticular genre, to cause readers to make interpretations that later prove to be wrong.
Consequently, readers must be sophisticated enough to make adjustments to their interpretations as needed.

If you are primarily interested in how the text controls your response, you will want to examine how it shows you what you are to be thinking and feeling as it unfolds. This may involve a consideration of the author’s intention and how it was carried out. Certainly it will entail looking closely at each element of the work for what it implies about the reader’s behavior.

In “The Masque of the Red Death,” for example, the reader gradually moves from enjoyment of (and vicarious participation in) the lighthearted revelries of the courtiers to “utterable horror” at the final “dominion” of the Red Death. The isolation of the setting, the images of silence and darkness, and the diction (“gaudy,” “fantastic,” “blood-tinted panes,” “ghastly,” “grottesque,” “delirious fancies,” “bizarre”) imply a world in which madness is the norm and the supernatural rules. Indeed, every component of the story—plot structure; patterns of expectation and satisfaction or expectation and disappointment; characterization; revelations and reversals; contrasting elements; image; symbol; figurative language; tone—contributes to the mounting uneasiness and final terror experienced by the reader. Consider, for example, the description of the rooms, one small element of the tale. The progress through each of the seven (a magical number) disquiets the reader. They are “irregularly disposed,” we are told, with a “sharp turn at every twenty or thirty yards.” Their colors, repeated in the stained glass windows to produce a claustrophobic effect, move in a disturbing sequence from blue to purple, then green, orange, white, violet, and finally black that is accentuated by window panes of “scarlet—a deep blood color.” It is a sequence that begins with suggested innocence (blue) and ends in mystery and death (black and blood color). Or consider the effect of the contrasting sounds in the story. We are told, for example, that “the wild music of the orchestra” and light laughter of the dancers are interrupted when the hour is “stricken” (a word that carries the suggestion of illness) by the ebony clock, which has a sound that is “clear and loud and deep and exceedingly musical, but of so peculiar a note and emphasis that...the giddiest grew pale.” The sound of the clock is made even more ominous by its contrast with the jovial noises of the partygoers and its effect on them.

To examine how a text controls a reader’s response, you will find it helpful to ask questions such as these:

- What did the author intend for you to feel while reading this work, and how did he or she make you feel it?
- What are you dependent on in this work to help you make sense of what you read, such as descriptive passages, the narrator’s voice, and contrasting viewpoints of characters?
- Do the events fall into a pattern you have met before?
- Are there opposites in the text that surprise you? Inform you? Keep you from anticipating what is coming?
- How do your previous experiences with this genre set up your expectations for how this text will operate?

- What images and events in the story are you already conditioned to approve or disapprove?
- How does the point of view affect (or control) your understanding?
- What similarities do you recognize between this work and other works—for example, themes, setting, characters?
- How does the text call upon what you know of the world to produce your response to the work?
- Did it cause you to make interpretations that you had to revise later by making new and different ones?
- What events or experiences were you led to anticipate? What mysteries were you asked to solve? What judgments were you expected to make?

The Reader as Producer of the Text

When the focus is turned directly on the reader as the chief source of interpretation, all of your thoughts, experiences, fantasies, and beliefs play a part in creating meaning. You will bring to a text a multitude of qualities that are yours alone: expectations, prejudices, stock responses, values, personal experiences, gender, age, past readings, even the circumstances of the present reading. These forces, according to Norman Holland, make a given work serve “highly personal, even idiosyncratic ends.”

According to Holland, who uses psychology to explain the process of reading, each child receives a “primary identity” from his mother. It is our understanding of the kind of person we are. Because an “identity theme,” like a musical theme, can have variations while it remains central to our being, when we read, we play our identity theme by re-creating the text in our own image. We “use the literary work to symbolize and finally replicate ourselves.” As we do so, we find the means to cope with fears and desires buried in our own psyches. Consequently, responses vary just as personalities do. No two people will work through a text in the same way or arrive at the same point of understanding. That is not to say that a text lacks its own themes and structure. Nevertheless, any interpretation of them is, in the end, subjective.

David Bleich bases his case for the importance of the reader on the denials of modern scientists (such as Thomas Kuhn) that an objective world of facts exists. Because what is observed is inevitably changed by the circumstances of the observation, there can be no knowledge except subjective knowledge. Bleich, applying such theories to literature, argues that a text does not exist outside its readers, who are the observers. Whatever is offered as an “objective” analysis actually has roots in a personal response, for instead of discovering meaning in a text, readers develop meaning for it. The process begins with the individual but is subsequently shaped communally through question, challenge, and amendment in a group setting. What becomes known as fact (what meaning is developed) depends, he says, on the needs of the community.

Stanley Fish, calling his approach “affective stylistics,” argues that readers create a text as they read it—word by word and sentence by sentence. He is interested in how readers’ responses develop as the words and sentences succeed each other one
by one—that is, how the style affects the reader. In his later work he describes interpretation as the product of interpretive communities, groups of informed, linguistically competent readers who read and make meaning based on assumptions and strategies that they hold in common. He denies the existence of an individual, subjective response because, as he points out, we have all internalized interpretive strategies based on assumptions about literature that have come to us from our institutions and cultural groups. We may belong to more than one such community. As Fish explains the process, a reader does not make an individual response that is altered by negotiation with others’ responses but instead makes a response that from its inception is the product of a wider community of readers who share certain assumptions about how a text is read. In these terms, readers do not interpret a text. They create it.

In the case of "The Masque of the Red Death," your response can be affected by a number of forces that lie completely outside the text. If you have already read a number of stories by Poe, you will probably begin this one expecting something out of the ordinary, probably something mysterious and scary. Anticipation based on experience will predispose you to accept a confrontation with the fantastic. Once you begin to read, you will notice that much is not told. Despite the seemingly detailed descriptions of the castle apartments, for instance, the reader is left to supply the exact images mentioned only as a "multitude of gaudy and fantastic appearances" created by the tripod "bearing a brazier of fire" and the visual outlines of the "glare and glitter and piquancy and phantasm" of the great feve. The way they take shape for you will depend on other fiction you have read, movies you have seen, or possibly places you have been. Your impression may be altered even by whether you are reading this story at home alone late at night or whether you are in the library browsing room at school on a sunny spring morning.

When so much importance is placed on individual responses or those of interpretive communities, it almost seems as if a text can mean anything a reader says it means. It is critical to remember, then, that "wrong" readings can exist even when the reader is using this reader-response model. Mistaking one word for another, or misunderstanding the definition of a word, for example, can lead a reader to make inferences that are clearly off the mark. Although a wide variety of interpretations of a single work are possible using this approach, some simply will not fit. To make sure your interpretation is on point, ask yourself how much of it includes various features of the text and how much of it deals with aspects that do not reflect the text.

The following questions can help you discover your role in creating the texts you read.

- What did you expect to feel while reading this work?
- What was unsettling in what you read?
- How did you adapt what made you uncomfortable so that it more clearly fit what you desired?
- With what or whom did you most closely identify in the work? What identification gave you the most pleasure? The most displeasure?
- Did the work fit your picture of the way life is?

- What adjustments did you have to make so that it did not challenge the world as you know it?
- What does the work fail to tell you about characters and/or events? What imaginary or personal material did you use to supply what was missing?
- What memories does this work recall for you?
- Can you be sure you have not simply misread a passage—for example, by making a vocabulary mistake?
- If you reread this work using a different strategy, how would it become a different work?

The Reader and the Text as Coproducers

In practice, most reader-response critics do not think singly about how a text affects the reader or how a reader creates the text. Instead, they tend to apply both perspectives interactively. They work from the assumption that it is in the meeting of the two shapers of meaning that literature is created. As Louise Rosenblatt argues, "'The poem' cannot be equated solely with either the text or the experience of a reader." Instead, it is the relationship that exists between them. The former serves as a pattern that controls what the reader can make of it. The latter is called upon to fill in gaps, to hypothesize, imagine, and in general be a coproducer of the text. The poem (or the story) is created by the transaction that goes on between the two creators. As a result, new readings of a given text are always possible, but a text cannot mean whatever a given reader chooses to think it means. Any reading must be true to the work and to the reader as well.

Another way of explaining the interaction of reader and text is offered by Wolfgang Iser, a German phenomenologist who argues that it is impossible to separate anything from the mind that knows it. That makes the reader and text co-creators of meaning. A literary work, Iser says, is an intended act of the consciousness of a writer, an artistic effort that is then reexperienced in the consciousness of a reader, who engages in an aesthetic endeavor. The text supplies the materials and determines the boundaries for the creative act of reading. It creates for itself an implied reader and uses certain structures to predispose the actual reader, who brings her own unique set of experiences to the act of reading the text, to respond as the implied one. (Both are competent to decode the text.) It engages "the reader's imagination in the task of working things out for himself." As readers give life to the material presented by the text, as they deal with its "indeterminacy," created by the missing material and information, they influence the effect of what has been written. If the work is successful, it supplies neither too much nor too little but simply guides readers through to self-discovery.

If Poe's story pulled you through the series of lurid chambers to the final acknowledgment of the presence of the Red Death, leaving you hardly breathing, eyes fixed intently on each line, then the story worked for you. You recognized that you were to be an imaginative reader who was able to disregard the limitations of a realistic setting and thereby responded to the swift pace and mounting intensity of the
narrative. Perhaps you identified with the guests and shared their response to the entrance of the masked figure, which, the narrator explains, is marked by terror, horror, and disgust. On the other hand, if you were unwilling to succumb to such a surreal plot, finding it simply too unbelievable even to generate sweaty palms, it was not a success. Your job is to explain what the effect on the reader was and analyze how the text and the reader were responsible for it.

Taken one step further, the transaction may occur between the mind of the author and the mind of the reader. The group known as the Geneva critics, for example, try to enter the mental universe of a writer, experiencing his unique consciousness. Individual works of literature grow unimportant in this process, as the purpose is not to understand a single work but to reconstitute in context the world of the writer. The goal is to share the inner reality of the author by considering his entire output.

To use the transactional model, you can begin by asking yourself some of the following questions:

- What kind of reader is implied by this text? For example, does it address you as if you are intelligent and well-informed, or as if you are inexperienced and innocent?
- What aspects of the text invite you to respond as that implied reader?
- How do you as an actual reader differ from the one that is implied?
- What gaps and vague outlines did you find yourself filling in?
- How did your perceptions and responses change as the work unfolded? What caused them to change?
- What contradictions did you perceive in the text—for example, characters who represent differing viewpoints? How did you resolve them?
- What do you know of the author's intent?
- List the most vivid images you remember from the text. How have you reconstructed them from your own experiences?
- What experiences of your own have you used to visualize and understand those presented in the text?

**Period Responses, The Receptionists**

It should be noted that there is another, somewhat different, form of reader-response criticism that asks the critic to examine the public's response to authors and works in a particular era. Known as reception theory, it recognizes that readers in different historical periods are not likely to interpret or judge a given work in precisely the same way and that as literary fashions and interests change, the characteristics that find favor in one century may be disparaged in the next. The receptionists peruse newspaper articles, study magazine reviews, and read personal letters to find evidence of how the public once viewed written material. They try to determine the expectations that readers were likely to have at a given time, based on their understanding of genres, works, and language. They look for what Robert Tauss calls the horizon of expectations of the reading public—what is, what they valued and looked for in a work.

The focus of the receptionists is easily understood when considering works that have at some point in time been rejected by the reading public but at other times have been held in high esteem. For example, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, today a popular and frequently taught novel, was given a hostile reception by the critics of her day. Her depiction of Edna Pontellier, a woman who remained unapologetic for her sensuality, was called "trite and sordid," and the author as well as the novel were deemed to be unacceptable in polite society. The America of a century ago was not ready to admit such a frank portrayal of female desire and indulgence. Its horizon of expectations did not include stories of such behavior. Sometimes the process is reversed, and a work that is well received early on receives negative criticism later. Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, for instance, has had the curious history of being alternately revered and castigated as readers in different eras proclaimed it to be sensitive or insensitive to various social issues.

The receptionists, whose work leads to interesting inferences about readers, authors, and their works, cannot make a final evaluation of the worth of a poem or story, because they demonstrate how its appeal may change from one time to another. Instead, they engage the past in a dialogue with the present, helping readers view the work from contrasting historical and cultural perspectives.

**WRITING A READER-RESPONSE ANALYSIS**

**Prewriting**

To find a starting point for exploring where your personal experience and the text converge, you will find it helpful to make a few personal observations before, during, and after reading the text. They will help you to discover interpretive points for discussion. It is easy to begin by asking questions like these before you even pick up the book.

- How do I feel about reading this piece? Am I eager to begin? Curious about what I will find? Reluctant because I haven't liked other works by the same author?
- What do I already know about this work or this author?
- What do I already know about the time, place, or characters it depicts?
- What does the title suggest to me?

Noting your responses in a journal or log during a first reading can help you make generalizations later. You may still be at the questioning stage when you do this, or your ideas may have reached an advanced degree of development. Regardless of how far along you are in your thinking, here are some suggestions for you to think about during the initial reading.

- Are there quotations from the work that you would like to copy and save?
- What questions would you like to ask the author?
- What objections would you raise to what you are reading?
- Where do you experience confusion, disagreement, approval, or any other attitude or feeling?
Compose a descriptive paragraph, poem, or short narrative about an experience the text brings to mind.

You can also make short responses after the first reading. They may be appropriate for a journal entry, or you may write them as separate texts. You can

- Describe how you feel about the work as soon as you finish it.
- Write a brief summary of the plot.
- Freewrite on a single line from a poem or on a sentence from a piece of prose.
- Identify a line or an image that immediately caught your attention, or one that you remember clearly. Why do you find it to be powerful?
- Think of someone or some experience that a character or situation in this work brings to mind.
- List the things you like about the work. Why do you like them?
- List those aspects of it that bother you. Why do they bother you?
- Identify any passages you do not understand.
- Choose what you would tell someone about this work if you could make only one comment.
- Consider how you might have acted had you been one of the characters.
- What else would you like to know about the characters or events?
- What values, beliefs, or assumptions of your own does this work affirm? Which of your values, beliefs, or assumptions does it challenge?
- Compose a letter (not to be sent) to the author or to one of the characters.
- Speculate on who should play the various parts in a filmed version of the work.

**DRAFTING AND REVISING**

**The Introduction**

Because you are making a reader-response analysis, it is appropriate to involve your audience in the introduction to your essay. In other words, you can try to provoke a strong response from your own reader. One way of doing so is to begin by recounting an incident from the work that elicits a particularly powerful reaction or quote a passage that holds strong emotion for most readers. For example, Edgar Allan Poe’s description of the mysterious stranger who suddenly appears at the ball in “The Masque of the Red Death” (“The figure was tall and gaunt, and shrouded from head to foot in the habiliments of the grave”) is not likely to provoke an inattentive yawn from anyone who reads it. It can send shivers down the spine of even the most passive reader. An essay that begins by quoting such a line will catch a reader’s attention, and it can also effectively lead into a more detailed examination of how the reader and text are responsible for making the literary work.

**The Body**

The core of your paper will explain how the text controls the understanding and sympathies of the reader, will identify the personal material you have put into the text, and will describe how the two interact to create the text. In other words, it will show how you acquired information about the text and what responses that information created.

Part of your discussion, then, will center on the guidelines embodied in the text. It will note stereotypes, point of view, connotations, patterns, metaphors, foreshadowing, and images that guide your responses. It will question the accuracy of the information that is given and the reliability of the various characters. It will remark on those instances in which only partial information is provided and where the reader knows more than the characters. Even points at which the reader is misled will be significant.

You may want to describe your general impression of the work or how your initial impression of it changed to your final judgment. You may even want to point out what you have found that was recognizable from your own experiences, both personal and literary. All the incidents and characters that produced either validation of or challenge to your sense of the world (noticeable because of your own comfort or discomfort on meeting them) will be noted. It may be helpful to profile the character with whom you most closely identified or the incident that gave you the most pleasure or pain. If you found yourself remembering a personal experience that made the text more credible or moving, you will want to include it here. If you supplied material by imagining events that did not actually take place, you should mention those fantasies or speculations that helped to explain a character’s motivation or enhance a bit of action. If you made adjustments in how you initially saw the text so that it was more in keeping with your usual way of seeing things, you will have a direct means of discovering your part in making this text. Even the expectations you had before reading it may be significant in explaining how you created it.

Finally, you will have to explain what resulted when the text and the reader came together. You will be looking for how the text invites responses by predisposing the reader to read in certain ways, and you will examine how the images provided by the text are modified by the reader’s personal experience. Although certain norms or values are proffered by the text, it is the reader who decides whether or to what degree they should be accepted or rejected. The critic’s job is to raise meaningful questions and to look for meaningful answers. In the process, a new reading of the text may emerge, and the reader may be changed as well.

**The Conclusion**

The body of your analysis will have presented numerous observations backed up by even more citations from the text. The conclusion, then, is the place to pull all the disparate pieces of information together into generalizations about the text. It need not be lengthy, but it should state the major effects the work has had on a reader and the causes that produced those effects. Finally, the conclusion should include an evaluation of how effectively the text elicited the desired responses, how deeply the reader became involved in constructing the text, and how the work was enriched by the mutual participation of text and reader. In other words, how well did the process work?
GLOSSARY OF TERMS USEFUL IN READER-RESPONSE CRITICISM

Geneva critics: Readers who examine recurring themes and motifs that reveal a writer's essential being. They try to chart the writer's spiritual journey.

Horizon of expectations: The linguistic and aesthetic expectations of a reader.

Implied reader: Wolfgang Iser's term for a reader with the skills and qualities required by a text for it to have the intended effect.

Interpretive communities: Stanley Fish's term for groups of competent, even sophisticated readers who make meaning based on assumptions and strategies they hold in common.

Narratology: The study of narratives that seeks to show how one story's meaning emerges from its general structure, as opposed to its individual theme.

Phenomenology: A modern branch of philosophy that asserts the perceiver's central role in determining meaning.

Reception theory: A historical approach to a work that involves examining the changing responses to it on the part of the general reading public over a period of time.

Semiotics: A science of signs that studies how meaning occurs and how structures allow it to operate.

Structuralists: Critics who analyze literature following principles of linguistic theory. They seek to uncover the rules and codes by which a work is written and read and thereby to reveal the grammar of literature.

Transactional analysis: An approach advocated by Louise Rosenblatt in which the critic considers how the reader interprets the text as well as how the text produces a response in her.

SUGGESTED READING


MODEL STUDENT ANALYSIS

Eudora Welty's Portrayal of the American Nightmare:
A Reader-Response Analysis of "Death of a Traveling Salesman"
Larry Singleton

Eudora Welty's introductory paragraph of "Death of a Traveling Salesman" ends with the narrator giving the reader an intriguing description of the protagonist, R. J. Bowman: "He was feverish, and he was not quite sure of his way." Unlike Bowman, who is in a state of perplexity, readers of fiction at the beginning of the twenty-first century feel more empowered and willing to interact and trust their impressions about the fiction they read. As
students, we are expected to respond to literature texts rather than to wait in a state of bewilderment until our revered professors impart an interpretation found "within" the text. Specifically, reader-response approaches have great utility in opening up texts for students. One example is approaching Eudora Welty's "Death of a Traveling Salesman" from five reader-response perspectives: "textual," "social," "cultural," "experiential," and "psychological" (Beach, A Teacher's Introduction, 7–8). In doing so, the transaction of reader and text produces quite different and involved interpretations from those one would encounter in more traditional approaches such as New Criticism. The interaction of the aforementioned five elements enriches and expands the text instead of searching for only some specific "meaning" within the text.

Before utilizing these five reader-response perspectives, a brief plot summary may prove helpful. "Death of a Traveling Salesman" is centered around the plight of R. J. Bowman, a single and lonely traveling salesman who has sold shoes throughout Mississippi for the last fourteen years. Bowman falls ill; however, before recovering fully, he decides to continue his journey toward Beulah, Mississippi. This becomes both a physical and a spiritual journey when Bowman is "lost" on a back-country trail and his car ends up in a ravine. As part of this spiritual journey, Bowman discovers a cabin and finds a woman inhabiting it whom he believes to be fifty years old and who reminds him of the one significant woman in his life: his grandmother. Notably, Welty does not name this character. Later Bowman meets Sonny, the woman's husband, whom Bowman first misidentifies as her son. Sonny's attire, specifically his wide black hat similar to Bowman's, evokes connections with the Bowman family past. Sonny uses his mule to pull Bowman's car out of the ravine; and upon his return, Sonny offers Bowman some of his bootleg whiskey, and the supposedly middle-aged matron of the house prepares a meal, creating an atmosphere of communion for Bowman.

Later, appropriately in the light, Bowman discovers the matron of the house to be Sonny's young and pregnant wife. Consequently, he cannot deal with this "fruitful marriage" and flees into the night to his awaiting car. The short story ends with Bowman's crumpling onto the road while "hearing" his heart making exploding noises to protest his actions.

Although this plot summary is useful in giving the reader an overview of the short story, a closer examination of the "implied reader," one textual approach, also proves useful. The author certainly envisions a fairly well-read individual, for the title of this short story is very close to Arthur Miller's famous play Death of a Salesman, and this association is reinforced by the similar names of the two protagonists: Loman and Bowman. Additionally, both characters are "ill" (delusional) and have bought into the materialistic "American dream." Although Willy Loman has not found happiness in pursuit of such a vision of being successful rather than living a life of adventure in Alaska, he commits suicide by means of a car accident in order to provide his son, Biff, with the insurance money he needs to pursue his dream of owning a ranch. At least, Loman does exhibit compassion toward his son. In contrast, Bowman leaves Sonny and his wife all the money in his billfold before he leaves, a great display by Bowman but an insult to Sonny and his belief that helping someone in need is a matter of honor, not one of monetary compensation. Thus, Loman is more "alive" in committing suicide than Bowman is when fleeing Sonny's shotgun house.

However, Welty provides the "implied reader" with notable patterns, images, and connotations that guide the reader's interpretation. The reader obviously cannot miss Welty's paradoxical pattern of "feverish" life and cold death: the sun is "keeping its strength," yet the time setting is winter. There is the "feverish" Bowman and thoughts of his "dead grandmother." This brings up another recurring image in the short story, that of Bowman as a child lying in his grandmother's bed: Bowman wishing "he could fall into the big feather bed," his visualizing a cloud in the sky as being "like the bolster on his grandmother's bed," and his car being "rocked . . . like a grotesque child in a dark cradle." Of course, the words grotesque and dark, juxtaposed with child and cradle, connote a paradox of young, energetic life with "dark" death. The paradoxical pattern also occurs in reference to the strange "grandmother" figure who sits in the dark with Bowman yet has images of light and life associated with her: her eyes possess a "curious dulled brightness," and she owns, in her dark abode, a "red-and-yellow pieced quilt that looked like a map or a picture, a little like his grandmother's girlhood painting of Rome burning." Then there are the connotations of the other two characters in the short story: Sonny, the bearer of fire, and Redmond, the possessor of fire.

This opposition within the text channels the reader's possible interpretations. The remainder of this essay will provide one such interpretation.

In addition to intratextual elements, there are notable intertextual connections worth noting. One cannot help but notice the impact of a physical setting of isolation on the protagonist, something commonly seen in many American writers but especially telling in southern writers such as William Faulkner, Robert Penn Warren, Flannery O'Connor, as well as Eudora Welty. The virtual "wilderness" in "Death of a Traveling Salesman" is a common setting in the works of these writers, where protagonists are afforded a "communal opportunity" to come to terms with isolation from their past and ultimately with mankind.

There are other intertextual connections worthy of discussion. Upon first reading the description of the countryside ("desolate hill country") and of Bowman's car falling into a ravine, I could not help but think of Flannery O'Connor's short story "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." In this selection, the grandmother experiences a moment of grace and communion with humanity before being shot by the "Misfit." Even more so than Willy Loman, she finally "lives" at the moment of her death. This contrasts with the fleeing Bowman's behavior. O'Connor's grandmother comes to terms with her humanity and accepts the
“Misfit” as her own son before he shoots her. Unlike this dynamic character, Bowman has opportunity after opportunity to come to terms with his past and become a more feeling and “humane” individual rather than a robotic salesman delivering practiced lines; but he does not.

Speaking of the importance of grandmother characters in the fiction of southern women, I cannot overlook the parallels and differences in the roles of Welty’s Phoenix Jackson character in “A Worn Path” and the Phoenix-like and grandmotherly-seeming wife in “Death of a Traveling Salesman.” Both characters seem ageless and have a golden glow. In the latter’s case, Welty repeatedly describes objects associated with Sonny’s wife in terms of a Phoenix-consuming fire: a “yellow cowhide seat,” the “yellow pine boards” of her house, her “red-and-yellow pieced quilt,” as well as her glowing eyes and “shining” teeth. Connecting these two characters lends credence to Sonny’s wife being unnamed, because she, unlike the Phoenix, is not a successful catalyst in the development of Bowman, who returns to his “old ways” at the end of the short story. In essence, one can view Bowman’s attempted rebirth as abortive.

Other significant aspects of “Death of a Traveling Salesman” are the social and cultural implications of southern literature’s emphasis on the importance of the past as an integral part of the present. Time is not a continuum but is overlapping. This has agrarian and regionalistic significance. In this text, Welty implies that Bowman is moving backward in time, back to the young life of his maternal grandmother and grandfather before the birth of his mother. In doing so, Bowman encounters ancestors who hold time-honored traditions of mythological proportions yet traditions in an agrarian society that give meaning and purpose to life (doing for others without expecting monetary reward, honoring rituals of starting a fire and preparing food). Conversely, Bowman’s life is one of materialistic modernity, isolation, and lack of communion with others through time-honored rituals. He is a “lost” soul separated from his past as a southerner. In effect, he is a “robotic” and programmed shell of a man, indicative of the plight of individuals living in the more technological, fast-paced, and capitalistic world of the twentieth century.

This interpretation has intertextual support in the form of Bowman’s destination: Beulah, a land of peace in Pilgrim’s Progress. However, Bowman does not come to terms with his past and does not experience peace at the end of his journey, since he suffers a relapse of his heart/soul condition at the end. This seems appropriate, given that textual connotations of Bowman’s name suggest a bow, an incomplete circle.

However, I cannot pass judgment on Bowman. Experientially and psychologically, I see much of myself in his situation. Like Bowman, I am a single southerner who knows a little about his family heritage and occasionally travels the dusty backroads of a fading rural south. Most of what I know about family and the all-important past consists of memories, bits and pieces of narratives told to me by long-dead relatives; yet these long-ago events and people do come to mind at strangely odd times, often by association with other present-day events or objects and animals, such as antiquated tractors and horses pictured in newspaper or magazine articles. Many would dismiss such connections and say they don’t have time for such “insignificant distractions” and “digressions.” In my twenties, I was guilty of exhibiting this attitude. However, now that I am older, I no longer view such occurrences as “digressions.”

In addition, I can understand Bowman’s fixation with materialism as his “savior.” As a young man in his mid-twenties, I did not spend a great deal of time with aging relatives who offered a wealth of information about family lore. Instead, I pursued working fifty to sixty hours a week doing public relations work for what I thought was excellent pay, my ticket to purchase a new VCR, new clothes, and a new car. After three years of self-imposed servitude to such a superficial view of life, and after the deaths of two close older relatives, I began to realize what sort of isolated pursuer of the American dream (the materialistic version) I had become. Like Loman and Bowman, I had forgotten the importance of family, the past, and the importance of substantive dreams.

Fortunately, I did receive the support of my quickly diminishing family to pursue the study of literature that has accentuated the importance of the past and facilitated my attempt to complete as much of my “circle” as I can. Without such support, my fate and Bowman’s may have been rather similar. Thus, this selection has promoted a better understanding of individuals like Bowman and myself ten years ago: “feverish” and confused souls who are “not quite sure of [their] way.”

Work Cited