



CHAPTER

4

Creating The Text

Reader-Response Criticism

*Unless there is a response on
the part of somebody, there is
no significance, no meaning.*

—Morse Peckham

THE PURPOSE OF READER-RESPONSE CRITICISM

New Criticism as the Old Criticism

Reader-response criticism can be seen as a reaction in part to some problems and limitations perceived in New Criticism. New Criticism did not suddenly fail to function: it remains an effective critical strategy for illuminating the complex unity of certain literary works. But some works don't seem to respond very well to New Criticism's "close reading." Much of eighteenth-century literature, for instance, has generally not been shown to have the sort of paradoxical language or formal unity that New Critics have found in, say, Donne or Keats. And New Critics appear to see roughly the same thing in whatever work they happen to read: "this work has unified complexity"; "so does this one"; "yep, this one too."

Further, if the work is indeed a stable object, about which careful readers can make objective statements, then why hasn't there

been an emerging consensus in criticism? Instead, the history of criticism seems to be one of diversity and change, as successive criticisms provide innovatively different readings of the same work. Even in the sciences, the idea of an objective point of view has been increasingly questioned. Facts, as Thomas Kuhn has argued, emerge because of a certain system of belief, or paradigm. Scientific revolutions occur not simply when new facts are discovered, but when a new paradigm allows these “facts” to be noticed and accepted.

Such ideas about the conceptual nature of knowledge, even scientific knowledge, call a fundamental assumption of New Criticism into question. In positing the objective reality of the literary work, New Criticism was arguably emulating the sciences; but in the wake of Einstein’s theory of relativity, Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle, Gödel’s mathematics, and much else, it seems clear that the perceiver plays an active role in the making of any meaning and that literary works in particular have a *subjective* status.

In addition, by striving to show how great works balance opposing ideas, New Criticism has seemed to some to encourage the divorce of literature from life and politics, indirectly reinforcing the status quo. By the standards of New Criticism, any literary work that takes a strong position ought somehow to acknowledge the opposing point of view, and criticism ought to point to that complexity and balance. Further, by assuming that literary language is fundamentally different from ordinary language, New Criticism may further tend to support the idea that literary study has little or no practical value but stands apart from real life (a poem should not mean but be, MacLeish says). New Criticism sometimes seems, especially to unsympathetic eyes, like an intellectual exercise.

The perception of these shortcomings of New Criticism—its limited applicability and sameness of results, the questionable assumption of a stable object of inquiry, and the separation of literature from other discourses—no doubt helped open the door for reader-response criticism (and other approaches). But reader-response criticism has its own substantial appeals, as we shall see.

The Reader Emerges

In 1938, while future New Critics were formulating ideas of the text as a freestanding object, Louise Rosenblatt prophetically called for criticism that involved a “personal sense of literature” (60), “an

unself-conscious, spontaneous, and honest reaction” (67). *Literature as Exploration* was ahead of its day, but by the time Rosenblatt published *The Reader, the Text, the Poem* in 1978, much of the critical world had caught up with where she was forty years before. For instance, the creative power of readers was championed by David Bleich’s *Readings and Feelings* in 1975 and by *Subjective Criticism* in 1978. Because “the object of observation appears changed by the act of observation,” as Bleich puts it, “knowledge is made by people and not found” (*Criticism* 17, 18).

This insight leads Bleich to embrace subjectivity, even calling his approach “subjective criticism.” Writing about literature, he believes, should not involve suppressing readers’ individual concerns, anxieties, passions, enthusiasms. “Each person’s most urgent motivations are to understand himself,” Bleich says, and a response to a literary work always helps us find out something about ourselves (297). Bleich thus encourages introspection and spontaneity, and he is not at all worried that different readers will see different things in a text. Every act of response, he says, reflects the shifting motivations and perceptions of the reader at the moment. Even the most idiosyncratic response to a text should be shared, in Bleich’s view, and heard sympathetically.

It is easy to imagine that many students have found such an approach liberating and even intoxicating, and that some teachers have contemplated it with horror. “There’s no right or wrong,” as one teacher said to me; “students can say *anything*.” But Bleich actually does not imagine that the student’s engagement with literature will *end* with a purely individual, purely self-oriented response; rather, he expects that students will share their responses, and in *Subjective Criticism* he describes the process of “negotiation” that occurs as a community examines together their individual responses, seeking common ground while learning from each person’s unique response.

An especially striking illustration of the benefits of Bleich’s orientation appears in an essay by Robert Crosman. Crosman recounts a student’s response to Faulkner’s famous “A Rose for Emily” that is so eccentric, so obviously “wrong” (if it were possible to be wrong within this approach), that one must begin to wonder if the student really read the story with any attentiveness. The student’s response seems in fact to expose the absurdity of letting students say whatever comes into their heads, for she writes that Emily, the mad recluse who apparently poisons and then sleeps with her suitor, reminds her of her kindly grandmother. Crosman’s student ignores

the horrible ending of the story, which implies that Emily has recently slept with the much-decayed remains of her murdered lover; instead, the student writes about the qualities of her grandmother—"endurance, faith, love"—that she also sees in Emily (360). The student finds that her grandmother and Emily both inhabit houses that are closed up with "relics and momentos of the past"; both her grandmother and Emily seem to think of past events and people as being "more real" than "the world of the present."

The value of this student's response emerges in the way Crosman uses it to modify his own reading. He comes to see that his interpretation, which is much more typical of experienced readers, actually "suppresses a good deal of evidence" (361). Crosman has perceived Emily to be a kind of monster, but he is led by his student to see that such is not entirely the case. Confronting the heroic aspects of Emily's character, Crosman notices that she triumphs, in a sense, over the men (father, lover, town fathers) who are, Crosman says, "ultimately responsible for Emily's pitiful condition" (361). By the same token, just as Crosman is able to see the positive aspects of Emily's character, making her human rather than monstrous, so is his student, by considering Crosman's response, placed in a position to see more than her grandmother's goodness in Emily.

Whereas Bleich sees the reader's response evolving by such "negotiation" within a community of readers, Rosenblatt focuses on the "transaction" between the text and the reader. While she accepts multiple interpretations, as readers actively make different works out of the text, she also considers some readings to be incorrect or inappropriate because they are unsupported by the text. So the "unself-conscious, spontaneous, and honest reaction" that Rosenblatt encourages ought to be checked against the text and modified in a continuing process, or "transaction": a poem is made by the text and the reader interacting.

The various reader-response critics all share the sense of reading as a process, an activity; their differences stem from this question of how meaning is controlled. Who's in charge? The reader? A community of readers? The text? The case of Stanley Fish is especially interesting in this regard because over his career Fish has taken just about every position. Fish's early work emphasizes how the text controls the reader's experience; the task of criticism is to describe this experience, and Fish's readings seem much like watching a movie in superslow motion as it is being analyzed by an imaginative film critic. Fish moves through a few words or phrases, and then considers in brilliant and clever detail what "the reader" makes

of it. Fish repeatedly finds that admirable texts continually surprise us, evading our expectations, exposing us to "strains," "ambivalences," "complexity" (*Artifacts* 136, 425). These values, as Jane Tompkins has suggested, are very similar to the values of New Criticism. But the way they are discovered in texts is quite different.

In *Surprised by Sin*, for instance, Fish argues that the reader "in" *Paradise Lost* experiences temptations and disorientations that parallel those of Adam and Eve. Thus, the critics who have thought Satan more appealing than God have not spotted a flaw in Milton's achievement; they have simply succumbed to the temptation Milton meant for them to experience. Likewise, in *Self-Consuming Artifacts* Fish shows how the process of reading certain seventeenth-century texts involves creating expectations that are thwarted, complicated, reversed, transformed as the reader goes on.

In his later work, in *Is There a Text in This Class?* and *Doing What Comes Naturally*, Fish moves away from the idea of an ideal reader who finds his or her activity marked out, implied, in the text, and he moves toward the idea of a reader who creates a reading of the text using certain interpretive strategies. These strategies may be shared by other readers, and the critic's job is to persuade his or her interpretive community to accept a particular reading. Neither the text's implied activity nor the community's shared reading strategies can be said to determine interpretation, for even when readers inhabit the same interpretive community, they must struggle to persuade one another of the "facts" regarding a particular text. Such persuasion may include information about the author, or the author's audience, or the initial reception of the work, or the history of its reception, or the text itself, or the conventions of interpretation the text draws upon. But the continuing process of discussion begins with the response of the person persuading.

HYPertextual READERS

The reader's creative role would seem to be especially evident in the case of hypertexts, which are essentially discrete blocks of electronic text (or other media) networked together. By clicking on a link in the text, or inputting a response to the text, readers can determine what will appear before them next. If this book that you are now reading were an electronic hypertext, rather than an old-timey ink and paper one, you might be able to click on the word "hypertext" and be "taken" (in an electronic sense) to more

information about hypertexts. “There” you might find links to websites about hypertexts, or links to hypertext novels, or links to Amazon.com and featured books about hypertextuality, or a video clip of me reading my utterly neglected poem, “Ode on a Grecian Hypertext.” Reading a hypertextual detective story, for instance, one might be asked which character should turn out to be guilty, and the story would then in some way respond to the reader’s response. At first glance, this kind of interactive work seems profoundly liberating for readers, epitomizing the spirit of reader-oriented criticism.

But the extent to which hypertexts blur the distinction between readers and writers—and even between reality and virtual reality—as some theorists have asserted, can certainly be overstated. Let’s take the simplest example of a hypertext, one in which the reader can click on one of two options. A character in a story lives or dies, perhaps, or a more detailed explanation of a solution appears, or doesn’t. In a sense, the reader confronts two texts: one in which the character lives, and another in which the character dies, or one that has a more detailed explanation, and one that doesn’t. The reader chooses which text to read—and can even read them both by going back and choosing differently. In this situation, the reader hasn’t really interacted with the text, or participated in the text’s creation: the text’s different versions were there all along, just as static as the text you are holding. A hypertext with dozens or even hundreds of links, and dozens or hundreds of pieces of text, is of course a very complicated text—or bundle of texts. But it remains to be seen whether readers of hypertexts *create* the meaning or the experience of a hypertext in a way that is fundamentally different from an ordinary text.

In any event, the advent of hypertexts underscores the value of reader-response criticism, which authorizes and encourages readers—of whatever sort of text—to begin where, really, readers always must begin: with an individual response. With a hypertext, not only is the reader’s experience unique, but the text itself may be one that no one else has read (or will read) in the same form (much less way). The uniqueness of our responses reflects the precious uniqueness of our selves, it seems to me. It is always possible (and often desirable, I think) to evolve a personal response based upon interaction with a community, or further reference to the text, or the employment of a particular political or aesthetic theory, or some other impetus. But you must start with a response. Although you can’t click on anything to generate your response, you also can hardly avoid responding. Just read it.

Let’s move to a more specific instance of responding.

HOW TO DO READER-RESPONSE CRITICISM

Preparing to Respond

Imagine that you’ve been asked to write about the following poem, drawing on audience-oriented criticism. You’ll want to read the poem carefully, thinking in terms of the following possible questions:

1. How do I respond to this work?
2. How does the text shape my response?
3. How might other readers respond?

Love Poem #1 (1987)

Sandra Cisneros

a red flag
woman I am
all copper
chemical
and you an ax
and a bruised
thumb.

5

unlikely
pas de deux
but just let
us wax
it’s nitro
egypt
snake
museum
zoo

10

we are
connoisseurs
and commandoes
we are rowdy
as a drum
not shy like
Narcissus
nor pale as plum

20

Adam
Eve

then it is I want to hymn 25
and halleluja
sing sweet sweet jubilee
you my religion
and I a wicked nun

What can you say about this poem? How can audience-oriented criticism help you to understand and appreciate it?

Making Sense

My own response to this poem began when I started to annotate it. I underlined some words that I thought might be especially important or unclear, and then, on a separate sheet, I speculated on their meanings. With any approach, you may need to look up some words. If you're a little hazy on who "Narcissus" is (line 23), for instance, a dictionary definition may be all you need: "A youth who, having spurned the love of Echo, pined away in love for his own image in a pool of water and was transformed into the flower that bears his name" (*American Heritage Dictionary*). Dictionary definitions aren't always sufficient, and (it probably goes without saying) the more you know, the more experience you have as a reader, then the richer and more informed your response is likely to be. Responding to a poem always involves you in creating a context in which the sequence of words makes sense: you must ask, Who is speaking to whom? Under what circumstances would someone say these things?

Still, all responses are potentially worthwhile. You may want to underline some important or puzzling words and speculate on their meanings before you look at my annotations below. And you may want to share your responses with another reader.

a red flag woman—What does this mean? A red flag means something to watch out for, dangerous, a warning. For instance, "The temperature reading should have been a red flag." So she is dangerous?

all copper—Why copper? Because it's cold? Because it turns green?! No, I don't think so. Copper is a great conductor of electrical current and heat. She's hot; she's electrified. That is, she's passionate, emotional, responsive?

chemical—Like a chemical reaction?

an ax and a bruised thumb—Is he clumsy? He does things aggressively, in an imprecise way. He breaks or splits things like an ax, but he isn't always careful (the bruised thumb).

pas de deux—A ballet dance for two, according to *Webster*. The sort of grace and coordination we'd expect from a ballet is indeed unlikely for these two together, a live wire and a wild man.

nitro etc.—This is a neat list of unexpected things, each one giving a different aspect of their relationship. Nitro = explosive?; egypt = foreign, exotic, mysterious, enduring (like the pyramids)?; snake = something wicked? a phallic symbol? the garden of Eden? Are "egypt" and "snake" related?

"Museum" and "zoo" point us to public institutions.

"Museum" suggests their love is rare, valuable, enduring, worth showing off; "zoo" suggests perhaps they're animals?

connoisseurs and commandoes—They again appear to be radical opposites: connoisseurs are refined, tasting carefully; commandoes are reckless and go wild.

you my religion—This is about as involved in another person as you can get. There's something troubling about such devotion to another person. No human being should worship another one. But am I taking this line too seriously?

wicked nun—This image continues the religious reference. Being a wicked nun seems especially exciting, combining suggestions of the forbidden and the delayed.

Subjective Response

Thinking about the words, you're already unavoidably beginning to think about the poem as a whole and your own response to it. The next step might be to freewrite about the poem. Just focus on the poem and write quickly whatever occurs to you. Don't worry about grammar, and don't stop writing. If you can't think of anything to say, say whatever is most obvious. The important thing is to keep the pen or keyboard moving. As a last resort, write "I can't think of anything to say" until you think of something. If that fails, then read the poem again and then try once more. Set yourself a time limit for this free response; ten minutes is about right for most people. There's no way to do this exercise incorrectly: just read carefully and respond, being as honest and involved as you can.

Here is my freewriting response:

This poem reminds me of Carol and Bob's relationship. They are about as unlikely and mismatched a couple as this pair, an "unlikely *pas de deux*." But instead of "copper" and "chemical,"

Carol is more like plutonium and nuclear. She's incredibly energetic, especially when you compare her to Bob. He could fit "an ax / and a bruised / thumb," but I suspect the result would be an amputated thumb in his case. They are amazing, like the couple in the poem.

Are Carol and Bob "nitro" together, like this couple? I don't know. There seems to me to be a good bit of energy in their marriage. I don't see Carol wanting "to hymn / and halleluja," perhaps, but I'm really in no position to judge, am I. I don't know what happens when they "wax," whatever that means. Certainly, the two people in Cisneros's poem are not living a dull life, and I think the contrast is also stimulating to Carol and Bob. There is power in conflict or difference. Opposites not only attract; they make sparks.

Many people find this kind of freewriting exercise very useful: it generates material that you may be able to use in an essay, and it is likely to stimulate your thinking about the work. Just to give you an idea of how individualistic and personal such responses can be, here is another one:

This poem seems to talk about an exciting relationship: she says "it's nitro." That suggests the relationship is great, but I think it's really doomed. I think this relationship, the first time it is shaken, will probably explode, just like nitro. She is emotional; he is rough and clumsy. Where's the long-term interest and compatibility in this set-up? Opposites attract, sure, but when they're so totally opposite, so far apart, the attraction may be volatile. This is after all only "Love Poem #1." I am wondering if there will be #2 and #3 once the relationship matures and cools off.

I think the speaker's comparison of herself to "a wicked nun" is revealing. The comparison supports my feeling that the relationship, despite its current heat, isn't going to make it. I notice that she does not see herself as a nun who has decided to give up her habit. She is just "wicked," doing something wrong and enjoying the extra excitement that doing the forbidden gives her. If her love feels that way to her, then won't that eventually put a strain on the relationship? Will she decide to give up her old life, her old religion, and become devoted to her new religion, her lover? Or will her prior life win out?

In my experience, relationships built on excitement are teacherous and fragile. I bet the nun will reform.

Which of these responses is correct? Both are. Both are responses to the text. Taken together, these two different responses may suggest a third one that tries to determine whether the poem really does evoke some skepticism on the reader's part or if it is simply a joyous celebration. Are there some elements that would qualify the poem's enthusiasm for most readers?

After engaging the text in a personal way, you can begin to ask such questions about your own response in the context of other readers' responses. Let's see what happens when the reading process is slowed down and an effort is made to imagine how the reader is supposed to respond moving through the poem.

Receptive Response

First, obviously, every reader encounters the title. What response does the title elicit? The poem announces itself as a love poem. What sort of title do we expect from such a thing? Most readers no doubt expect a love poem to have a more romantic or imaginative title than "Love Poem #1," and the reader's initial reaction is to wonder if the poem is in truth a love poem. If it is, then why is the title so bluntly direct? The numbering also creates certain possibilities: will the poem reflect the intensity of love in its first bloom? Will it deflate or satirize infatuation? At this point, the reader cannot know, but the firstness of the poem is perceived to be an important feature, to be taken into account as the poem unfolds.

The first line seems to open further the possibility that the poem is not a love poem in the usual sense: "a red flag" signals a warning, a danger, and seems more appropriate to a poem announcing the end of a love affair. So perhaps the first is the last, and the unimaginative title is ironic? The second line, "woman I am," seems to be an affirmation of the speaker's individuality and her sisterhood. In other words:

Line 1: "a red flag" = Watch out! There's something dangerous here.

Line 2: "woman I am" = The reason you should watch out: a red flag (look out!), I am woman.

But as the reader begins to wonder about these two statements—"a red flag" and "woman I am"—the possibility arises, reading backwards, that these two lines go together in a different way, as a single statement: "a red flag" becomes a modifier of "woman"—I am a red-flag woman.

Without punctuation, the reader cannot decide for sure which syntax is correct, and so both readings continue on: "watch out, I'm a woman," and "I'm a dangerous kind of woman." Do the next two lines support the suggestion of an unromantic, even threatening self-portrait of the speaker? Most readers will think of electrical wiring and plumbing when they read "all copper," which appears to refer back to the speaker; likewise, things that are "chemical" are perceived by most readers as dangerously reactive. Only experts should fool around with plumbing, wiring, chemistry: pipes explode, wires spark, chemicals blow up.

There is of course an element of surprise at hearing the speaker describe herself in this way. "All copper" and "chemical" are not part of the usual vocabulary of love poetry, are they? The reader will find the next three lines equally disorienting, as the speaker's love is described in the decidedly unromantic terms of "an ax / and a bruised / thumb." He or she is potentially destructive and apparently dangerous. (Although some readers may assume the speaker's lover is male, the poem doesn't prescribe that response, does it?) An ax usually isn't used to build things, but rather to cut them, kill them, chop them down. Such wrecking sometimes results, especially if the worker is clumsy, in a bruised thumb, or worse. As a love poem, this one seems to be going nowhere, and the reader may well not be surprised that it is #1. How can there be any more?

Thus, I would argue that the opening of the second group of lines confirms the attentive reader's assessment: they are indeed an "unlikely / pas de deux." This admission also sets the reader up, however, for a turn. By saying they are unlikely as a pair, Cisneros implies that they *may be* nonetheless a couple, somehow. The rest of the poem vigorously fulfills that implication, reversing the reader's inferences, which he or she may have suspected would be reversed. Still, the explanation of their relationship is startling, as the reader encounters a list of unexpected and even puzzling comparisons:

nitro—This one is easy. They are explosive together. But since nitroglycerine is used to blow things up (as well as to prevent heart attacks), an element of danger remains.

egypt—How can the lovers be "egypt"? Perhaps the reference means they are exotic together? Hot, like the deserts? Mysterious, like the pyramids? Alluring, like Cleopatra? Fertile, like the Nile? By not saying how the lovers are like Egypt, Cisneros opens up a space in which the reader can supply all sorts of qualities.

snake—This comparison is as tantalizing and amazing, at least, as "egypt." A snake is of course often considered a phallic symbol, and the reader may think of the lovers' conjunction as a kind of living version of that symbol. But it may also remind us, in the context of a couple, of Adam and Eve, suggesting that they are somehow participating in a return to Eden together; but this time, the lovers are not ruined by the serpent but rather become one themselves? Or, is the snake, in the context of "egypt," supposed to suggest some sort of ancient fertility cult that involved the handling of snakes? We don't know, but the attentive reader will consider these and other possible responses to this rich and startling image.

museum—Another strange and disorienting comparison. How can the lovers be like a museum? Perhaps they create, in their lovemaking, something of enduring value, something so wonderful that future generations would want to preserve it, as in a museum.

zoo—This reference is perhaps the easiest for the reader to respond to: it suggests obviously that they are animals together—a collection in fact of all sorts of exotic and wondrous animals.

The rest of the poem continues to celebrate the lovers in unexpected ways, even though certain ideas reappear. The speaker calls them "connoisseurs and commandoes," which repeats to some degree the oppositions already set up. The reader may connect "connoisseurs" to the cultured reaction of museum goers, but at the same time the lovers are wild "commandoes," which the reader may link to "nitro" or an "ax." The difference in this third section of the poem is that instead of each lover having distinctly different qualities, they are together "connoisseurs and commandoes," unifying opposing features in their relationships.

If the reader believes, however, that the rest of the poem will fit some sort of pattern set up thus far, the next lines seem designed to thwart that expectation. The lovers are "rowdy / as a drum," which suggests, I suppose, the rowdiness of someone beating a drum. Perhaps this simile reinforces the earlier suggestions of wildness, but it is certainly difficult to see how a drum in itself is "rowdy" or what this comparison is supposed to accomplish. The reader next learns the lovers are "not shy like Narcissus," an allusion that means obviously that they are not self-absorbed, that they don't hold back from love. But is there any deeper significance to this allusion? Why bring in Narcissus and shyness? Would any reader suspect at this

point that they *are* shy—these commandoes, who are “nitro”? The next line seems even more elusive, as if the lovers are slowly becoming incomprehensible to the reader: “nor pale as plum”? Perhaps this comparison refers to the color plum and tells us in another way that they are not shy—although the reader surely must hesitate to call “plum” a “pale” color.

But “plum” serves another function beyond befuddling the reader, as it becomes clear at this point, if not before, that a recurrent rhyme is appearing, unobtrusively: “thumb,” “museum,” “drum,” and “plum.” And with the appearance of this music, the poem moves to its climatic ending, comparing the speaker’s feelings to a religious ecstasy:

25

then it is I want to hymn
and halleluja
sing sweet sweet jubilee
you my religion
and I a wicked nun

The reader may hear the assertion that she wants “to hymn” as a pun on “him,” as if her lover has become an activity in which she can engage or as if the male role is one the speaker longs to adopt. The associations of “hymn” continue for the reader as singing halleluja and enjoying the “jubilee” appear. Immediately these religious comparisons are carried beyond the reader’s expectations (which may be, at this point, what the reader does expect), as the speaker declares her lover to be her religion. For most readers, such sacrilege is an exaggeration at the edges of propriety: most readers are all in favor of love, but to make another person one’s religion is perhaps troubling. The experienced reader probably sees this assertion as exaggeration (hyperbole), but it is nonetheless worrisome in its implications.

But the final line takes even a further step, as the speaker names herself “a wicked nun.” This final move completes the effort to convey the excitement of the forbidden, the impossible, the dangerous in the relationship, leaving the reader shaken and stunned—like the speaker herself, it seems—by the power of their love. Their love is itself vigorously direct, like the poem’s title; their love is also apparently unadulterated and uncompromised, pure and explosive at its very beginning.

It is quite likely that your own thinking about the reader’s reception of this poem is different from mine—perhaps radically different. That’s fine with me. Although we could argue over which one of

us is insufficiently attentive to the poem’s cues, in the context of reader-response criticism it makes more sense to try to learn from each other. For me, even when I’m trying to play the role of the implied reader, I’m continually aware that I’m making choices, filling in blanks and gaps, interpreting in one particular way when several other ways (some of which aren’t occurring to me) are feasible. I say “the reader,” and I am trying to think of an ideal or implied response, but I’m aware at several points that “the reader” may be only me. Still, it seems helpful to *try* to think of how other readers will respond. The real beauty of audience-oriented criticism, after all, is that the focus is on our activity: we make the text say whatever it’s going to say and then try to persuade others to accept our reading.

Let’s take another example and this time develop an essay.

THE WRITING PROCESS: A SAMPLE ESSAY

Preparing to Respond

Here is a very short story by Ernest Hemingway, “A Very Short Story,” which is actually part of a sequence of stories (for the whole sequence, see *Ernest Hemingway: The Short Stories*).

A Very Short Story (1925)

Ernest Hemingway

One hot evening in Padua they carried him up onto the roof and he could look out over the top of the town. There were chimney swifts in the sky. After a while it got dark and the searchlights came out. The others went down and took the bottles with them. He and Luz could hear them below on the balcony. Luz sat on the bed. She was cool and fresh in the hot night.

Luz stayed on night duty for three months. They were glad to let her. When they operated on him she prepared him for the operating table; and they had a joke about friend or enema. He went under the anaesthetic holding tight on to himself so he would not blab about anything during the silly, talky time. After he got on crutches he used to take the temperatures so Luz would not have to get up from the bed. There were only a few patients, and they all knew about it. They all liked Luz. As he walked back along the halls he thought of Luz in his bed.

Before he went back to the front they went into the Duomo and prayed. It was dim and quiet, and there were other people praying. They wanted to get married, but there was not enough time for the banns, and neither of them had birth certificates. They felt as though they were married, but they wanted every one to know about it, and to make it so they could not lose it.

Luz wrote him many letters that he never got until after the armistice. Fifteen came in a bunch to the front and he sorted them by the dates and read them all straight through. They were all about the hospital, and how much she loved him and how it was impossible to get along without him and how terrible it was missing him at night.

After the armistice they agreed he should go home to get a job so they might be married. Luz would not come home until he had a good job and could come to New York to meet her. It was understood he would not drink, and he did not want to see his friends or any one in the States. Only to get a job and be married. On the train from Padua to Milan they quarrelled about her not being willing to come home at once. When they had to say good-bye, in the station at Milan, they kissed good-bye, but were not finished with the quarrel. He felt sick about saying good-bye like that.

He went to America on a boat from Genoa. Luz went back to Pordenone to open a hospital. It was lonely and rainy there, and there was a battalion of arditi quartered in the town. Living in the muddy, rainy town in the winter, the major of the battalion made love to Luz, and she had never known Italians before, and finally wrote to the States that theirs had been only a boy and girl affair. She was sorry, and she knew he would probably not be able to understand, but might some day forgive her, and be grateful to her, and she expected, absolutely unexpectedly, to be married in the spring. She loved him as always, but she realized now it was only a boy and girl love. She hoped he would have a great career, and believed in him absolutely. She knew it was for the best.

The major did not marry her in the spring, or any other time. Luz never got an answer to the letter to Chicago about it. A short time after he contracted gonorrhoea from a sales girl in a loop department store while riding in a taxicab through Lincoln Park.

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How this story shapes the reader's response has already been suggested by Robert Scholes in *Semiotics and Interpretation*. As Scholes observes, the point of view in the story is technically third person (if it were first-person narration, it would read this way: "One hot evening in Padua they carried me up on the roof . . ."). But the viewpoint, Scholes says, seems to be closer to the unnamed man than to Luz (116–17). If the narrator were equally distanced from both characters, they would both have names. But "he" apparently doesn't need a name. The reader is told in the first and second sentences what "he" could see. Also, as Scholes notes, the assertion "She was cool and fresh in the hot night" really makes sense only from his perspective: *to him*, she seemed cool and fresh. This point of view plays an important role in the reader's response, and I would like to elaborate on Scholes's view of the story by tracing out in some detail "the reader's" experience.

For starters, we might consider how the reader responds to Hemingway's opening paragraph. Our response must be problematic at that point because we know so little: important information is being left out. But we do know something. We know "he" is in Padua, but we don't know what he is doing there or who he is. We learn that "they" carried him to the roof, but we don't know who "they" are or why he has to be carried: is he sick or injured? Does he have a handicap? The reference to searchlights in the third sentence probably suggests to most readers that the story may be taking place during wartime: these are searchlights looking for attacking planes. If that's the case, then perhaps he is being carried because he is wounded. We also learn that he and Luz are somehow close: "they" leave them alone on the roof, and Luz sits on his bed, appearing "cool and fresh."

In this second paragraph, the implied point of view is made clearer, and additional clues are offered. The notion that he is in a hospital is confirmed here. Luz is on night duty, so she would seem to be a nurse—an inference further supported by her preparation of him for the operating table. The reader may notice, as Scholes points out, that the male character's reticence is much like the story's own restraint (119). He doesn't want to blab, and neither apparently does the story's narrator, telling us only the minimum. Letting go is the enemy, and the enema; as Scholes puts it, "Logorrhoea and diarrhoea are equally embarrassing" (119).

Even if the reader finds the male character's fear of talking about anything problematic, the embodiment of a dumb macho stereotype,

the strong silent man, we must be softened by his kindness in taking the temperatures. Here he is on crutches, and yet he gets up so Luz won't have to. What is not said by the narrator is what Luz is doing in his bed, but this is a blank that the reader easily fills in. The reader can easily discern that the "it" that the few patients "all knew about" must be an affair "he" and Luz are having. Why else would the narrator present the revelation that "they all knew about it" as if it were a kind of secret?

Recognizing what "it" is, most readers will probably acknowledge that a nurse sleeping with her patient probably does not represent the highest ethical standards. And recognizing this response perhaps makes clear why Hemingway has the narrator immediately tell us "They all liked Luz": their affection for Luz is designed to qualify the reader's disapproval. With the paragraph's final sentence, the reader must also realize, as "he" thinks of Luz in his bed, that she apparently means a lot to a recovering man, perhaps a wounded soldier. Having immersed ourselves in "his" point of view, readers may not notice, without some consideration, that we do not know what Luz is thinking.

In the third paragraph we learn that he is in fact a soldier because he goes back to the front. We learn that he and Luz pray together in church, and the narrator tells us that they wish they could be married and feel as if they are married. If this feeling really is mutual, the reader may wonder about their plan. Why doesn't Luz return with him rather than waiting on his "good job"? Doesn't this condition make her seem a bit mercenary? Also, why are the restrictions on him seemingly so severe? Perhaps it makes sense that he will not drink, especially if he has a problem with drinking. But why does he not want to see his friends? In fact, he doesn't want to see anyone at all, according to their understanding. Does Luz not trust him? Does he not trust himself? The reader cannot be sure, the way this understanding is phrased, whether Luz imposes these conditions or he volunteers them; but since they restrict his behavior, the reader may assume the rules are Luz's idea.

Such subtle shaping of the reader's response prepares us for the bombshell in the sixth paragraph: she dumps him. In thinking about the reader's response here, we might consider (among other things) the effect of the information that "she had never known Italians before." The passage seems to offer this fact as a kind of explanation of her behavior, but it is an excuse that makes Luz seem worse, as if she wants to try Italians the way one might try a new fla-

vor of ice cream. Hemingway does not say this excuse is disgustingly inadequate, but he sets up the story so that the reader easily comes to such a conclusion. Her letter is not quoted, but is filtered through his perspective; from that vantage point, it seems reasonable to assume that Luz has shamefully betrayed him.

There are in fact aspects of the letter, as it is reported, that seem so unfeeling they appear to be cruel. It is difficult for any reader to imagine what could be more devastating than saying what he thought was the love of his life was actually "only a boy and girl affair." To say "she loved him as always" similarly demeans their relationship. "I thought we were in love," she is in effect saying, "but now that I've been with this Italian, I see we were just playing like children." Her love hasn't changed, just her understanding of what that love was. Finally, to say she "believed in him absolutely" after refusing to come to America before he had a "good" job seems the height of hypocrisy and coldness.

How do we respond to the conclusion? Hemingway has led the reader, it may seem, to see Luz's own jilting by the major as just what she deserves. He adds "or any other time" to prevent the reader from assuming that Luz and the Italian had some problems but worked them out. The affair that *she said* she thought was the real thing, in comparison to their boy and girl thing, does not turn out to be real after all. But did she really believe that the Italian was different? Is Luz a "loose" woman? Is that the significance of her name?

By telling us that Luz never got an answer to her letter, Hemingway conveys indirectly the soldier's pain. The reader can imagine he is so hurt, and so thoroughly disgusted, that he can't even respond to her. The final sentence further deepens the reader's perception of his pain. As Scholes points out, first Luz wounds his heart; then the salesgirl wounds him in a different place. The reader will naturally assume that he wouldn't have been in that taxicab, fooling around recklessly and decadently, in public in Lincoln Park, if it had not been for Luz. The narrator does not say it is Luz's fault that he gets gonorrhoea, but that clearly is the implication: when he loses Luz, he loses everything. "A short time after" here implies some connection. First the war wound; then Luz's; then the salesgirl's.

In moving through the story, I am carrying out and elaborating on the reading Scholes suggests. About the reader's response to this story—that is, the implied response that Hemingway marks out—Scholes says the following:

Most male students sympathize with the protagonist and are very critical of Luz—as indeed [the story] asks them to be. Many female students try to read the story as sympathetic to Luz, blaming events on the “weakness” of the young man or the state of the world. This is a possible interpretation, but it is not well supported by the text. Thus the female student must either “misread” the work (that is, she must offer the more weakly supported of two interpretations) or accept one more blow to her self-esteem as a woman. Faced with this story in a competitive classroom, women are put at a disadvantage. They are, in fact, in a double bind (120–21).

I have thus far essentially agreed with this analysis of the implied reader’s response. The text, in Scholes’s opinion, makes the case against Luz. Although taking Luz’s side is “a possible interpretation,” Scholes says, it seems more difficult to him, a misreading. Scholes does, to be sure, place “misread” inside quotation marks, indicating his awareness of alternatives. But in truth, Scholes sees the reader—the male reader anyway—as being pulled toward one best response.

Not only does Scholes implicitly assume the text is a stable structure, marking out a particular response, he also assumes that “most” males will naturally take the soldier’s side, and females will naturally try to take Luz’s side. But one of the beauties of reader-response criticism is that it takes advantage of the diversity of readers in the world, reminding us of the treacherousness of generalizations about them. Reader-response criticism—by bringing the personal, the individual, even the eccentric responses to our attention—can revitalize texts that we think we have already learned how to read. Having processed the story with considerable care, attempting to play the role of a passive reader, we’re ready now to take a more active part as a responding reader, entering into a debate within a community of readers.

Preparing to Write

What seems more difficult to Scholes (that is, taking Luz’s side) seems to me in fact more compelling. I felt the first time I read this story that Luz was getting a raw deal, both from the soldier and from the narrator. Does that mean that I am responding from a woman’s point of view? And is that point of view necessarily “at a disadvantage”? Even if we assume that women tend to side with Luz, and that the evidence for doing so is weaker than the evidence

against Luz, we should still note that what is most obvious is often-times not very interesting in literary criticism. Making the case for Luz against the soldier is generally a more interesting endeavor than showing how Luz is cruel to the soldier.

Thus, I argue that Hemingway creates such apparent bias against Luz in order to expose it: that is, the soldier is so obviously being made into a martyr, and Luz into a villain, that the reader’s response ought to resist this bias and look more carefully at the text, seeing past the narrator’s obscuring point of view.

To give you an idea how I developed this response into an essay, I present below my notes and then the essay that resulted from them. Before examining these documents, you might want to sketch out your own response to Hemingway’s story. What does it say to you?

Emphasize that the narrator clearly takes his side: Hemingway is reminding us to consider the source. You can’t let the player’s coach call the balls in or out, and the narrator in this case is on the soldier’s team.

I could make Hemingway into the villain who tries to cover for the soldier, making Luz into an Eve figure. Or I could argue that Hemingway has the narrator make those moves, thus exposing him. I think the latter would be more fun.

What is the absolute worst evidence against Luz? Probably the reason she gives for the breakup. Focus on that reason: “theirs had been only a boy and girl affair.” The reader assumes, in the context created by the soldier’s spokesman, that this excuse is cruel and cold. But maybe it isn’t a rationalization, a way of getting her Italian major. Consider the possibility that Luz is right: they are immature; it is a boy/girl affair. Any evidence?

- The soldier does reveal his immaturity after Luz breaks it off: having sex in a taxicab, getting an S.T.D.—now that’s really mature.
- We also must wonder about his decision not to respond to Luz’s last letter. If he really loved Luz, wouldn’t he consider forgiving her? Doesn’t everyone make mistakes? Isn’t it possible that Luz just got confused and mistook infatuation with the major for love? At such a distance from the soldier, in such bleak circumstances, she simply erred. But the soldier is such an immature hothead that the idea of forgiving her never occurs to him.

- What is after all the basis of the soldier's relationship with Luz? If she is wrong, if it is more than a boy/girl affair, what evidence is there in the story of his maturity and the depth of his love? The story in fact tells us nothing that suggests any great passion on his part. He seems perfectly willing to leave her behind while he goes to the United States to get a job. What does he think of Luz? We know only two things, really: She was "cool and fresh" and "he thought of Luz in his bed." So far as we can tell, the relationship is based on sex, which isn't the strongest foundation for marriage.
- What is the evidence that Luz is a bad person? She does have sex with the soldier while he's a patient. She sleeps in his bed. She lets him get up and take the temperatures. But none of this makes her evil. He is a wounded soldier in a foreign country about to go back to the front. She is comforting him. She offers him love and affection. She is the nurse every wounded soldier no doubt dreams of. In letting the soldier get up and take the temperatures, Luz is arguably letting him act as her protector, strengthening his ego, which is likely to be fragile after his injury.
- Why is there an understanding that he won't drink and won't hang around with his friends? Is Luz being mean? Hemingway leaves this meaningful gap in the story, when he could have easily filled it in. Perhaps the soldier has a drinking problem. Early in the story other people do take away the bottles. The story doesn't say that Luz imposed this "no drinking" policy on him; perhaps he imposed it on himself to indicate his seriousness and trustworthiness to Luz.
- What does it mean when Luz breaks it off? Had there been a formal proposal, an acceptance, a ring, an engagement? All the reader knows is that the two are sleeping together and that they come to view each other as married—at least from the soldier's perspective. Hemingway says the understanding is that "he should go home so they might be married." What does "might" mean here? If they wanted to get married before he went back to the front, why didn't they arrange it when he returned? Such unexplained gaps must lead the reader to wonder about the facts. *Has* the

soldier come to assume something that just isn't the case? He assumes, because they are sleeping together, they're going to get married? And poor Luz, feeling sorry for his wounds and his inevitable return to danger doesn't have the heart to tell him it just isn't that serious.

- If they really were in love, why might Luz fall for the Italian major? The reader isn't told anything about what things look like from her perspective. Does he write letters? Does he get a job? Does he follow through on his "no drinking" pledge? If he *does* get a job, then why hasn't Luz already come over? It seems likely, in fact, the more one thinks about it, that something is seriously wrong on his end. Hemingway, by withholding vital information, allows the reader to jump to conclusions—conclusions that the careful reader must eventually withdraw. The reader leaps to conclusions, much like the soldier.

Shaping

Based on these notes, which meditated on the possibility that Luz is being set up, and that the reader ought to see through this unfair treatment, I sketched out a draft of the main points I might want to make in articulating my response. Here's what I wrote:

Main point:

Luz is right. It was a boy and girl affair.

Evidence:

- Their relationship is apparently based on sex; plus, some questionable ethics are involved in their affair.
- The soldier appears to be unreliable: Luz is afraid he won't get a job but will just drink and run around. Since she doesn't come to the United States, it appears that she may have been right.
- Luz obviously wasn't ready to get married, or she would have married him when he returned to the front, before he returned to the States. She just couldn't break his heart so soon after the war.

- He doesn't respond to her last letter; he doesn't try to win her back. Instead he responds with reckless indulgence. Our first impulse is to feel sorry for him; our more reasoned response is to fault him.

Problems:

- If Luz has no intention of marrying him, it is only momentarily kind to string him along.
- If Luz aims to get him to the States, where he'll slowly forget about her, then why do they have this understanding about his drinking and socializing?

Drafting

At this point, I feel ready to write a draft. After several tries, and some rethinking and rewriting, here is the essay I produced.

The Longer View of Hemingway's "A Very Short Story"

The obvious response described: the set-up.

Why this response occurs (point of view): more set-up for an alternative response.

How third person seems like first.

Most readers of Hemingway's "A Very Short Story" will naturally pity the poor nameless soldier. He is wounded in the war, and then his fiancée breaks off their relationship when she falls for an Italian major. Her name, Luz, which might be pronounced like "lose," points to his fate: where women are involved, he will lose. As a final indignity and injury, another woman gives him gonorrhoea, emphasizing his status as a victim and a loser—because of women.

Although the main villain is Luz, his experience with the salesgirl, who wounds him in a different way, suggests quite simply that women are untrustworthy, evil, dangerous—as bad as the war, it seems.

But this immediate reaction of pity is the effect of our point of view. Although the story is told in third person, Hemingway actually gives us, as Robert Scholes points out, what is essentially the soldier's point of view. Repeatedly in the brief story, we are told what he experiences and what he is thinking. In the opening, for

instance, we are told that "he could look out over the top of the town." We learn that Luz "was cool and fresh in the hot night"—a perception that clearly is his. We know his motivation for trying not to talk under anaesthetic (he does not want to "blab"), and we know how many letters he received and what was in them. We never know, however, what Luz is really thinking, and we learn the content of her letters from his perspective, when he reads them. The real context of their writing is hidden from the reader.

But Hemingway gives the careful reader plenty of clues that suggest we should look closer, overcoming the limitations of the narrative's point of view. Is Luz in fact entirely the villain, and the soldier purely the innocent victim?

Our opinion of Luz is of course influenced by the fact that in falling for the Italian major, she betrays the American soldier. There is little question that Luz made a mistake, but it is also clear that she pays for her mistake, for "The major did not marry her in the spring, or any other time." And when Luz writes to the soldier about the major's departure, she is perhaps attempting to resurrect her relationship with the soldier, but he fails to respond. The soldier cannot forgive her, apparently.

Nor, it seems, can many readers. The most important reason, I believe, is Luz's letter breaking off her relationship with the soldier. Specifically, her assertion that "theirs had been only a boy and girl affair" seems especially thoughtless and cruel. It is bad enough to be dumped, but it is even worse to learn that your own relationship was, in your partner's view, immature and superficial. But before we damn Luz's insensitivity, we ought to consider the possible validity of her remark. In other words, is she possibly right? Was their relationship only a boy and girl affair?

Transition to a different response, one that looks beyond the point of view.

This focuses on the crucial factor in our response to Luz: she betrays him.

The letter is most important in shaping this negative response to Luz.

My response, contrasting the obvious response: Luz may be right.

I see Luz's immaturity easily.

I also see the soldier's immaturity.

Most immature: his response to Luz's breakup.

How I respond to earlier evidence of his immaturity.

What in fact is the basis of their relationship? It appears to be only physical. All we know of his view of Luz is that she is "cool and fresh." She sounds more like a soft drink or a vegetable than a partner for life. Luz is after all sleeping in the hospital with one of her patients, and another pronunciation of her name, as "loose," may also be appropriate. When she says their relationship was immature, perhaps she accurately assesses her own behavior. The conditions, to be sure, were extraordinary: it is wartime, and the wounded soldier is returning to the front. I can understand Luz's looseness, but I can also agree that she is immature.

Her assessment of the soldier's maturity also seems accurate to me. Just look at his response to her last letter. He goes from hospital-bed sex to taxicab sex. Hemingway provides the tawdry details to emphasize his poor judgment: "A short time after [her letter] he contracted gonorrhea from a sales girl in a loop department store while riding in a taxicab through Lincoln Park." The poor soldier is wounded again in "combat," but surely this problem is his own fault. It is not Luz's fault, nor even the salesgirl's fault, is it? Even if we grant that mature and thoughtful people might contract a sexually transmitted disease, and that things were much different back then, the circumstances here still do not suggest responsible behavior. In fact, it is hard for me to imagine how he could be more immature, unless perhaps he had sex on the sidewalk with a prostitute.

I also notice the soldier's promise not to drink, nor to see "his friends or anyone." Given the reference early in the story to drinking on the roof, I have to wonder if he has a drinking problem. I wonder why they did not marry when he returned from the front. There was

not sufficient time before he left, but surely there is enough time when he gets back. It seems fair to suspect that the lack of time was just a convenient excuse. Likewise, why does he go ahead and leave Luz if he is unhappy with the arrangement? How long does it take him to get a job? Does he in fact get one? If so, then why is Luz still overseas? We are not told many things we need to know to evaluate his responsibility, but what is left out, together with what we do know, does suggest to me that Luz's view may not be thoughtless or cruel, but simply accurate. Theirs was indeed a boy and girl affair. At least Luz is perceptive enough to see it.

I think Luz is right: I can see her side.

PRACTICING READER-RESPONSE CRITICISM

I offer here two works along with some questions intended to stimulate your response, helping you to develop a reader-response essay. These are just sample questions; other ones will probably occur to you. The important thing is to generate materials that allow you to articulate your response. Without you, there is no response.

Since There's No Help (1619)

Michael Drayton

Since there's no help, come, let us kiss and part,—
 Nay, I have done, you get no more from me;
 And I am glad, yea glad with all my heart,
 That thus so cleanly I myself can free;
 Shake hands for ever, cancel all our vows, 5
 And when we meet at any time again,
 Be it not seen in either of our brows
 That we one jot of former love retain.
 Now at the last gasp of Love's latest breath,
 When his pulse failing, Passion speechless lies, 10
 When Faith is kneeling by his bed of death,
 And Innocence is closing up his eyes,—

Now if thou would'st, when all have given him over,
From death to life thou might'st him yet recover.

Questions

1. As you read the first line, what scene do you imagine taking place? At the end of the first line, what tone do you imagine the speaker is using?
2. How do the next three lines (2–4) affect your perception of the speaker's tone? What do the words "cleanly" and "free" suggest about the speaker's tone?
3. The speaker says about ten times (depending on how you count them) that the lovers should break it off. Why all the repetition? And why the extreme declaration that not "one jot of former love" should remain?
4. Imagine yourself as the person being addressed in this poem. How would you feel after line 8?
5. How does your view of the relationship change in the last six lines? How does presenting "Love" as a dying person affect your response?
6. The poem speaks to "you." Who is this "you"? What clues does the poem give us about the character of "you"?
7. Sometime around 1591 Michael Drayton fell totally in love with Anne Goodere (he said he lost his mind over her). This sonnet was probably written shortly after that, even though it was not published until 1619. Anne Goodere married Sir Henry Rainsford in 1596; Drayton never married. But he did spend every summer at Clifford Hall, the country home of Anne and Henry, his passion apparently turning into a deep friendship. How does this information affect your response to the poem?

Killing the Bear (1991)

Judith Minty

- 1 She has strung the hammock between two birch trees at the edge of the clearing. Now she drifts in and out of the light there and drowsily studies the pattern made by the rope's weaving and the flickering leaves.
- 2 When she had the dog, he stretched out beneath the hammock. Hackles raised, growling and nipping at flies, he'd

meant to save her from shadows. In truth, he startled at noises, even at shifts in the wind, and she ended up more his protector than the other way around.



- 3 There were wolves at the little zoo when she was a child. She heard them howling from her aunt's kitchen and went to see them up close.
- 4 And a bear.
- 5 Three times she visited, slowly circling the bear pen, but he was always sleeping. He looked like a bundle of clothes by the dead tree. His fence was electrified and posted with signs, and she was afraid to touch the iron bars.
- 6 The wolves set off a chorus of neighborhood dogs. Their calling floated back and forth all that summer vacation.



- 7 She lies in the hammock every afternoon, her life in the rhythm of the woods. Up at dawn to the shrill pitch of bluejays. Logs tossed into the stove, match lit, breath steaming in the cabin's chill. Trip to the outhouse, coffee perking, bucket of water from the river. The rest of the morning, ping of nails driven into boards. Her porch is nearly done. One room and another room. Something inside and something out.
- 8 The afternoon silence and the sway of the hammock lull her and when she hears a low guttural, she thinks, at first, it is the dog. Then she remembers the dog is gone.
- 9 She struggles to sit up and makes the hammock sway crazily.
- 10 A bear stands beyond the pines—small jets of eyes, heavy black coat. He snuffles, then drops on all fours and weaves into the forest.
- 11 Her hands lift to cover her breasts.



- 12 Her favorite doll was a stuffed animal and she slept with it close to her heart. She was nine when her mother said, "Give me your bear for three months. Let's see if you can stop sucking your thumb."
- 13 She tried very hard to stop, and when the time was up, she asked for the bear again.
- 14 Her mother said, "Another month."

15 One day, as she sat in the kitchen watching a cake being stirred and poured into the pan and then put into the oven, it came to her that her bear was gone, that it had been thrown down the incinerator.

16 Only a few years ago, her mother told her, misspeaking even then, "I'm sorry for burning the animal in you."



17 Her hammer has stopped its thump and echo. The roof is laid. The porch smells of fresh paint. She has hauled the old sofa out and can sit there in the evenings, if she wants.

18 When the bear understood that she was alone, he came closer. The first time, she was reading in the hammock and heard something like a sigh. She knew it was him, even before she caught a glimpse of black gliding through the woods. The next time, he was so close she smelled him—a terrible, rancid odor. Without looking, she swung out of the hammock and walked to the cabin. Two days later, he stood next to the birch tree, breath rattling his throat. If she'd turned, she could have touched the bristles on his shoulder.



19 The Gilyak tribe honored him. They put his head on a stake outside their doors and made offerings to it. On Yezo Island, the Ainus thought he was a man trapped inside the body of a bear. If a hunter found a cub, he brought it to his wife who suckled it.

20 In Lapland he was King of Beasts. The men lived alone, purifying themselves, for three days after the hunt. At the funeral, after they had feasted, they put his bones back together in the ground.

21 Once she spent an evening with two Swedes. At dinner, their wineglasses held the tint of leaves. Ole, the painter, said, "You live in green light." Gunnar told magic tales. "When a woman meets a bear in the woods, she must lift her skirt. Then he will let her pass."



22 In the travelogue about Alaska, the Kodiak caught a salmon, his claws stretched out like fingers. When the second

bear approached, he reared up. He looked soft and gentle, as if he were greeting a friend, until, with a sweep of his paw, he split open the head of the other.

23 In college, a classmate told about the summer he'd worked at Yellowstone and got too close. He never felt the nick, only knew when blood trickled down his forehead.

24 There was also the news story about the woman dragged from her tent in the middle of the night, crying, "He's killing me. Oh God, he's killing me." The bear carried the woman away, his claws tangled in her hair, ripping at her arm.



25 When she drove to town for supplies, she bought a secondhand rifle. She keeps it loaded now, propped against the doorjamb inside the cabin.

26 The clerk at the hardware store showed her how to fire it, how to aim along the sights. He winked and told her she could get a man with it at twenty yards. She said she didn't need a man, just wanted to do some hunting.

27 She misses the dog. She carries the gun awkwardly over her shoulder when she goes to the woodpile, or to the river.



28 Her calendar hangs on the cabin wall, each day of summer marked with an X, the rest of the year clean and open. She turns up the wick on the lamp and starts to brush her hair, staring at her reflection in the windowpane.

29 She is thinking about leaving. She is thinking about driving out of the clearing.

30. When the scream begins, it breaks against the walls. It shudders in a moan, then rises. Everything, even the wind, holds its breath.

31 It is over so quickly she almost believes it didn't happen and raises the brush again, and barely recognizes herself in the glass. She runs to the lamp and blows out the flame, then to the window, hoping she will not see what must be there.



32 She did not shoot cleanly the first time. When he ripped the screen and tore the siding loose, she stood on the porch, gun leveled.

33 "Go away."

34 He was no more than ten feet from her when she fired. He spun around and fell to the ground, then raised himself up.

35 When she realized she had only wounded him, she ran into the cabin and turned the lock and leaned against the door. She could hear him thrashing and bellowing in the bushes and against the trees.

36 She knew she would have to step onto the porch again, go to the ripped screen, with nothing but night air between them. She would have to take aim and shoot again. And if that didn't stop him, she would have to slip the bolt and reload the rifle and stand there and shoot him again until he stopped bawling and weeping and falling down and getting up and lurching against the trees.

37 When they began this, she never thought she would have to kill him so slow. She never dreamed she would have to hurt him so much.



38 It is nearly dawn when he dies, when she gets up from her chair, when his groans stop pricking her skin. She takes the flashlight and goes out on the porch. She shines the beam around in the gray light and sees the blood dried on the new screen and on the fresh-painted sill and splattered on the leaves around the cabin. She sees the trampled bushes and broken branches and where he crawled into the weeds.

39 She shines the arc out, light bouncing on tree and log, until it lands on a black heap, huddled in the middle of the clearing.

40 As soon as the sun rises, she begins to dig, and by midafternoon she is through with it—the rope tied to him, the car backed up to the hole, the rifle and box of ammunition remembered and dropped in next to him, the musty soil put back, and branches over that.

41 Then she bathes with the last of the water from the river and sweeps the cabin floor, thinking that rain will wash away the blood and that, soon enough, snow will fall and cover it all.



42 It is dark when she gets to the state line. Next summer, she will dig him up to take the claws.

Questions

1. What associations do the first two paragraphs bring to your mind? Can you imagine yourself in a similar scene? How would you feel? How do you react to the suggestion that "she" ended up more the dog's protector "than the other way around"?
2. Do paragraphs 3–6 alter the mood created by the first two paragraphs? What contrasting moods are created by the third section?
3. What is your response to the following sentence? "Her hands lift to cover her breasts." For instance, what expectations does the statement create for you?
4. How do paragraphs 12–16 affect the reader's understanding of her attitude toward bears?
5. How does her construction of a porch, and the movement of her sofa onto the porch, affect your response to the bear's appearance? What does the bear's smell contribute to your response? How about the bear's sex? (The bear is a "him," not an "it.")
6. Paragraphs 19–21 observe how various cultures have honored bears, but it also has its ominous aspects. Explain how the reader's sense of danger builds in the seventh section.
7. Why are the summer days marked with an X? Does that have anything to do with bears?
8. Describe your reaction to the paragraphs 32–41.
9. Is the final sentence surprising? Why, or why not?

WORKS CITED: READER RESPONSE

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RECOMMENDED FURTHER READING: READER RESPONSE

- Beach, Richard. *A Teacher's Introduction to Reader-Response Theories*. Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1993. A very comprehensive overview of the wide range of reader-oriented approaches.
- Berg, Temma. "Psychologies of Reading." In *Tracing Literary Theory*. Ed. Joseph Natoli. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1987. 248–77. A lively discussion of the way personality affects textual reception.
- Gaillet, Lynee Lewis. "Reading." In *Keywords in Composition Studies*. Ed. Paul Heilker and Peter Vandenberg. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1996. 196–200. A brief yet expansive view of our current conceptions of making meaning. Includes a concise treatment of reader-response criticism in the context of the teaching of writing.
- Holland, Norman. "Hamlet—My Greatest Creation." *Journal of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis* 3 (1975): 419–27. A classic essay, often reprinted and excerpted, arguing that meaning is not discovered, but is actively made as the reader responds.
- Iser, Wolfgang. *The Implied Reader*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1974. Influential and still readable, Iser's work convincingly argues that texts provide cues that indicate an implied reader—a role the real reader may assume, play, or reject.
- Jauss, Hans. *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*. Trans. Bahti. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1982. A challenging book that places reader-response in historical context: how does a reader's historical position affect his or her response? Should we attempt to respond as the initial readers of a work? Is that possible?

- Peckham, Morse. "The Problem of Interpretation." *College Literature* 6 (1979): 1–17. A compelling and entertaining argument leading to the conclusion that the meaning of a statement is the response to that statement.
- Wimsatt, W. K., "The Affective Fallacy." In *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*. Ed. W. K. Wimsatt, Jr. Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1954. The famous essay articulating the New Critical axiom that literary criticism is not properly concerned with the reader's response, but should focus on the work itself. Reader-response critics would embrace this "fallacy."