



## 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 to this day a popular and 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 critics provide innovatively different readings of the same work. Developments in literary criticism seem more like changes of fashion than the evolution of science. 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 and constructed 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). Her *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 40 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 many teachers have contemplated it with horror. "There's no right or wrong," as one teacher said to me; in Bleich's reader-response criticism, "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 William 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 mementos 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.

Thus, Bleich sees the reader's response evolving by "negotiation" within a community of readers, and 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 unsupportable 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. For both Bleich and Rosenblatt, the reader ought not simply respond and move on. Rather, the reader shares a response, and considers the responses of others, and reconsiders the text, and evolves his or her responses.

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 super-slow 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, embedded 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. In 1994 Fish turned his attention to the law and politics, publishing *There's No Such Thing as Free Speech: And It's a Good Thing Too*, and in 1999 *The Trouble with Principle*. These books seek to demolish the idea of universal and impersonal principles, arguing that meaning is always created in a particular context by particular people. Our values, in other words, are a kind of reader's response to our culture and history.

Reader-response criticism in all its variety is closely related to the study of rhetoric, a field that for over 2,500 years has focused on how speakers and writers can shape the responses of their audiences. Rhetoric is concerned primarily with how to generate a response: how to invent material, how to arrange it, how to style it, how to present it, in such a way as to elicit the desired reaction. Audience-oriented criticism moves in the other direction, in a sense, constructing a response and analyzing how it has been produced. Rhetoric generally has been thought of in terms of political and ceremonial and judicial texts, and reader-response criticism has mostly been concerned with literary works. But the resources of rhetoric certainly can be brought to literary study, and reader-response criticism can be used on any kind of text. Literary study is in fact so valuable for such a wide range of endeavors precisely because we are asked to think about how we ought to respond, and how that response is being created. And rhetorical concepts are, not surprisingly, often quite useful. Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, for

instance, says that a speaker has three major strategies to draw upon: we are influenced by how we perceive the person speaking, the appeal to "ethos"; we're influenced by logic, by agreeing with certain assumptions and their logical implications, which is the appeal to "logos"; and we are swayed by emotion, by the appeal to our fears, and self-interests, and desires, the appeal to "pathos." This simple triad is a useful tool for analyzing a presidential speech and a poem alike, helping us to think about how our responses are shaped.

## 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 Web sites 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; 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 text's different versions were there all along, just as static as the text you are holding. In any event, hypertexts underscore 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.

## HOW TO DO READER-RESPONSE CRITICISM

### Preparing to Respond

Imagine that you've been asked to write about the following poem, drawing on reader-response 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

*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 15
we are connoisseurs and commandoes we are rowdy as a drum not shy like Narcissus nor pale as plum	20
then it is I want to hymn and halleluja	25

sing sweet sweet jubilee  
 you my religion  
 and I a wicked nun

(1987)

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 as starting points. 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, or offensive, depending on the responder, 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 setup? 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 treacherous and fragile. I bet the nun will repent and reform.

Which of these responses is correct? Both are. Both are thoughtful and well-supported 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

The title, “Love Poem #1,” does not seem imaginative or romantic, and 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? Yes, 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.

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—and that seems good. 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 the violence of "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, beginning to evade meaning, the poem moves to its climatic ending, comparing the speaker's feelings to a religious ecstasy:

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 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. 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 and to read what other readers say and enrich our own responses. 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 readings.

You can apply the strategies of reader-response criticism to anything—even to objects or stimuli that we do not literally "read," such as cultural and political events, even paintings and sculptures. You simply need to be able to describe how the "reader" or viewer or listener (hypothetical or real) responds. Think for instance about the sequence of events at a football game, and how the spectators respond as the spectacle unfolds. Why do sporting events typically begin, for instance, with the singing of the national anthem? How are spectators expected to respond? One might argue that the national

anthem tends to remind antagonistic fans of the citizenship that they have in common, encouraging them to respond to the game in a better spirit of sportsmanship. Or, perhaps the national anthem lends an air of importance to what follows, suggesting that football is somehow more than just entertainment, but somehow has some significance, and should be taken seriously and passionately. Or perhaps the national anthem marks a boundary, signaling a transition from the real world (before the anthem) to the "play" world, setting aside our concerns and worries while we think only about a game.

Whatever we're analyzing with reader-response strategies, two moves seem especially worth noting here. First, although a response might feel seamless, continuous, flowing, the description of a response must somehow be broken up into parts. Language moves through time, in sentences with subjects and verbs and the rest, and so the description of a response must move through time, forcing us to divide the response up into pieces. The immediate impression that one gets from a painting or sculpture will be difficult to describe, of course, because it feels like an all-at-once experience. You can talk about what one notices first, and second, and third, moving around the canvas or object, or through the event or the text, but you are inevitably making choices about where that first bit of response begins and ends, and the second begins and ends, and so forth. For people who want there to be one right answer, and for everyone to see and experience things the same way, reader-response criticism is bound to be pretty frustrating. For people who rejoice in the diversity of experiences and responses and opinions, reader-response criticism will be especially interesting, not only because of our different orientations and abilities, but also because of the different ways that we partition and perceive our experiences. Texts, films, objects, events generally provide us with cues about how we ought to comprehend their parts, or (depending on the perspective) we ascribe these cues to whatever we interpret. Part of your job in constructing a response, then, will be to determine the segments of whatever you're responding to.

The second move involves understanding how the perception of genre affects the response. If we recognize that a work is a detective story, or a situation comedy, or a sermon, then we have a repertoire of expectations and reactions that come into play. The *Star Trek* television shows, for instance, have all begun in ways that immediately identify the kind of thing that we are watching: The original *Star Trek*, with Captain Kirk, Mr. Spock, and the rest, featured an opening credit sequence that showed the *Enterprise* in space, coming into view in one corner of the screen, zipping across and disappearing from



the other corner in an instant. Viewers not only have a response to that scene, identified as a discrete bit of the show, but they also create certain expectations about what will follow. *Star Trek* famously depicted an optimistic vision of the future, in which science and technology will have solved many of our current problems and advanced humankind into space, "the final frontier." This opening scene, displaying a faster-than-light starship, suggests that we should view what follows as science fiction: There will be marvels, but they should be plausible within the terms of what we know and can extrapolate about science today. All the subsequent incarnations of *Star Trek*—*Next Generation*, *Deep Space Nine*, *Voyager*, and *Enterprise*—presented some variation on this outer space vista: *Next Generation* showed incredibly beautiful planetary systems and the new *Enterprise* passing by them; *Deep Space Nine* showed us the space station and an amazing interspatial wormhole; *Voyager* depicted strange planets and phenomena, and the ship jumping into warp speed; and *Enterprise* preceded a similar jump to warp speed with various images of human exploration, from the historical past and the imagined future. Viewers familiar with the *Star Trek* series and with science fiction in general are going to respond differently from viewers unfamiliar with either or both. Although educators may tend to think of reader-response criticism as an equal-opportunity sort of approach, allowing every reader (or respondent) to have his or her say about the work's effects, this simple reference to the beginnings of a television franchise emphasizes that our responses depend on what we know: If we understand the genre of a particular work, if we have experience with other similar works, then our responses will be more informed, quite possibly richer. Even those teachers who insist that there are no wrong responses (which is indeed a liberating principle, inviting students to boldly go where their reading and responding has never gone before) still must acknowledge that we become in some sense better at reading and responding with practice. And a key part of what we learn has to do with recognizing, at the outset, the kind of thing we are experiencing.

## **THE WRITING PROCESS: A SAMPLE ESSAY**

### **Preparing to Respond**

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

### **A Very Short Story**

*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

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