

Nonfiction and Fiction: Does Genre  
Influence Reader Response?

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# NONFICTION AND FICTION: DOES GENRE INFLUENCE READER RESPONSE?

by

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(ABSTRACT)

This study explores aspects of the theoretical basis of Louise M. Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading and its focus on the reader's efferent and aesthetic stances during transaction with nonfiction and fiction. The study explores the following questions:

Does genre (nonfiction or fiction) influence the reader's response to a literary text?

Does a reader's process of reading change during a nonfictional reading compared to a fictional one?

Are there certain factors that persuade a reader to view a nonfictional piece of writing differently than a fictional one?

To examine these questions and to ensure the validity of the study, I wrote a story titled "The Exit" and presented the writing to three freshman English classes, first as nonfiction and then during the next class period as fiction. I chose to follow Rosenblatt's class procedure: an initial reading with free responses, an interchange of ideas, and then a rereading of the same text. For research purposes I needed bulk written and verbal responses to compare and contrast. This three-day immersion in nonfiction and fiction reflections produced sufficient data to analyze: (1) written free responses from the initial

reading of the text as nonfiction; (2) recorded audio tapes of their small groups, responding to five inquiry questions regarding the nonfiction text; (3) written individual take-home responses to the same five inquiry questions; (4) written free responses from the second reading of the text as fiction; (5) recorded audio tapes of the small group discussions on their nonfiction and fiction responses; and (6) recorded audio tapes of the entire class reflections on the responses to reading the story as both nonfiction and fiction. During this expedition I kept a journal of each day's events so that as my students and I experienced this exploration together, I could capture what we all were feeling and thinking as it was actually happening.

Although the students were unaware of genre influence until the third-day class reflection, there were distinct differences in student responses to nonfiction and fiction. These students predominately read nonfiction aesthetically and fiction efferently. In this study with these students, genre did influence the reader's response; the reader's process of reading did change during the nonfictional reading compared to a fictional one; and there were certain factors which persuaded the reader to view the nonfictional piece of writing differently than the fictional one. The contrast and comparison of the students' responses to nonfiction and fiction are shown in a detailed Venn diagram.

In addition, I have included an extensive essay titled "The Transactional Dance: Louise Rosenblatt's Presence in the History of Literary Criticism." Her transactional theory of reading transcends time and continues to invite research.

DEDICATION

TO MY FATHER, **WILLIAM CLEON CROCKETT**  
WHO MADE READING MY *MAGNIFICENT OBSESSION*

and

TO MY MOTHER, **ISHMAEL HUGHES CROCKETT**  
WHO MADE READING MY *GREAT EXPECTATIONS*

and

TO MY SISTERS, **PATSY, NANCY, and GLORIA**  
WHO MADE READING MY *DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE*

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a difference in the lives they will touch. They have taught me as I have tried to teach them.

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Another life who has made a profound difference on mine is Louise M. Rosenblatt. I express my deep gratitude for her willingness to confer with me on this research. Her scholarship has changed the way that I read and the way that I teach others to read literature. Her theory has enhanced the enjoyment of reading and has created a very transactional relationship with my students and me.

In life, one is very fortunate to have transactional relationships with others. I express my gratitude to a dear friend, Mary Lee. Mary Lee is the type of friend that most people only read about in books. She has shown my family and me an unconditional love that only saints and poets know. Her generosity of spirit, her calm and confident reassurance, and her visionary guidance has made her an honorary member of and a kindred spirit to my family.

And when I think of my own kindred spirit, I will always think of my sister, Gloria. There are no words ever to convey my gratitude and love for her. She is my greatest blessing and the soul of my accomplishments. The completion of this

paper is a product of her passionate perseverance for my research and her unflinching belief in me. When we were little and the others were off playing and out having fun, she would take me by the hand and say, “Come on Aleta. I won’t leave you behind!” To this day, she never has.

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## Chapter I. Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory: What Happens When a Family Reads to Share?

**CHILDREN ARE A GOOD WAY TO START PEOPLE.** When I read that line in a teacher's magazine, it brought back a time in my life that I will never forget and a person who I will never forget. That line reminded me of my father, our little reading room at home, and his philosophy of reading with his children.

My father believed in children, and most of all, he believed in his four little girls. I was the youngest. And, I assumed the role of the youngest with both resistance at times and surrender until I learned to read. Reading was the beginning of a new-found independence for me and a new-found self-identity. I owe this independence and self-identity to my father and to his practice of empowerment through our family-reading discussions.

I came from a family environment that believed empowerment came through reading and through encouraging self-expression. My sisters and I were encouraged to read everything that interested us and some things that didn't. In fact, reading became a natural part of our daily routine--we went to school, we did our homework, we ate our oatmeal, we did our chores, and we read our stories and books. About twice a week after supper dishes were washed and dried and put away, my whole family (my father and mother, my three sisters and I) would gather in a little reading room off from our kitchen to share with each other our "reading-in-progress." That phrase was coined by my mother

to always keep us reading something. She wanted us to have an ongoing affair with words and thoughts and ideas.

My sister Gloria who was next to me in age had remarkable reading comprehension. She devoured her homework, books, recipes, and magazines and then would express them so eloquently at our discussions. She was my hero then and still is today. I wanted to see the world through her eyes, and I wanted to be just like her. But I knew that I couldn't because my father and mother expected and demanded that each of us was to be our own persons. We were expected to cultivate the talents that were ours and nurture them to the fullest. In fact, we were even taught to be our own best company so that we would never feel alone no matter where we were.

But, Gloria and I were pals and I was her shadow; so we would try to be the first ones in that room to decide where we were going to sit. My father said that we both chased the moon and raced the wind to be the first in that room. But we soon learned, though, that it really didn't matter where we sat because each place was equal to the rest. My mother and father saw to that. It was like King Arthur's round table--there was no authoritative head. I loved that feeling of equality. Inside this room my father and mother were fellow readers and questioners just like us. Outside our reading room, I continued to be the youngest of four daughters and had to earn my place and privileges. But in that room, my father and mother and sisters really listened to what I had to say and they would ask me questions and ask my opinions on topics of discussion as if I were someone whom they really respected and admired. Some nights I chose to lie on the floor while the others rose

tall above me on sofas or recliners, but I was as tall as they were when the reading discussions started.

Our discussions precipitated from extraordinary topics: from art to classical music to pop music to poetry to novels to the old west to sports to politics to religion to sex to dating to cooking to driving to causes bigger than life and even to Peter Rabbit and chamomile tea. Our education had no boundaries or limitations in that room. Everything imaginable was discussed--from integrity to sex to driving a clutch--my father could talk about all of these in the same breath and never bat an eye except perhaps to wink at my mother from time to time. If the topic were anywhere in our readings, it was discussed through our readings and through our own imaginations and reflections.

I could not wait for our discussion nights. Now as I reflect on these discussions I wonder which came first--my love of reading or my love of our discussions. Either way, reading was the dominant factor. And, we all contributed.

I left those discussions full of intrigue, full of wonder, full of vision, and full of myself. The mysteries and beauties of life continued to swirl in my head long after those discussions ended. What I liked so much about those nights was that we never left the discussions with doubts or fears or anxieties or embarrassment. Embarrassment could have easily crushed my feelings one evening if my father and mother had not handled the subject with charm and respect for all of us.

This embarrassing moment stemmed from my love for the poems of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. When I was around six or seven, I started to quote the poem

“There Was a Little Girl.”

There was a little girl  
Who had a little curl  
Right in the middle of her forehead;  
And when she was good  
She was very, very good,  
But when she was bad she was horrid.

Around eight or so my other favorite poem became Longfellow’s “Elizabeth.”

. . . Ships that pass in the night, and speak each other in passing,  
Only a signal shown and a distant voice in the darkness;  
So on the ocean of life we pass and speak one another,  
Only a look and a voice; then darkness again and a silence.

The first one I quoted for fun and a laugh and the second because my mother loved the name Elizabeth and I was intrigued by certain ships: the Titanic, galleons, sailing vessels on their way to the South Seas--it did not matter--I fancied them all. Whenever my sisters quoted lines from their favorite works, I would always begin mine by saying, “Now a line or two from Longfellow.” Dumb-sounding as it was, my father doted on it; so of course I continued to do it.

One night Nancy recited from a work she was reading, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great*

*Gatsby*, ending with Nick Caraway saying to Gatsby “You can’t repeat the past” and Gatsby replying, “Can’t repeat the past, of course you can.” Gloria chimed in saying that this line reminded her of the book she was reading by the author Thomas Wolfe called *You Can’t Go Home Again*. My parents liked it when we made associations. Gloria was never one to live in the past; that’s why she felt that the past could not be recovered--and that Gatsby lived in the past hoping to restore his future. I remember this well because that night Gloria told us that Thomas Wolfe had died on the same day I was born (September 15) and in the same year as Nancy (1938). And, that the novel, however, was published two years after his death in the year that she was born--1940. For an instant, Nancy, Gloria, and I felt a slight kinship to Thomas Wolfe. But this kinship did not last very long, for it was my turn to share something.

I had just turned nine or ten. Jokingly, I started off by saying that I thought a person could repeat the past and said “now a line or two from the past and from one of my favorite poets, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow,” when my father interrupted me by saying, “Aleta, it’s time to read other poets now--not just Longfellow.” I interrupted him and said that I was just trying to be cute and that this was really something new about the Longfellow poem that I had discovered at school.

“It’s a new version a friend told me in school today about ‘the little girl with the curl.’ She knew the poem but not the poet--so I told her I would tell her who wrote it if she would tell me the new version so that I could share it with my family.” My father beamed with pride. He wanted us to share our love of literature and reading with our

classmates. Reading to him was contagious and needed to be spread to others.

Leaning closer so that they could hear me, my family waited as I prepared myself. As always with poetry, I felt I needed to stand in order to recite. So, I rose and started:

There was a little girl

Who had a little curl

Right in the middle of her forehead;

When she was good

She was very, very good,

But when she was bad she was MARVELOUS!

Dead silence filled the room as I finished the ending. Then my two older sisters, Patsy and Nancy said, “We’re outta here!” And with that remark, they excused themselves and hurried upstairs to their rooms. Gloria looked at me with disbelief and grabbed for a pillow to cover her face. She was laughing so hard that she couldn’t stop.

My father looked at me and then at my mother and then back at me with a squint in his eye that always meant I had startled him. My mother, giggling a little to herself, tapped Gloria on her shoulder and told her to calm herself while my father went to the bottom of the stairs and insisted that Patsy and Nancy return to our discussion room.

During all of this I was still standing in the middle of the floor, thinking I had added something to the night’s discussion. I didn’t really know what it meant for the little girl with the curl to be “marvelous!” And, I really didn’t care; but I soon discovered what it meant. One word had opened up a whole new area of discovery for me.

That night and many more to come, we explored topics that I wasn't so sure I wanted to know about: prostitutes, sex for sale and for the asking, lewd behavior, foul words, growing up, and more. My questions were answered either by my parents or my sisters or by ourselves during reflection. I remember asking Gloria if she knew this stuff already. It took me awhile to understand some of these adult topics, but after asking everything under the sun that I didn't understand, it all became a little clearer. Even dealing with difficult topics, they continued to allow me to voice my thoughts.

At times, believe it or not, I had the answers to some of the others' questions. When they would say, "Aleta, how do you see this?" Or, "Aleta, what would you do in a situation similar to this one?" Or, "I bet Aleta can see other sides to this"--I would smile, straighten my shoulders, and respond with confidence and self-worth.

Little did I know then that my critical thinking skills were being sharpened and broadened. To me, it was just part of growing up in a family who openly discussed reading topics.

After that, however, I decided to read other poets and give Henry W. Longfellow a rest for awhile. And, the little girl with the curl who was marvelous when she was bad must have been aboard one of those ships that passed in the night because we didn't hear from her again for a long, long time.

What we read was very important to my father. Cooking recipes that my mother and sisters shared with us had special meanings and were taken very seriously by him. My sisters' romance stories were listened to by all of us over and over without any impatient

looks or condescending remarks from my father. He encouraged us to be loving, considerate, independent, and strong. He insisted that we become educated women who could think for ourselves and support ourselves no matter what. As I look back on these discussions, my father was probably the first feminist that I had ever met.

These meetings slowly molded our characters and dreams and ideals. We learned the meaning of honor, integrity, courage, compassion, individuality, discrimination, hurt and hate, insensitivity, impatience, and respect. We learned to honor and love the classics as well as the pop culture of that time. We honored reality as well as our imagination and creativity. We learned to cherish and love each other and ourselves. We learned the value of democracy, education and freedom as it applied to the world outside of our home and to the world inside our home. My father often quoted Jefferson, saying that “if a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be” (Lucas 468). We learned all of this through reading and our remarkable and uninhibited discussions of those readings.

One discussion in particular opened my eyes to a philosophy that my father cherished. And, like most of the things in our lives--this philosophy of his came from a book he had read and wanted to share with us--Lloyd C. Douglas' *Magnificent Obsession*. I'll never forget how I felt when he started to tell us what a magnificent obsession entailed. Oh, we all enjoyed the love story that Lloyd C. Douglas wrote and my sisters and mother cried a little at the ending of the book; but I was captured by its idealism long before my father had finished the last passage from the novel. I wanted a magnificent obsession of my

own. We adopted the book as our own.

Thirty-eight years later I would discover in one of her lectures that the writer Maya Angelou had done the very same thing with writings that she had loved. She embraced her audience with how literature had rescued her so many times because she had made it her own. From William Shakespeare to Edgar Allen Poe--it did not matter--both of those writers had written just for her. From the Shakespearian Sonnet 29, "When in disgrace with Fortune and men's eyes/I all alone bewep my outcast state" she quoted to her audience, she said she felt those words in her soul. She knew exactly what Shakespeare was saying even though she was just a poor little poverty-stricken black female in a little Arkansas town called Stamps. And her fascination and devotion to Poe was so personal that their relationship led her to call him "EAP." She had claimed the writings of these men as her own.

Back in 1957 I had claimed that novel by Douglas as my own. I knew that I had to have a cause bigger than life itself; therefore, I would practice the concepts of the magnificent obsession from that day forward.

My sister the very next week read the book on her own and shared it with her senior class as one of her high school book reports. So, my father's love of reading and his love of sharing with each other what we had read set us on a course that would eventually govern our lives forever. And, even when we got our first television, those reading-discussion nights remained sacred to us. Television seemed to isolate us from each other, but our reading nights brought us back together again.

The knowledge, the scholarship, the companionship, the camaraderie, the security and love that radiated from those discussions in that room--I still carry in my heart today. As I reflect on those moments, it's remarkable what all we did learn from those discussions; but at the time, we did not know just how much we were learning.

All my sisters and I knew was that we were having a wonderful time reading and responding to what we had read.

## Chapter II. Rosenblatt's Theory: What Happens When a Reader and a Text Meet?

### It's Transactional

The empowerment that I felt in that little reading room kept aglow the spark I had for reading. As I grew older though that spark was constantly being extinguished by school teachers. I wanted reading to be exactly the way that it had been in my home--exciting, passionate, combustible, and shared. I wanted my classmates, the teacher, and me to talk about what we had read for our class assignments. I wanted to hear their thoughts on what we read the night before. However, the teacher politely hushed us when we tried to share. He instructed us to answer questions from the back of the readings and to define vocabulary words and to write answers in our workbooks. Whenever we tried to share something about the stories with our classmates or ask their opinions on something from the story, he would call us down for talking out of turn and would occasionally write our names on the chalkboard for disrupting the class. I remember how embarrassed I felt as my name stared back at me from the chalkboard.

Eventually, I stopped trying to share my thoughts on what I had read; eventually, I stopped wanting to share my thoughts on what I had read.

Our literature lessons became very routinized and structured. The teacher had outlined on a tablet that he kept in front of him exactly what we needed to know. And when he would tell us something about the story or poem, he would check it off of his tablet and

go on to the next item on his list. Our reading adventures and explorations became a checked-off list of items on a tablet.

So, I became a product of a society of learners who waited to be told what to learn. It didn't take me very long to grow accustomed and comfortable with this approach to learning. Soon I sat at my desk in a quiet classroom along with my other classmates and waited to be taught something or told something. We became passive learners. Our names never appeared on the chalkboard anymore either for disrupting the class by expressing our own thoughts on what we had read or what we had learned.

After a while even the spark for reading, that once fueled my love of learning, grew dimmer as I supposedly became more educated. I had become the type of learner and reader whom Louise M. Rosenblatt termed as an "invisible eavesdropper" (*The Reader, the Text, the Poem 2*)--not a dynamic participatory learner--but a static invisible eavesdropper whose role in the classroom made little or no contribution to learning. "Like Ralph Ellison's hero, the reader might say, 'I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me'" (1).

But what did I care? I was quite content to be spoon-fed. I didn't have to think--all I had to do was memorize the teacher's answers from his lecture notes and return them back to him on his tests or look up a few vocabulary words or work a few pages in the back of the chapters in the text. . . and maybe, the teacher would assign an essay or two for us to recapitulate his ideas in a neat little form on paper. Whatever he assigned, I did--in a robotic trance.

By the time I graduated from college and was assigned my own classroom with my own students, I was ready and still robotic. I had my lists of things that I thought my students should learn, and I was prepared to start checking them off that list one by one. As I reflect here, I can easily understand how teachers and professors can have yellowed lecture notes from years gone by. They were programmed that way; learning was very structured; lecturing was very structured; and, in some disciplines old knowledge was so sacred and revered that new knowledge seemed sacrilegious.

On a typical teaching day, I could go into the classroom, lecture nonstop for seventy-five minutes, say thank you very much for your undivided attention, turn and stagger out of the room in total exhaustion. My students, their tongues dragging the floor, would then stagger out behind me, trying to race each other to the water fountain and to an open window for fresh air. I could lecture one full week nonstop on Prufrock alone. And with Whitman's *Song of Myself*--I wouldn't even stop long enough to take a breath! I thought this was teaching.

I taught literature this way because I had been taught literature this way. And according to me, there was no other way to teach literature--until 1987--when I read a book by Louise M. Rosenblatt who had revolutionized the world of literary criticism (see Appendix A for a brief look at Rosenblatt's influence on Literary Criticism) by creating a way of empowering students, readers, and teachers with her transactional theory of reading literature; and whose theory continues to celebrate the human spirit, making it limitless, timeless, and free. In very simple terminology, Rosenblatt's theory is what

happens when a reader and a text come together. She called it “transaction” between the reader and the text. The reader and the text with each reading both change through this transaction. The text, having a special meaning for each reader at any given moment in time, transacts with this reader; and this reader, bringing his/her uniqueness (gender, age, experiences, etc.) transacts with the text. Her theory even though it was first published in 1938 still prepares a person (of any age) for--not just a future life--but a full life as John Dewey had advocated in the era of progressive education. And, her theory works.

I have seen first hand what a difference it makes and has made in the lives of my own students and in my own life and in the lives of my sisters. The most frail and enslaved spirits have found new self-worth and a liberation from self-induced and societal-induced limitations. Her theory does indeed celebrate the renaissance of the human spirit. That’s where the beauty lies.

The beauty of her theory lies in the fact that it can start at any age; it can empower at any age, and it can celebrate the human spirit at any age. No other literary theory can make that claim. This theory empowers all readers of all abilities and not just some readers with the best abilities. To this day, I often wonder if my father and mother knew that they were practicing Louise Rosenblatt’s transactional theory when they encouraged my sisters and me to explore literature through our own self-expressions and reflections. Rosenblatt’s book, *Literature As Exploration*, was first published in 1938, so it had been in circulation awhile before I was born. I wished I had learned of her theory sooner so

that I would have had an opportunity to talk with my parents about it while they were both still living. When it came to reading, they certainly practiced what she had advocated all of those years before her theory was taken seriously.

Many benefits came to us because of our transaction with literature in that room. As Rosenblatt wrote in *Literature As Exploration*, “The great abstractions--love, honor, integrity, compassion, individuality, democracy--will take on for him [reader] human meaning” (276). The scholar Gordon Pradl surmised that Rosenblatt’s work offers a “universal appeal for the importance of literature as a way of exploring and celebrating human experience” (31).

Reading is such a powerful tool. How can teachers use Rosenblatt’s theory in the classroom? Teachers already know that teaching is a two-way transaction between themselves and their students. “Teachers need to help specific human beings--not some generalized fiction called the student--to discover the pleasures and satisfaction of literature” (*Literature As Exploration* 34 ). An important instructional objective from a transactional perspective is to foster the student’s trust in the expression of his own experience with a text. Empowerment for the student and reader comes through reading literature and his active self-expression of his ideas from the reading. Many times our students come from an environment where self-expression is severely suppressed. Reading becomes their only escape and their only friend as Jim Garrison in his article on transactional reading reminds us.

For young readers books are friends; often the best friends they have. Books can

open up worlds of possibility and satisfy needs and desires, and sustain hopes and dreams when all others, including teachers, parents, and peers, fail. Books are warm and caring friends. They can also discipline and disturb us by listening well, speaking sincerely, and giving us a different perspective on things. (1)

Rosenblatt's theory empowers all readers of all abilities and not just some readers with the best abilities. It will help to turn all students into better readers and to prepare them to be better citizens.

It must not be forgotten that the student--no matter whether he is a young child or a college boy soon to enter adult life-- is already functioning in society. He has to make choices; he must set up goals for himself in his daily life; he must develop a sense of priorities. And these demands he will continue to meet throughout his life. (*Literature As Exploration* 169)

In reading, as they do in learning, students must have a two-way transactional relationship. What exactly is transaction and where did the word originate for Rosenblatt?

John Dewey's term--transaction--had a profound effect upon her view of teaching literature. In 1949 with the publication of his and Arthur F. Bentley's *Knowing and the Known*, Rosenblatt's discovery of their word *transaction* would form the foundation for her theory in her first book *Literature As Exploration*. Dewey had used this word as a replacement for the word *interaction*. Interaction had suggested that the two entities involved were separate entities and remained unchanged after their interaction.

Rosenblatt's entities were the reader and the text. The new word "transaction" implied that the entities reciprocally created their relationship. She borrowed their term because it created exactly what her theory had advocated in the first place. The word "transaction" would appear for the first time in the 1968 edition of *Literature As Exploration*. "The transactional phrasing places the stress on each reading as a particular event involving a particular reader and a particular text recursively influencing each under particular circumstances" (292). In an April 20, 1950, letter to John Dewey, Arthur Bentley wrote that "Louise Rosenblatt was all excited about the application of *Knowing and the Known* to literature" (*Preface/The Reader, the Text, the Poem* xiv).

One might think of an automobile engine to describe interaction as opposed to transaction. The spark plugs work in conjunction with the air and fuel filter to create a smooth-operating vehicle. In other words they are interacting to create a smooth-running vehicle. But, when the engine is turned off, the spark plugs remain spark plugs and the air and fuel filters remain filters. They are virtually unchanged after the process.

Rosenblatt describes it this way:

Interaction, then, was seen as the impact of separate, already-defined entities on one another. . . the metaphor for interaction we have seen was the machine with separable elements or entities acting on one another. Another analogy would be an event as two billiard balls colliding and then going their separate unchanged ways. The metaphor for transaction was organic, the living organism. The human being is not seen as a separate entity, acting upon an environment, nor the

environment as acting on the organism, but both as parts or aspects of a total event. (“Viewpoints: Transaction Versus Interaction” 97-98)

Rosenblatt shared another example of transaction--this time on a personal note. In the Preface to her 1978 book *The Reader, the Text, the Poem* she writes, “the dedication to my husband, Sidney Ratner, historian and philosopher, inadequately symbolizes a most transactional relationship” (xv). This short line from her defines transaction as she interprets it.

The relationship that the reader has with the text during a transaction can also be compared to a closed electrical circuit. The transaction begins when the switch is turned on. The turning on of the switch creates this powerful energy that surges back and forth, from the reader to the text and from the text to the reader. When the electrical switch is turned off, the surge of energy stops. But in reading, once the transaction has stopped between the reader and the text, even though both return as separate entities--this energy is still flowing, creating a change--both in the reader as well as in the text. Rosenblatt writes that “transaction designates an ongoing process” (17).

The change in the reader and within the text happens over and over with each new reading of the same text as Rosenblatt reminds us. “The poem [any text--nonfiction or fiction] must be thought of as an event in time. The reader brings to the text his past experiences and present personality” (12). The reader changes constantly because the person who is the reader is constantly changing. The text changes constantly because it is constantly perceived differently by the constantly changing reader.

Therefore, the reader and the text are dynamic forces, that both simultaneously act upon and condition the other, and both leave changed until the next transactional encounter when the process starts anew.

Each [the reader and the text] becomes in a sense environment for each other. A two-way, or better, a circular, process in which the reader responds to the verbal stimuli offered by the text, but at the same time he must draw selectively on the resources of his own fund of experience and sensibility to provide and organize the substance of his response. Out of this new experience, the literary work, is formed.

(43)

Without the reader, the text is nothing but symbols and markings on the page. “A text, once it leaves its author’s hands, is simply paper and ink until a reader evokes from it a literary work--sometimes, even, a literary work of art (ix), . . .the reader, we can say, interprets the text--the reader acts on the text” (16). Without the text, the reader has no electrical switch that creates that surging energy that evokes meanings and understandings. “Or, we can say, the text produces a response in the reader--the text acts on the reader” (16). There are two major functions of the unique pattern of words which constitute the text.

First, the text is a stimulus activating elements of the reader’s past experience--his experience both with literature and with life. Second, the text serves as a blueprint, a guide for selecting, rejecting, and ordering of what is being called forth; the text regulates what shall be held in the forefront of the reader’s

attention. (11)

In Rosenblatt's theory, there are no extremes or excesses--no overemphasis on the reader--no overemphasis on the text--no overemphasis on the historical time and place of the text--and no overemphasis on the author of the text. No other theory can make this claim. John Dewey, a champion of Rosenblatt's hypothesized: "If a theory makes no difference in educational endeavor, it must be artificial" (*Our Western Educational Heritage* 530 ).

Her transactional theory is certainly not artificial, for it evokes from what could remain cold and artificial--and--turns it into a work of art.

### Chapter III. Rosenblatt's Theory: What Happens in a Transactional Classroom?

A transactional classroom is a student-focused, reader-response oriented classroom with no learning limitations. It is dynamic, democratic, didactic, and daring, and once experienced the teacher and the students are never the same. Not ever.

The desks are usually in a circle or semicircle, but they don't have to be. That is simply a matter of taste--the teacher's and the students'. The teacher is the guide yet a fellow reader. However, the cool part of a transactional classroom is that the students and readers, the authors and texts, and the teacher become literary allies.

What occurs takes time and nurturing and patience on both the teacher's part and the students'. But, when it starts to happen--the students become independent learners, fellow readers, editors, critical thinkers, detectives, politicians, preachers, world leaders, lawyers, philosophers, disciplinarians, professors--all rolled into one magnificent class. The bonding takes my breath away. How does this bonding happen?

It starts with a reading assignment, a question, a response, and trust and respect for each other. The question is a reader-response inquiry question. A reader-response question is a question that includes the reader totally. It may start with a how does one see this or how would one handle this situation or what does this remind one of? In a transactional classroom the questions are the important tools. From the questions all sorts of explorable paths to learning are created. The students are the explorers and the

teacher is their guide.

The teacher as guide must give the students a freedom to go off on many paths, allowing them to search out their answers and discuss these answers openly and without interference. The class discussions along with the freedom to independently search out their answers and to openly reflect on these answers enable the students to respect their own responses as well as the responses of their classmates. The teacher must encourage the students to reflect on how they have arrived at their answers. This step is a beginning of the critical thinking process and a step towards building a healthy self-confidence.

Respect, encouragement, and self-confidence are virtues that thrive in a transactional classroom. And, the teacher must see that everyone contributes to the nurturing of these virtues.

At first, the teacher may want the students to keep a type of response journal. It is a good way to build confidence and trust. It also allows some students to reach beyond their grasps in a private sort of way, at first. And, the journal can act as a cooling-off device for flammable responses and topics: sexual issues, political issues, racial and cultural issues, religious issues, drug and alcohol issues etc. What I particularly like about the journal is that it encourages everyone to contribute--even if it only produces a few words at the beginning. But, in a classroom with all seats equal, the teacher can inconspicuously sit by those who are shy or anxious or uninterested because once the class has bonded it won't matter where the teacher sits.

How important is the teacher in a reader-response classroom? The teacher is in a

controlling force as guide in a transactional classroom, and it is through the guidance of the teacher that the student is led through his own critical awareness of his reactions and responses to a text. But, in a true transactional room, the teacher will not be needed as the traditional teacher. The teacher may be needed to remind the students at times to keep the volume of their voices under control, for it may get a little rowdy when the air is full of all of that robust rhetoric; but respect for each other still rules. Expressive ideas are shared and discussed and argued and challenged but in a very democratic environment. The teacher transforms into a fellow reader, ally, and guide.

But, I must confess that it bothered me at first when I realized that my students could conduct the class without me if necessary. Giving up my role as knowledge-bearer or old-wise-one humbled me a little because I had been schooled in the old Formalist/New Criticism frame of thought. In my salad days as a teacher, I wanted all eyes on me, all hands wrapped around a pen, all notebooks opened, and all mouths and minds shut. Believe me, it was less time-consuming to lecture to the students on what the text said or what this critic said or what this study guide revealed. But, the harm and injustice done to them was equivalent to helping a baby chick out of its shell. It was quick, but the damage was irreparable.

Since most teachers in earlier days were schooled in a more formalistic classroom, a question of literary analysis is of concern to most. It was for me, too. Can students in a reader-response/ transactional classroom analyze a piece of writing in the manner that college and university examinations require and expect? Can these students respond to a

piece of writing without becoming lost in their own feelings and emotions? I have found that students who have been in a classroom where their responses have been respected and where they were asked to reflect on these responses and where they were asked to come to some type of analysis of their own responses scored as well or higher on national tests than those who were in the more formalistic classes where they were spoon-fed or lectured.

In my observations as a teacher, I have discovered that first a reader or writer needs to write in first person (I) before he can write in the academic third person (he). And, he needs to understand his own methods of critical thinking before he can interpret those of others. Personal reflection is a strength not a weakness.

A transactional classroom not only nurtures personal reflection but also independent reading and the joy of literature. All types of literature from fiction to nonfiction are encouraged. I've often wondered if readers respond differently to nonfiction as they do to fiction. This research question led me to explore Louise Rosenblatt's second book, *The Reader, the Text, the Poem*, first published in 1978.

## Chapter IV. What Happens When a Reader Explores Nonfiction and Fiction?

The intellect and the imagination. Powerful entities. Nonfiction and Fiction.

Powerful genres. What happens when these flow through the readers during the same journey, taking the readers in and out of different channels along their journey? Reading is a journey that leads the readers to wherever they want to go. Are the readers aware of these different channels that they take as they read? Are these intellectual and imaginative and nonfictional and fictional channels so similar that the readers are at the end of their journey without realizing the channels that led them to the end?

In the article “Applying a Reader Response Heuristic to Expository Text” William Brozo quotes Anthony Petrosky (1982): “The response heuristic asks readers to write, first, what they perceive in the text, and then how they feel about what they see, and finally what associations--thoughts, feelings, and experiences--inform and follow from their perceptions” (139). Brozo says that “when the heuristic is used as a catalyst for writing, it can, with revisionary assistance from other writers and the teacher, yield a sophisticated essay” (140-41). Through a personal connection, he claims, a text becomes meaningful and memorable (141). Freeman and Sanders (1987) advocate that students feel their writings serve a function if the writings are relevant to their lives and their interests instead of the generic book reports and formal essays. Anderson and Pichert (1978) and Pearson, Hanson, and Gordon (1979) write that individual perceptions shape one’s comprehension. Can personal responses or aesthetic ones prepare students for the

academic expository essay? If writing that begins by referring to the text and then moving on to one's own personal narratives can help readers explore the roots to their perceptions, can the same be said about reading? Does a reader have to focus his attention on the text inwardly before he can focus on it outwardly?

Is there some connection between reading and writing? Is there some connection between reading fiction and writing fiction? Is there some connection between writing fiction and writing nonfiction? Donald Graves writes in *A Researcher Learns to Write* that "many truths are better expressed in fiction than in personal narratives" (187). John Gardner in *The Art of Fiction* refers to fiction as a "kind of dream, a rich and vivid play in the mind" (30). In his article "On the Nature of Fiction Writing" Don Zancanella writes that as readers we place limitations on fiction.

We fail to grant fiction its playful, dreamlike rights because we overlook important differences between writing fiction and writing fact. We speak of the narrative form as if writing the most off-hand anecdote of the day's events differs little from the most fantastic fiction. Yet while there are times when fiction becomes highly autobiographical or when nonfiction narratives use all the stylistic devices in fiction, one need only sit down to write a make-believe story to discover that writing fiction simply feels different. (240)

So, what is that difference? And, if writing fiction feels different--does reading fiction feel different, too?

Vladimir Nabokov said that "literature was not born the day a boy crying 'wolf, wolf'

came running out of the Neanderthal valley with a big, gray wolf at his heels: literature was born on the day when a boy came crying ‘wolf, wolf’ and there was no wolf behind him” (238). E. M. Forester wrote once that if one writes “the King died and then the Queen died--that is story--but if one writes--the King died and then the Queen died of grief--that is plot.” James Britton in his article “The Role of Fantasy” writes ‘play [fiction] loses its essential character when it submits the necessity of truth congruent with the facts of experience’ (42). Is fiction freer of the necessity of making its inner truth congruent with the facts of experience? Don Zancanella thinks so. “The writer of a fictional narrative must continually ask himself what happens next--while the writer of factual narrative already knows” (241). How much do readers of fiction and nonfiction already know?

Nancy Martin writes in her article “Genuine Communications: The Enfranchisement of Young Writers”-- ‘since stories are about the possible rather than the actual, they give young writers access to the hypothetical modes, i.e. they can see their own experience as something that can be improvised on. Language frees them from actuality’ (166). Louise Rosenblatt calls this a “blueprint” (the reader’s past experiences with literature and with life). Benton and Fox describe this construction of a new text as a process of creating secondary worlds.

The secondary world lies in an area of play activity between the reader’s inner reality and the outer reality of the words on the page. The world of the book draws its idiosyncratic nature from the former and is shaped by the latter. (5)

Benton and Fox also say that readers adopt a shifting viewpoint that is located inside the secondary world amidst movements and uncertainties. From this viewpoint readers picture events and identify with characters. They anticipate and reflect on characters' actions, and they evaluate the author's telling of the story.

Frank Smith in *Understanding Reading* (1982) argues that the "reader is constantly involved in making predictions based on his evolving mental mode of the text" (54). Louise Rosenblatt calls this mental mode the reader's stance. To Rosenblatt perception begins with the reader's stance and with emotion. I agree with her and add that learning, also, begins with emotion and the reader's stance.

D. W. Harding argues that we read literature as on-lookers. Rosenblatt argues that readers must be active participants in both fiction as well as nonfiction to fully understand what they have to offer the reader.

Judith Langer in *The Process of Understanding Literature* has determined that there are four stances in the process of understanding:

1. Being out and stepping into--the reader makes an initial contact with genre, content, structure, and language by using prior knowledge, experiences, and surface features of the text.
2. Being in and moving through--readers are immersed in their understandings, using their prior knowledge and the text itself to further their creation of meaning.

3. Stepping back and rethinking what one knows--readers reflect on their previous knowledge or understandings.
4. Stepping out and objectifying the experience--readers distance themselves, reflecting on and reacting to the content, to the text, or to the reading experience itself. (32)

She writes “during the reading of literature there is a horizon of possibilities. . . the reader’s understanding of the whole seems to be constrained by their notions of human or imaginary possibility. . .their understanding of nonliterary texts seems to be constrained by their perceptions of the topic” (35). To Langer, the reading of literature involves the exploration of possibilities and the reading of science or social studies uses the type of thinking to gain facts.

Which influences the reader more--nonfiction or fiction? Mary Beth Culp and Jamee Osborn Sosa conducted a study to assess the influence. The results indicate that the attitudes, values, and behavior of the majority of students in the study have been less influenced by nonfiction than fiction. Students reported more influence from voluntary than assigned readings. Many commented that they did not remember reading any nonfiction in English classes. Those who did remember nonfiction in their English classes mentioned *The Diary of Anne Frank* . “Their identification with people is positively related to the influence of nonfiction” (63). The most popular type of nonfiction was biography. Next, were true adventure/suspense books and self-help ones. The conclusion of this study is that the majority of students are not assigned to read much nonfiction.

One student reported, “I prefer fiction, mainly because it is much easier to relate to it than nonfiction” (64). This study raised questions as to the place of nonfiction in the English/language arts curriculum. Should more nonfiction be assigned? Is the difference in influence of fiction and nonfiction related to the two forms or to students’ purposes for reading or to the students’ perceptions of the nature of the forms? (64)

In another study Karen Roggenkamp discovered the links that her students began to make between literature and real life. Her students began to examine their own lives through the literature they read. One student who had read Thurber’s *Walter Mitty* realized that he, too, wasted a good deal of his life daydreaming about who he wishes he could be. “Another student acknowledged that Budge Wilson’s short story ‘The Metaphor’ forced her to examine how she treats other people and to question whether her view of the world was more like Charlotte’s in the story or more like that of Charlotte’s cold, superficial mother” (*Long Live the Queen: Literature and Life Philosophy* 35). The researchers concluded that the act of reading forces the reader to confront who he is and in what he really believes.

How do little children respond to nonfiction and fiction? J. Kevin Spink in the article “The Aesthetics of Informational Reading” discovered in a study that he conducted that primary and intermediate grade students who read both nonfiction and fiction did not associate one with pleasure and the other with learning. The students, Spink argued, found meaning in a work to the extent that it related to the childrens’ own lives and experiences.

After reading various articles I still had many unanswered questions about how readers explored nonfiction and fiction. I found those answers to my questions in the philosophy of Louise Rosenblatt.

In order to find out answers, specific questions have to be asked. Rosenblatt searched for the answers by constantly asking herself specific questions about the relationship between the reader and a text. These are a paraphrasing of some questions that she posed throughout her classic *The Reader, the Text, and the Poem*.

1. Does not any reader, whether of a newspaper, scientific text, or cookbook, have to evoke the work from the page?
2. Is not any reader of a text active?
3. What does the reader do in different kinds of reading?
4. Can a reader speed-read a novel in only a few short minutes as advertisers claim?

Rosenblatt tells us that “the reader performs very different activities during the reading-event and the contrast derives primarily from the difference in the reader’s focus of attention during the reading-event” (23). According to her theory, a reader assumes two stances when he explores a text: an efferent stance and an aesthetic stance.

An efferent stance is a reading position that the reader uses to carry away information from the reading. Efferent is derived from the Latin “efferre” which means to carry away. This stance would be used to read a recipe, to look at directions on a map, to read a newspaper, or to read an algebraic equation or chemical formula. The reader’s attention

is focused on what will remain as the “residue” (23) after the reading.

An extreme instance is the mother whose child has just swallowed poisonous liquid and who is frantically reading the label on the bottle to discover the antidote to be administered. She wants to get through the reading as quickly as possible and to retain the information that will serve her practical purpose. She is interested only in what the words point to--the objects, ideas, and actions designated. Her own responses to these concepts, or to the rhythm, sound, or associations of the words are of no importance to her, and indeed the more she ignores them, the more she makes herself impersonal and transparent, the more efficiently she reads. Her attention will be concentrated on what is to be assimilated for use after she has finished reading. (23-24)

As a reader reads efferently, his attention is directed outward--away from himself toward what information is to be retained or actions to be performed.

In aesthetic reading, the reader is concerned with what happens during the actual reading event. “In aesthetic reading, the reader’s attention is centered directly on what he is living through during his relationship with that particular text” (25). A reader who is involved in a popular exotic-romance novel is living through the experiences as they are being read right at that very moment. The heat is felt; the desire, the passion, the thrill--everything is felt right then! “The aesthetic stance heightens awareness of the words as signs with particular visual and auditory characteristics and as symbols. What is lived through is felt constantly to be linked with the stimulus of the words” (29). The reader

turns his attention toward the full lived-through fusion with the text.

The reader's attention is directed inward, not outward as in efferent reading. The reader is not concerned with what he is going to take away from the reading (the residue, what will remain after the reading--the information acquired), but what he is living through at the moment he is reading. The aesthetic stance is the fusion of both reader and text at that initial reading.

Can the same text be read efferently and aesthetically? To Rosenblatt, it can.

The mathematician turns from his efferent, abstract manipulations of his symbols to focus his attention on, and to aesthetically savor the elegance of his solutions.

We may focus our attention on the qualitative living-through of what we derive from the text of "Ode on a Grecian Urn" or we may turn our attention to efferent analysis of its syntax. (25).

The power that lies in reading a text by using both of these stances is the unlimited creativity and scientific progress that can abound. Many ideas, inventions, and new pieces of literature have started with efferent reading and then have materialized as the reader started to focus his attention inward into the aesthetic realm. Albert Einstein said that imagination is more important than knowledge. With the efferent and aesthetic stances, the reader has both knowledge and imagination.

With knowledge and imagination come new ways of looking at things--including the speed of reading. Rosenblatt is adamant about her thoughts on speed-reading. To speed-read a novel as a literary work of art would be absurd. Cliff Notes or a plot summary

would do as well. To speed-read a novel would be strictly efferent reading. “If a literary work of art is to ensue, the reader must turn his attention as fully as possible toward the transaction between himself and the text” (28). Samuel Coleridge wrote something similar.

The reader should be carried forward, not merely by a restless desire to arrive at the final solution; but by the pleasurable activity of mind excited by the attractions of the journey itself. (*Biographia Literaria* 6).

A misconception of Rosenblatt’s transactional theory begins, perhaps, with the aesthetic stance. Because this stance focuses the reader’s attention inward, some academicians may think that her theory implies that anything goes. She writes that “perusal of a text merely leading to free fantasy would not be reading at all in the transactional sense” (*The Reader, the Text, the Poem* 29). The free exchange that goes on in a transactional classroom enables the student to scrutinize his own responses by listening to the responses of others. In this type of intellectual exchange the students struggle to justify their responses. This struggle sharpens their critical-thinking techniques. The teacher’s role here is important because the teacher helps the student toward a clarification of his response. But, the student soon discovers that “some interpretations are more defensible than others” (*Literature As Exploration* 135).

What happens then when readers encounter the different genres? Does genre influence his response to a text? Does a reader explore nonfiction differently than he explores fiction? Rosenblatt answers these questions in the following manner.

Another constantly recurrent theme is the distinction between the work of art and the real world, sometimes referred to as the fictionality of the work, sometimes as its imaginative character. Such a distinction between the real and the fictional does not, however, suffice to differentiate the work of art. For example, whether the reader assumes that there was ever a person, Sherlock Holmes, who existed in the real world is of minor importance in answering the question as to whether Conan Doyle's text gives rise to a literary work of art. We are reasonably sure that Julius Caesar did exist in the real world. Yet this does not affect the attitude that the reader takes toward what is evoked for him and in him by the text of Shakespeare's play. (31)

So, to Rosenblatt it becomes irrelevant or secondary to the reader if these two men actually existed in the real world. If the writing is convincing enough to produce a type of realism that evokes efferential and aesthetic responses in the reader, does the genre matter?

Does the genre matter? Louise Rosenblatt and her transactional theory of reading encouraged me as a teacher to explore further with my own students the genre question of reader response with nonfiction and fiction.

## Chapter V. Rosenblatt's Theory: What Happened When a Teacher Explored with Her Students?

### (Procedures in Exploration)

Page after page was crumpled and tossed into my office wastebasket as I sketched, wrote, scribbled, and outlined different methods that might be effective in my research. How could I present to my students an exercise that would (1) explore genre (nonfiction and fiction) and reader response; (2) enhance critical thinking; and (3) evoke a lived-through experience with a literary text? Hours and then days passed as I puzzled over this question.

I remembered a story of mine that I had shared with students years ago. I had never written the story down on paper so there was no such thing as a hard copy of the story. It had only existed in my mind. So after talking with my advisor about using this story with my students to explore the question of genre and reader response, she said to me--“Now it's time for you to put this story on paper”-- and so began an adventure for me as a writer. I had written with my students many times in class and had shared short writings of mine with them before, but this was different. This adventure in writing was especially for them--and my research. The subject matter had to be about an incident that perhaps they could identify with; and maybe, just maybe, there would be a lesson in this writing that they would always remember, a lesson that would be subtle, yet alarming.

Rosenblatt wrote in *Literature As Exploration* that students will value “literature as a means of enlarging their knowledge of the world because through literature they acquire not so much additional information as additional experience” (38). I wanted them to experience this story without any real danger to them.

So, I began to compose. The originality of the story ensured its validity for the research, but still this was not an easy task. For every word I chose, I discarded a hundred more. Carefully, I pondered over words that I thought were frightening, foreboding--and disturbing (to me anyway)--foreshadowing types of words. I wanted the theme of this story to alert them to the dangers of risk-taking, poor judgment, and spur-of-the-moment decisions. I created characters near the same age of my students--in fact--the story was about a college student and her relationship with her boyfriend and her father. And, what started out as just a simple reader-response exercise with my students smoldered and finally exploded into a literary adventure for me. As I wrote the story, I lived through it as the writer. But then, I started to live through the story as Rosenblatt suggested one do as the reader. First, I was the writer; then I became the character, and then the reader. And finally, I would slip into the role as researcher. It was exhilarating and exhausting, and I loved every minute of it. I called the story “The Exit” (Appendix B).

“The Exit” revolves around a young coed, Harriet Smythe, in the prime of her young, adventurous, and sometimes rebellious life. Harriet had been reared in a wealthy family and dominated by her father and her fiancé. One weekend as Harriet and her fiancé, Richard, were driving to visit her father they took an exit to save driving time. This exit

wandered off into a long, wooded stretch of secluded road. Here, they encountered three ruggedly handsome brothers who lived in one of the run-down shacks. These men noticed Harriet and Richard immediately because of the car Harriet was driving--her Volkswagen Super Beetle convertible. Their flirtatious outbursts sparked both feelings of fear and excitement in Harriet. Afterwards, she was warned by both her father and Richard not to travel this road alone; but Harriet was somewhat lured by the images of these coarse rustic men.

One autumn night as Harriet was driving home to visit her father, she veered off, inadvertently or deliberately, onto the exit and her car stalled in front of the brothers' dimly lit shack. She caught a glimpse of two dark figures rushing out of the shack towards her as she hurriedly tried to start her car. But Harriet was unaware of a third presence crouching nearby.

As I wrote the last words to "The Exit," I wondered how my students would react and respond to this literary text. Then, I thought about class procedure.

I knew the appropriate class procedure, according to Rosenblatt, was to have the initial reading with free responses, an interchange of ideas, and then a re-reading of the same text (*Literature As Exploration xviii*). (Figure 1) For research purposes, however, I had to develop a series of questions, not to check comprehension, but to detect possible changes in responses caused by genre and to serve as a lead in for a challenging interchange of ideas. I wanted thought-provoking reader response questions. My research required questions which would invite a focused concentration on the topic and yet preserve its

### **Sequence of Reader-Response Exercise**

- (1) Initial reading as nonfiction
- (2) Written free response to nonfiction
- (3) Group discussion–response to questions
- (4) Written response to questions
- (5) Rereading as fiction
- (6) Written free response to fiction
- (7) Group discussion on nonfiction
- (8) Class discussion on nonfiction/fiction

Sequence of Research Exercises

Figure 1

aesthetic quality as well (Appendix C). These questions were for the students to openly discuss in their groups. This interchange of ideas would follow after the students had their initial reading of the story and their written free responses to it. To denote group influences, I decided to have the students answer the questions as a written exercise for them to reflect on at home.

After writing the story and preparing the questions, I was faced with introducing the students to the exercise itself. Again I pondered on how to do this effectively. What strategy should I use? For my research I needed written and verbal responses to compare and contrast. I decided to present the story to three freshman English classes, first as nonfiction and then as fiction. The entire exercise would take three days with each class.

My students and I have a transactional relationship, so I felt confident and comfortable with this activity with them. But I must admit I had butterflies. Teacher researchers experience anxieties because they are so close to their participants and partners in research; and too, I was the author of the literary text, I was the researcher in this exercise, I was their teacher and guide, and they trusted me to do what was best for them in their learning experience. I unequivocally wanted this to be a pleasant yet enlightening experience for them. Rosenblatt's theory echoed: evoke the literary work, connect the work with their own experience, place the responsibility of response with them, and above all, remember your function is to help students realize that the most important thing is what literature means to them and does for them.

After careful consideration I decided to present the story to each class first as nonfiction, then as fiction. It seemed more believable to present the story as true first. The first day would consist of the initial reading of the story with a cover sheet denoting “The Exit” as nonfiction. This reading would be enhanced by a written free response to the story. Next, so that the students could voice their responses to the story and have an open interchange of ideas, I would divide the class into groups of three or four. Their free exchange of ideas and their reflections on the story through five inquiry questions would be audio taped, each group having its own tape recorder and leader. The five inquiry questions were to be assigned as an overnight written assignment to denote changes from group influences.

The second class period would consist of the rereading with a cover sheet denoting “The Exit” as fiction. Students were again to free respond. After this reading they would divide again into their respective groups to exchange their responses to the story as both nonfiction and fiction. This reflection also would be recorded.

The third day and culmination of this exercise would be a taped discussion of the entire class reflecting on the genres nonfiction and fiction. For my research I needed bulk written and verbal responses to compare and contrast. This three-day immersion in nonfiction and fiction reflections would produce sufficient data to analyze: (1) written free responses from the initial reading of the text as nonfiction; (2) the recorded audio tapes of their small groups, responding to the five inquiry questions regarding the nonfiction text; (3) the written individual take-home responses to the same five inquiry

questions; (4) the written free responses from the second reading of the text as fiction; (5) the recorded audio tapes of the small group discussions on their nonfiction and fiction responses; and (6) the recorded audio tapes of the entire class reflections on the responses to reading the story as both nonfiction and fiction.

During this exercise I kept a journal of each day's events so that as my students and I experienced this exploration together, I could capture what we all were feeling and thinking as it was actually happening. These notes are an integration of the highlights of all three classes as we journeyed through genre as exploration.

**Day One.** I was so excited and so nervous this first day. It was raining; in fact, it was a downpour. I tried to enjoy a cup of tea before class, but I was too nervous--I paced in my office before class started. My first journal entry was *Is this normal for me to be this anxious? Why did it have to be such a downpour today? I hope that the students aren't having any trouble in this rain and that all of them will have a chance to participate.* I wanted everything to go smoothly, I wanted the students to enjoy this exercise, and I wanted it to stop raining.

I looked at the clock and it was time for class. Copies of "The Exit," six tape recorders, the free response sheets, and the inquiry questions were lying on my office desk. I scooped them up and took a deep breath as I closed my office door. As I was walking down the hall, I stopped at the water cooler for a drink. My lips were dry; my hands had electricity running through them. I knew my face was flushed. I'd never experienced this type of anxiety before a class. I thought as I rounded the corner, *They'll know by looking*

*at me that I am the one who wrote this story. They'll think I'm Harriet!* I don't want them to know that I am the author, for I am fearful that it might influence their responses. As I got closer to the classroom, I saw them. They were waiting for me. I entered and *Chris* says, "*It's really raining today. Are we going to write something?*" "Yes," I answer trying to catch my breath and settle my pulse down a little, "*as a matter of fact we are.*"

Thank you Chris for that question. I needed someone to say that. I felt my old self coming back to them. What was I so nervous about? I looked out at them and they looked back at me with their looks of "We're ready." I handed out copies of "The Exit" and they settled back like they always had in the past. I told them, "I want you to read this nonfiction writing and free respond to it. Then, I want you to get into these groups (I had already made lists of groups and leaders) and discuss these questions about the writing. I'd like for you to tape your discussions. As the students read, I wrote in my journal: *There was nothing to be anxious about.*" In each of the three classes, the students took control of the assignment and were very comfortable with themselves as readers. I had been nervous for no reason. They began to read and I pretended to read and free respond with them. I left them as their teacher as I assumed the role of researcher. As they read "The Exit" I recorded in my reflections journal their reactions to the story. I watched them as they went deeper into the story. In each class my anxiety returned as I watched them, for I was not only a researcher at that moment, I was the author of the story that they were reading. My writer's voice said to them silently, "*Are you enjoying this story? What do you think of Harriet?*" I felt my face flush again. *If they look at me, they'll know I am the writer.*

But, my researcher's voice pushed the writer slowly away as I observed the expressions on their faces. My journal entries read: *April smiles to herself. She is visiting those brothers about now with Harriet and Richard. Shannon looks up at me and grins. I smiled back as I pretended to free respond. Lisa raises her eyebrows and looks at me and whispers, "Have you read this?" She wants to share the story with me. I feel they all do. They want to exchange their ideas with each other. They want to share this experience with the class. But, they continue to read on. The fellows never look up at me. They make no eye contact with me like the girls do. I wonder if they are too private or too respectful to let me see them read about Harriet's adventures and desires. The girls are into this story and are living through it. The fellows seem a little uncomfortable with Harriet. As I continued to watch them in each session, the teacher in me surfaced. I saw them as readers exploring a new adventure. I remember how they looked at me on our very first class meeting together. They were nervous and anxious. Now as I watch them, they look so confident and secure with whom they have become. Sammie looks over at me and takes a deep breath and smiles. I can almost see the wind and rain in her hair as she rides along with Harriet in the convertible. She's looking at me, but she is thinking about those brothers. She and Harriet are up to something.*

*Luke has sympathetic eyes and he nods a reassuring nod. I bet he is worried about Harriet? Lisa catches my eye and whispers as she is free responding, "I want to read the rest of this!" They read on.*

*The transactional relationship between teacher and students creates a bond that will*

*outlast our time together as a class.*

*Latesha twists the end of her hair as she underlines some passages. Then, she writes on her response sheet and grins as she writes. Jerry scratches his mustache. His head is down and he is writing and tapping his pencil on the desk. He does not look at me. He is deciding Harriet's fate. I am secondary at this point in his life. Harriet and her escapades are primary.*

*I wonder how they will treat Harriet. Because the story is an open-ended one, the reader has more power than the author. Will they allow her to take the exit again? Will they permit harm to come to her? Can they identify with her? How will they react when they know that I am the author? They won't know I am the author until day three. The rain and wind continue to beat against the window. I could not have picked a better day for them to write. I feel exhilarated. They are responding to a story that I have written for them, but they don't know that yet.*

The classrooms were very quiet. The only sound was the low melodious sound from the lights. As I watched them read I write, *Everyone is so laid back. They are enjoying this reading. For a moment I feel as though we are in someone's living room or in someone's reading circle, or in the library on a rainy afternoon. The classroom had been momentarily transformed into. . . .(For a moment I am back with my father and mother and my sisters ) . . . the reading room at home. The bond that I felt with my parents and sisters, I am feeling right now with my students. Laura looks up at me and pretends to wipe her brow and whispers, "Whew!" Her eyes have a twinkle in them that reminds me*

*of my sister Gloria. Laura wants to share her feelings about "The Exit" with all of us now. She wants to discuss her ideas; I can sense that she is ready to explode with verbal free responses. I share those feelings with her, for as a young girl I wanted to engage in the free-response exchange with my family so much that I felt that I could not contain the energy. The classes were similar in that they wanted to discuss now and to exchange ideas now. They are not passive readers; they are very active ones. Billy is rubbing his chin and has a sinister look in his eyes; he smiles to himself. I expect Harriet is in a lot of trouble at this moment. I wonder if Billy is one of the brothers now? What is he thinking? He writes; then he erases. He smiles. Poor Harriet! Mickey who sits a row away from Billy is studying to be a minister. Mick has a concerned look on his face. I bet he is Harriet's father at this moment. I don't think he will allow Harriet to take the exit again. As I looked at each of them and their facial and body expressions, I had mixed emotions: I am so proud of these students because they are independent readers, but I miss the group interchange with me. What a discussion we could be having! Then I add, Stop being so eager; get out of their way now and let them explore this text! I felt comfortable with this exercise, and I felt a sense of security from these words that Rosenblatt had written so many years before: "Literature lends little comfort to the teacher who seeks the security of a clearly defined body of information" (*Literature As Exploration* 26). Well, they are on their own as usual. They are independent readers and that's the way I want them to be. . . independent and secure with their responses to literature.*

Even though they responded as they read, most of the writing surged at the end of the

initial reading. The fronts and back of their response sheets were filled. And then, they got into their groups. Each leader turned on their respective recorders and started with the inquiry questions. I was worried about this part of the research. Even though I had their written free responses as data, I felt uncomfortable with guide questions even though they were inquiry questions. *I am uncomfortable with these questions. Maybe I should have allowed them to just free respond in their groups.* This was my initial response to the questions as the groups started their interchange. But as they began to share their ideas, these questions became secondary; these questions became catalysts for other questions. Rosenblatt wrote:

In the interchange of ideas the student will be led to compare his reactions with those of other students. He will see that a particular work may give rise to attitudes and judgments different from his own. Some interpretations, he will discover, are more defensible than others of the text as a whole. Yet, he will also become aware of the fact that sometimes more than one reasonable interpretation is possible. (75)

In each class as they discussed, I wandered slowly around the room, stopping momentarily at each group. At first they ignored me and then out of courtesy they would smile and make a comment that invited me to respond. I just smiled and moved on. As I moved around the room, I had to refrain from joining in with them.

I heard remarks like:

*“She’ll take that exit again!”*

*“Oh no she won’t! Harriet is a free spirit now and she has tasted freedom.”*

*“That nerd won’t control her anymore!”*

*“I think her mother committed suicide.”*

*“I think her mother ran away like Harriet is going to do!”*

*“No, her mother just died of natural causes.”*

*“The title means Harriet’s way to freedom.”*

*“I think the title means the paths we encounter in life--the choices we have in life and it’s up to us to make that decision on our own.”*

I went back to my journal to jot down what I was hearing and also wrote, *They don’t need you. Leave them alone and stay out of their way.* This was a struggle for me. *A researcher leads a lonesome life--I feel left out, but this is the result of a transactional classroom! Be proud of them.* I wanted to join them and participate in their interchange. The climate of the room had changed. I couldn’t hear the buzz of the lights anymore. What I did hear was the buzz of freedom of thought in the classrooms. It was intense. These students were taking control of their own learning, exploring together a new literary text, and deciding on Harriet’s fate. Sometimes I want to interfere too much in my students’ search for taking control of their own learning. In a transactional classroom, students learn to bounce ideas off of each other, relying on the interchange of ideas with their classmates and not relying totally on the interchange with just the teacher. Rosenblatt calls this passing the conversational ball (*Literature As Exploration* 68).

If they [students] thus far have been subjected to the **typical** school routine,

the tendency is at first for them to address themselves only to the teacher, the conversational ball is constantly thrown to the teacher, who then throws it to another student, who again returns it to the teacher, and so on. In a more **wholesome** situation, the ball is passed from student to student. . . .this interchange among students must be actively promoted. (68)

When the time was up and they prepared to leave, they put the room back together and straightened the desks. Then, they focused their attention on me and bombarded me with questions about Harriet. *Did Harriet take the exit again? What happened to her mother? Who or what is in the bushes? Will we get to read the ending next time?* I told them as they were leaving the classroom, “We’ll continue with ‘The Exit’ next time. See you!” *Whew!!! How will they react when I see them again and ask them to read “The Exit” as fiction?*

**Day Two.** The sky was overcast and threatening rain. I sipped a cup of tea as I read from *Literature As Exploration*. I wrote in my journal, *Today, the students will have another encounter with Harriet, but this time as fiction.* I picked up “The Exit,” free response fiction sheets, the six tape recorders, and walked out of my office. Myaish was getting a drink from the water fountain. “Let me help you with these recorders,” he said. “Are we reading another story today?” I just smiled. Boy, I thought, are we!” Once in the classroom, I handed out “The Exit” with the response sheets and in each class I said “Today, I want you to read this fiction writing and free respond to it, and then get into your respective groups and discuss your responses.

“But this is the same story,” said Erica thumbing through the pages. Similar responses were noted in each session. The other students glanced at each other and then back at me and then at their copies of “The Exit.” At first, I expected mutiny or at least some demand for an explanation; but they smiled, picked up their pencils, and settled back to read.

My journal entry read: *Their body language is different this time. They hover over the text. Heads down and eyes are intensely focused on the text. They are reading, and looking back, and underlining. No one--not even a girl--is looking up at me to include me with this reading. I am totally excluded. They read and write as if they are doing an assignment.* It took every effort for me not to say to them, “*Hey guys, relax and enjoy this. It’s the same writing--enjoy it like you did the class period before.*” No one looked at each other. No one smiled to himself. I wrote, “*You are there with Harriet this time but you are not participating, are you? You are not riding with her. You are an outsider trying to examine her this time, aren’t you? What are you all doing with the test now?*” I had written in my journal the word “test” instead of “text.” Test instead of text! That was the atmosphere of the classroom. It was like they were all taking a test instead of reading a story. I want to say to them now stop this and enjoy this story. It is not a test. It is only research. But I didn’t say anything to them. I just sat and observed. They did not live through “The Exit” this time. The reading was slow because they were so intense as they thumbed back through the text looking and searching and underlining. Finally, they got into their respective groups. The leaders turned on the recorders and they began. I

wandered around the room again pausing briefly as I listened to them. *I heard Sammie say, "It really didn't matter to me if it were nonfiction or fiction. I responded the same. But I liked it better as nonfiction."* And as I passed by her group I wondered, *"Sammie why do you like 'The Exit' better as nonfiction."*

*Jack remarked: "It had no relevance one way or the other. The story was the same to me."*

I sat back down at the desk and I wrote in my journal: *What is this going to lead to? I reflected: When the students were reading "The Exit" as fiction, I was their teacher during their free responses and a researcher during their group discussions. This time, it did not enter my mind that I was also the author of the text. For some reason, that was not an issue with me anymore. I wrote: They approached the fiction reading more effereently and I know why.*

In each class, as the groups continued to exchange their feelings on nonfiction and fiction, the students started to play and engage in a type of free fantasy. These were comments I jotted down.

Dusty playfully said, *"If the story is not real then, I'm going to give Harriet some real freedom."* Dusty had become the author of the text. Not only had Dusty given Harriet some freedom, she had given freedom to herself as the reader and as the author of the text.

Jason commented, *"With nonfiction we really don't know the ending of this story, but with fiction we do."*

I pretended to do other things as I listened to and reflected on this interchange of ideas.

Their discussions ended with many questions leading with: “So which is it--nonfiction or fiction?”

“Does it really matter to you?” I asked.

“Yes,” Darlene answered, “we want to know. Is Harriet real or not?”

I answered, “I wish we had more time. I’ll tell you next class meeting.”

I sat at the desk reflecting in my journal after the students had gone: *I wonder what they will say when they find out that I am the author?*

Chris peeked her head back into the room. “*Are you ever going to tell us if Harriet is real or not? I like her. I’m going to be mad if she is not real!*”

As I got up from the desk I answered, “Next time!” She waved and left. *Next time, I will tell them that Harriet is not real.*

**Day Three.** From my journal, I read these words that I had copied from *Literature As Exploration*: “*Teaching becomes a matter of improving the individual’s capacity to evoke meaning from the text by leading him to reflect self-critically on this process*” (26).

Today was going to be a reflection day for the entire class and me. I had waited for this day because I wanted to be a part of their interchange and discovery and also today was the day that I was going to tell them that I was the author and creator of Harriet. In my journal I had written, “*How will they react to me as the creator of Harriet? What will they say about this entire research activity? Does it matter to them if Harriet is real or if she is fiction?*” My anxiety felt good today. I guess it was the type of anxiety only a teacher knows--an eagerness to guide a student to his own self-awareness of why and how he has

responded to a particular literary text on a given day and at a given time. I wanted to do this for them, for I wanted them to know that they had experienced the reader's continuum. From just my observation of them, I experienced their reading stances. It was very obvious on the second day that they read "The Exit" efferently--I saw it in their body language, I saw it in their facial expressions, and I felt it in their change of attitude. And, I was going to share with them my observations of Day One and Day Two. The clock on the wall seemed slower today. I wrote in my journal, *What will they take from the lesson today? Will they understand the efferent and aesthetic stances more clearly? Did the genre influence their responses to "The Exit"? What a day for research!*

It was time. I gathered up their responses, the tapes and recorders, a CD player, and a copy of Johnny Mathis's Greatest Hits. As I rounded the corner, I could see and hear my students. As I walked into the room, April chuckled, "Are we going to read "The Exit" again today?" as she pulled out her pen and tablet. I just smiled and placed everything down on the desk.

"We aren't going to read it again, but we sure are going to talk about it now!" Sighs of relief filled the air as they all reached for pens and paper and tablets.

"Are you planning to write something?" I asked as I readied the player.

"We have a lot of questions to ask you?" came from Mickey as he opened the window.

"You have questions for me?" I grinned with a puzzled look on my face..

Chris read from her tablet, "Yes, we want to know if Harriet is a real person or is she

just a character in a story? Who was in those bushes? And, what happened to her mother? Did she marry Richard? Did she go down that road again?" Similar questions came from each class as we met that third time.

I introduced Day Three with Johnny Mathis' song "A Certain Smile." As his voice filled the air with a haunting but loving sound, the students sat very still and listened intently. Blank looks stared at me and at each other. In my journal I had written, *I forget sometimes just how young they are. Their music is not my music and my music is certainly not theirs.*

No one said anything until Johnny Mathis crooned these words, "A certain smile, a certain place, can lead an unsuspecting heart on a merry chase."

"That's Harriet's song," someone squealed!

And then they all echoed the same words. They were geared up for an all-out class discussion, and this time they included me. I felt that rush of excitement I always get when they are fueled by literature and their desire to rationalize their responses to it. Comments began to flourish. . . .

*"That's the song Harriet was listening to just before she took the exit."*

*"So it really is a song."*

*"Oh, then Harriet must be real too."*

*"Oh, I am so glad! I am so glad! I knew she was real!"*

I asked each class: "Does it matter if Harriet is real or fiction? Don't you still feel the same about her?"

*“If she is not real, I am going to be mad at somebody!” Chris said as she pointed and shook her finger straight at me. She was smiling, so I felt safe to tell them about my research.*

I started by first telling them that I was the author of “The Exit.” Most of them squealed by asking, “Are you Harriet?” “Are you Harriet?” over and over and over. I told them that Harriet was a composite of many people. They asked if I had known her in college. I told them that I had known some who had characteristics like Harriet, but Harriet was not a real person. She only existed in our minds and in our pens.”

“Our minds and our pens?” they asked.

“Yes, your minds and your pens,” I told them. “I wrote “The Exit” just for you, and I had written it so that it would be original. I didn’t want to take the chance that maybe you had read it somewhere or had seen the movie of it. I created her so that she would be someone that you could identify with--relate to--or even understand, perhaps.”

They all asked, “So what happened to her? We want to know. Tell us.”

I replied, “What do you want to happen to her? You have that power. You all were not only the reader of “The Exit,” you can also be the author. You tell me. Do you want her to take the exit again? Do you want her to marry one of the brothers in the shack? Do you want her to be harmed by one of the brothers? Do you want her to marry Richard? You tell me what happened to her mother.”

I fired all of these questions back towards them. But these classes had already in their response groups discussed the possible endings to this story as fiction. They had begun to

take authorship with the fiction in their response groups. This discovery of the freedom that fiction allows had already been explored in their groups. Their transaction with me on the third day was only beginning. I knew this day that we were all going to be changed--by the class discussion, by "The Exit" as a literary text, and most importantly by their reflections on their own responses.

First I told the students that I was intrigued by their overall theme of the writing. I had noticed in their free response sheets, their written answers to the questions, and in group discussions that the major point of the story for them was Harriet's independence, her rebellion, and her adventurous nature. Their responses had shown that they were pleased with her defiance of her father and Richard, and that they felt no threat or danger from the men in the shack. Most of them had wanted Harriet to have a relationship with one of the men in the shack as a companion, a lover, or a friend. They had to chuckle when I told them that I deliberately used words to scare them, to warn them, and to alert them to possible dangers. "I did everything but point to the figure crouched in the bushes and say watch out!" The students were tickled at this.

"You wanted to scare us?" was a typical remark from the classes. I told them that I didn't intend to scare them--well maybe just a little--but that I wanted to warn them to be careful about spur-of-the-moment decisions, the dangers in unnecessary risk-taking, and the consequences of poor judgment. No one mentioned how Harriet's action would affect her father or Richard. No one mentioned the physical harm that could have come to Harriet, and no one mentioned the effects that Harriet's risk-taking could have on her for

the rest of her life. The students seemed intrigued when I told them that when I wrote about the figure crouched in the bushes that those words scared me and cautioned me, and I was the writer. They wanted me to go line by line with them to discuss the text through the eyes of the writer. So, I did. Then I said, “Okay, let’s talk about your responses as the reader now!” And, as a group we talked about Rosenblatt’s theory on stance. They were already aware of her theory on transaction with the text. I remembered when I had told them about her theory early in the semester. Their responses had been very similar. To them, her theory of the reader and the text transaction made absolute sense. They couldn’t understand why other theorists questioned her theory at all. So when I said I wanted to further explore her theory with them, they were ready to do just that.

Turning the recorder on, I opened the discussion for all three classes with the same question: Did it make a difference in your responses when the genre changed from nonfiction to fiction? As they started to respond to the question, I started to write down some of their responses in my journal. Typical responses from the classes were similar to the following entries.

*“It didn’t make any difference to me at all but when it was nonfiction, I was right there with Harriet.” (Erica)*

*“It didn’t matter to me either but when I read it as fiction, I started to see Harriet as some type of a symbol of women’s independence.” (Luke)*

*“It really didn’t matter to me either but when I read it as fiction, I started to judge Harriet.” (Sammie)*

*“ It doesn’t matter to me but when I read her as nonfiction, I felt as if I knew her.” (EuAnna)*

*“It didn’t make any difference to me either but when I read it as fiction, I had this nasty habit that I wanted to pick it apart.” (Marsha)*

After this exchange had continued for awhile I said, “Listen to you. Just listen to all of you. Listen to what you are saying to each other. Listen to what you say after but. . . .”

And then I read to them what I had just written in my journal about their interchange with each other. Luke knew that he had seen the fictional Harriet as a symbol of independence. Sammie knew that she had judged Harriet when she was fictional. Erica knew she said that she was right there with Harriet when Harriet was nonfiction. Eu Anna knew Harriet as a real person. And Marsha knew that when she read fiction, she analyzed it to pieces. They knew all this but did not connect it with genre.

Turning off the recorder, I reacquainted them to the words “efferent stance” and “aesthetic stance.” We talked about how when we read we can go in and out of these stances without ever being aware of them. I quoted to them from Rosenblatt’s article on *“Writing and Reading: The Transactional Theory.”*

The reading process that produces the meaning, say, of a scientific report differs from the reading process that evokes a literary work of art. . . such classifications of texts as literary or nonliterary ignore the contribution of the reader. . . essential to any reading is the reader’s adoption, conscious or unconscious, of a stance. As the transaction with

the printed text stirs up elements of the linguistic/experiential reservoir, the reader adopts a selective attitude, bringing certain aspects into the center of attention and pushing others into the fringes. A stance reflects the reader's purpose. The reading-event must fall somewhere in a continuum, determined by whether the reader adopts what I term the "predominately aesthetic" stance or the "predominately efferent" stance. The difference in stance determines the proportion or mix of public and private elements of sense that fall within the scope of attention. (5-6)

I read them this quote, wanting them to hear the eloquence of Rosenblatt's words.

We discussed further how we can read the very same piece of writing in both the efferent stance and in the aesthetic stance. As readers, we talked about the importance of being aware of the selective reading--the stance--and the degree of our attention--our concentration. We agreed that often in a school environment, we automatically adopt the efferent stance even when we are reading a story because that is how we have been taught to read a story--for facts. The attitude that we have for reading has become a fact-accumulating attitude towards reading. Marsha realized she chose to pick fiction to pieces as she said she did because she was taught that way. We have been programmed to do just that--students and teachers.

"How can we unprogram ourselves so that we can enjoy reading," they wanted to know.

"By becoming aware of your stance," I said. "Ask yourself, 'Am I reading to extract

facts or am I reading to live through this experience?’ Louise Rosenblatt’s theory is that we read somewhere near the middle of the continuum, going back and forth, to and fro, in and out of both stances.” As we talked, I hurriedly sketched on the chalkboard a simple and quick visual representation of the reading process, relating the to and fro movement to the swing of a pendulum. (Figure 2)

I explained when reading in the efferent stance we tend to focus our attention on facts--the information of what is to be taken away from the text. I continued to share her article with them.

In efferent reading we focus attention on the public ‘tip of the iceberg’ of sense: the meaning results from an abstracting-out and analytic structuring of the ideas, information, directions, conclusions to be retained, used, or acted on after the reading event. The predominately aesthetic stance covers the other half of the continuum. . . the reader adopts an attitude of readiness to focus attention on what is being lived through during the reading event. Welcomed into awareness are not only the public referents of the verbal signs but also the rest of the ‘iceberg’ of sense, the sensations, images, feelings, and ideas that are the residue of past psychological events involving those words themselves, heard in the ‘inner ear’. . . the lived through meaning is felt to correspond to the text. (5)

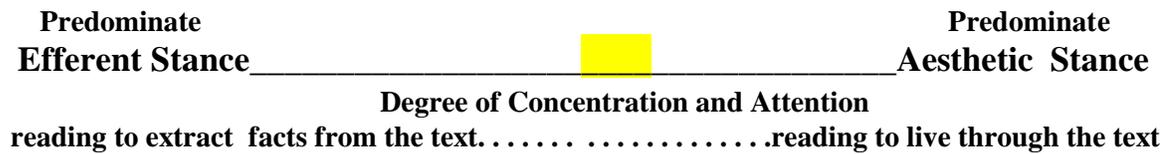
The meaning that the reader evokes during the aesthetic stance creates the literary text

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## Rosenblatt's Theory of the Way We Read

to and fro, back and forth pendulum movement  
in and out of both stances  
where most of our reading occurs  
in the middle of the continuum



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## THE CONTINUUM SPECTRUM

Figure 2

and thus creates the rest of the iceberg. The image of the iceberg intrigued them, so I purposely took this exploration a little further.

The movie *Titanic* was playing in the theaters during our initial discussion of stance, so I asked them if they had considered that this was an example of a mixed genre of nonfiction and fiction. The film makers had gone to great extent to assure the authenticity of the story. The Titanic was rebuilt to the same specifications as the original ship; the same company was asked to remake the china from its original pattern; the staircase was created exactly with the same type of wood and elegance as the original one that now lies at the bottom of the ocean. Everything was authentic except, of course, for the love story that had been interwoven into the plot. “Did you look at the movie as a student when you saw it the first time? Did you pick it to pieces?” Responses in each class determined that it seemed real enough because it could have happened in real life.

The girls wanted to talk about the love scenes and their enchantment with Leonardo Dicaprio and his character in the movie. They pointed out Rose’s clothing and her manner of speech. Again, the theme of independence and rebellion surfaced. This typical response from all of the classes continued to intrigue me. Independence and rebellion claimed dominance over security and comfort and tradition. Most said, “I liked it and I cried and cried and cried at the end.”

The male students wanted to discuss the architecture and construction of the ship, the ship’s demise, and the carelessness of its captain. They shied away from the romance and

social obligation.

“It didn’t matter to you that the love story was basically fiction?” I asked.

“No,” was the unanimous reply. “No.”

“Then, why did you care so much that ‘The Exit’ was fiction then and not real?” They just smiled, looked at each other sheepishly, and then looked back at me.

To end this discussion, we talked about how characters in a story could appear so true-to-life and how the public identified with the characters as real life people. One of the students, Amy, had been researching Agatha Christi and shared with the class her findings on how the public revered Christi’s Hercule Poirot. She hurriedly dug into her folder and pulled out a clipping from the front page of the *New York Times*. It was Hercule Poirot’s obituary. As she read it to the class, she beamed and said, “Can you believe this--an obituary for someone who never really existed--and on the front page?” I had remembered something similar to Amy’s discovery. I shared with them how my father and mother enjoyed a fifties television program called *Dragnet* with a Los Angeles detective by the name of Joe Friday, who was played by the character actor Jack Webb. I had heard that when Jack Webb died, the L. A. Police Department had given him a full-honors burial; and he had never been a policeman in his life. In Rosenblatt’s second book, she had addressed something similar to the public’s fascination with literary characters or television personalities. She calls this readiness to adopt the aesthetic attitude--“go to the theatre” (*The Reader, the Text, the Poem* 80).

The audiences of radio and television soap opera are evidently especially

prone to such confusion of stance: it has been reported that when the heroine becomes pregnant, gifts for the baby arrive at the studio. (81)

Each class wanted to talk more about movie characters rather than television ones. I knew why because they were still trying to figure out who Jack Webb was. The movie *Halloween H20* was soon-to-be released, and they were concerned about why the public loved to be scared. One student had remembered an essay by Stephen King called “*Why We Crave to be Scared.*” I had to smile to myself because I had tried to scare them a little with Harriet, the men in the shack, and the crouched figure, but they had not fallen for that. This *Halloween* sequel to the movie was to celebrate the movie’s release date which was twenty years earlier. I had not been aware of the release of the movie, but they were and wanted to know if I found the character, Michael Myers, believable or, as they put it, fake. I said that he was probably a composite of many characters taken to an extreme by the story’s author. At the time of these class discussions, I had not been aware of this movie’s impact on society. I did later on that summer hear an interview with the movie’s heroine, played by the character actress, Jamie Lee Curtis. This particular interview was with the *Today Show* host Matt Lauer. They were discussing the violence impact of this movie, and he was trying to debate her with the argument that horror films created violence in the nation. I remember this interview very well because I had written parts of it in my journal to reflect on later with other students. Jamie Lee said that she *would never attempt to debate anybody about violence because she had children of her own, too, and that Lauer had brought up very good points about horror films.* But, she said that she felt

that the audience was more comfortable and has more fun with movies like the *Halloween* sequels than they did with movies such as *The Saving of Private Ryan* because *everyone in the world knows that Michael Myers does not really exist, but everyone in the world knows that war is real.*

To culminate this exercise, I brought them full circle back to the reader and his awareness of how he reads and the purpose or stance of his reading. I read to them from J. A. Appleyard's book, *Becoming A Reader: The Experience of Fiction from Childhood to Adulthood*. Appleyard wrote that we as readers go through various stages of reading in our lives, but that "adults are in this sense the most pragmatic readers of all" simply because they are "conscious of their own motives and responses and that may be the one truly distinctive mark of adult readers, whatever their age" (164).

When it was time to leave, some said that they still wished that Harriet were a real person. "She can be what you want her to be," I said as they were packing up to leave. Students remarked that they had never thought of reading this way before and that they had given no thought to a reader's stance nor to the genre of a text either, but they would from now on.

The very last student leaving the last class turned, smiled, and said, "We really liked your story, but I still wanted Harriet to be real. Are you going to finish it?"

I smiled and said, "Maybe someday or maybe I should just leave the ending the way it is."

She nodded her head, seeming to understand. "I would have liked to have met her and

asked her if she took that exit again and if she married Richard.”

“Do you want her to take that exit again? Do you want her to marry Richard?” I asked.  
“She can do anything you want her to do.”

She thought a moment and shook her head, “I don’t know. I’ll have to think about it for awhile.” With that, she waved and disappeared down the hall.

I grinned to myself and thought, “I don’t know either. I’m going to have to think about it for awhile, too.”

My students and I had just finished the exercise that had surprised and had enlightened us as to what happens as we read. Together we had explored nonfiction and fiction through the very same piece of writing. We had journeyed through a planned sequence of events which had lead us to varied discoveries about ourselves.

I thought of Louise Rosenblatt and what she had written: “[A reader] can begin to achieve a sound approach to literature only when he reflects upon his response to it, when he attempts to understand what in the work and in himself produced that reaction, and when he goes on thoughtfully to modify, reject, or accept it” (*Literature As Exploration* 89).

This study was my attempt to help my students achieve a sound approach to literature. I thought again about what Rosenblatt had said, “the instructor’s function is to help students realize that the most important thing is what literature means to them and does for them” (64).

I stood motionless for a moment, recalling the last three periods with my classes. It had

been an experience mixed with conflicting emotions--theirs and mine. I gathered up my journal, my Johnny Mathis CD, CD player, tape recorders and tapes of their final class discussion, and walked to my office. I placed my journal and the recorded tapes on my desk where now lay all of the research data. This exercise was over, but the exploration of their responses had just begun for me. What other discoveries lay in those stacks?

## Chapter VI. What Happened When a Reader Responded to the Same Text as Both Nonfiction and Fiction

(An Analysis of an Event in Time)

Our vision of the ‘real’ world often depends on what we bring to it not only from past ‘reality’ but also from the world of fiction or the imagination. Literature especially invites confusion about its relation to the real world.

Louise Rosenblatt from *The Reader, the Text, the Poem* (33)

Each genre makes its own kinds of conventional demands on the reader--that is, once he has set up one or another such expectation, his stance, the details he responds to, the way he handles his responses, will differ.

Louise Rosenblatt from *The Reader, the Text, the Poem* (57)

I now understand what Gary Lynch meant when he wrote: “You can’t imagine how profoundly important it is to sit and go through it [data] so you can really understand. . . to gain it at an intuitive level” (*The Art of Classroom Inquiry* 65). I also had the same concerns as Suzanne Pelletier. “Sometimes I worry that I will become so self-absorbed in looking, collecting, and questioning that it will become so self-conscious that I will look at everything too closely” (66). I must admit that for a moment or two, I just stared at that mound of data on my desk; but I wanted to continue the exploration, so I took a deep breath and took the first step in my analysis.

**Transcribing the Tapes.** To get organized, I sorted the tapes by the individual classes and their groups. Labeled on the outside of each tape were the names of the students in that group. There were three classes. The first class had four groups; the second class had four groups; and the third class had only two. The first stack of tapes

was the individual group discussions of the questions. The next stack of tapes was the individual group discussions of their nonfiction and fiction responses. The last stack of tapes was the entire class discussion of nonfiction and fiction.

I listened to the audio tapes for each class and its individual groups in my office, in my car, and at home. Then I began the transcribing at home. I must admit I dreaded this task of listening to a small portion of tape, stopping the tape, typing, rewinding the tape, relistening, and typing again. What I had imagined as a laborious and tedious job, turned into an emotional discovery for me.

As I listened to their voices, I was there with them again. I could see their faces. I could hear the emotions and anxieties they were experiencing. They were discussing a piece of writing that I had written, and they were expressing their opinions about it and searching for the answers to their own questions. Among themselves they were creating their own transactional classroom. They were making judgments and exchanging ideas and sharing emotional experiences with each other.

The atmosphere that they were creating was a relaxed and informal one and they were doing what they had done all year--they were discussing a piece of writing as readers. The discussions were spontaneous yet disciplined because each group had its own leader, but the leader was a transactional leader who encouraged the interchange among the members of the group. They were doing exactly what Rosenblatt had discovered. "A free exchange of ideas will lead each student to scrutinize his own sense of the literary work in the light of others' opinions. He will turn to it again to point out the elements

that evoked his responses and to see what can justify the other students' responses" (104). They were working together to discover knowledge in a free-spirited and friendly-challenged atmosphere.

The transcribing was filled with mixed emotions at times for me because now as a researcher I was not an actual participant in this exercise with them. They were living through their actual discussions; and by transcribing these discussions, I had the opportunity again to benefit from their transaction as a silent participant. "When there is active participation in literature--the reader living through, reflecting on, and criticizing his own responses to the text--there will be many kinds of benefits " (276).

My students had already benefited from this active participation in literature as I now benefited as a voiceless participant.

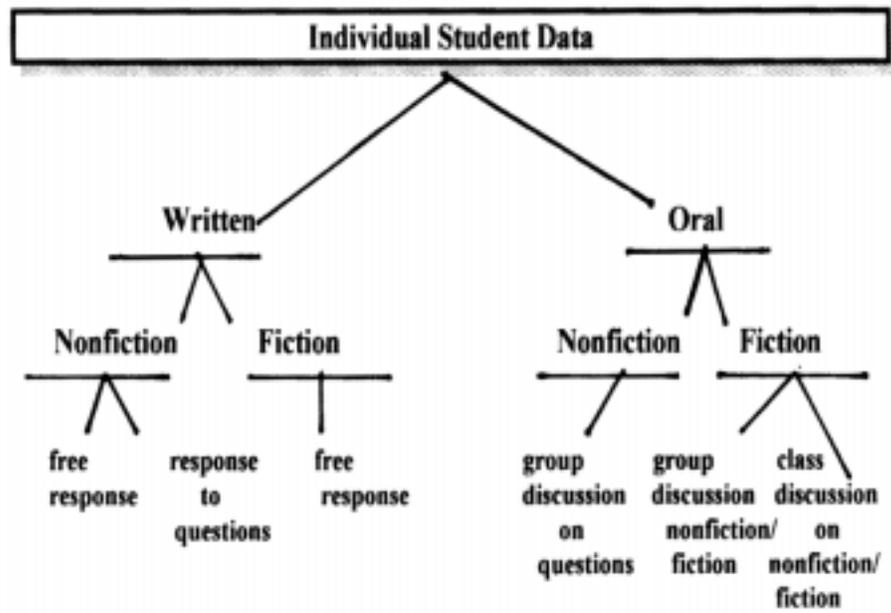
**Sorting Students' Verbal and Written Responses.** In addition to their verbal responses from the transcriptions, the students had free-responded on paper to the writing as first nonfiction and then as fiction. They also, as an overnight assignment, had answered on paper the same questions that they had previously discussed in their individual groups. I carefully sorted each groups' written responses. I then put the written ones with the respective transcriptions. I now had a compilation of each individual student's data for all three days.

**Coding Student Nonfiction and Fiction Responses.** I followed each student through every step of the six-step analytical data process : (1) the initial free response to the nonfiction reading; (2) the individual group discussion of the questions; (3) the take-home

written responses to the questions; (4) the free response to the fiction reading; (5) the individual group discussion on their responses to nonfiction and fiction; and (6) the whole class reflection and discussion on their responses to the piece of writing as nonfiction and fiction. (Figure 3) Student nonfiction responses were coded in red ink. Fiction responses were coded in blue ink. Similarities of both responses were coded in green ink. With the coding process I found myself so caught up in their responses that I was actually again living through each student's responses. As I coded their responses in the different colored inks, I shared their emotions, thought-patterns, personal feelings, and their reflections as they progressed through the six-step analytical process. I found myself in my own efferent and aesthetic stance continuum. I was looking for patterns and analyzing their responses, but I too was often engaging in the aesthetics of their emotions and feelings and anxieties. As they went in and out of their efferent and aesthetic stances, so did I. Rosenblatt on stance is quite clear.

The stance guides the choice of what to pay attention to, what to select out and synthesize, from the elements stirred up in the stream of consciousness during the transactions with the text. In readings that fall somewhere in the efferent half of the continuum, the reader selects out predominantly more public than private elements. The aesthetic stance, in contrast, accords predominantly more attention to the prenumbra of private feelings, attitudes, sensations, and ideas than to the public aspects. . . . Many texts are susceptible of being experienced at different points of the continuum by different readers,

## Analytical Steps



Six Individual Analytical Steps

Figure 3

or even by the same reader under different circumstances. The same text may even be recreated variously as an efferent utterance or a poetic experience. . . . Perhaps we should think rather of most reading as hovering near the middle of the continuum. This would do justice to the fact that a reader has to learn to handle his multiple responses to texts in a variety of complex ways, moving the center of attention toward the efferent or aesthetic ends of the spectrum. . . . Dewey says somewhere that there is nothing to prevent the man sipping his tea from also enjoying the shape of the cup. (*The Reader, the Text, the Poem* 184, 36-37)

As I read over each student's responses carefully, I found that the written free responses to the nonfiction text were very personal and self-revealing. The students had lost themselves in the text and had related Harriet's situation to their own. Their responses revealed inner conflicts that they had with society's concept of being rich and being poor and were drawn from their past experiences and their present situations. Some responses were so intimate, during their oral response in their groups, students did not or could not reveal these personal feelings. Therefore I chose not to reveal the students' names because I did not want to violate their privacy nor their trust even though I did have their signed consent forms. I assigned pseudonyms only for this dialogue.

With these comments some students in free written response exposed their innermost thoughts as they related to Harriet's dilemma. Rick was an example of how personally he took the description of the brothers' living environment.

Rick: The way the shacks were talked about on those back roads took me home. I have lived an entire life in the place so negatively described in the story. This story also created an emotion of rage in myself because of the way it put down people in the run down area.

During the group and class discussions this student never referred to rage of any kind or to his own personal living conditions. However after I had read his written response, I could understand this oral interchange he had with one of his group members. They were discussing what they thought could happen to Harriet if she did encounter the brothers.

Hope: I didn't expect Harriet to run off with them [brothers]. I just expected her, well, I probably figured somebody was gonna slash her throat or steal her purse or something!

Rick: Just because they lived in shacks?

As I listened to this exchange I noticed that Rick's voice trailed off at the end of his sentence, and he did not pursue the issue again. . . not with Hope or anyone, not even me in our class discussion.

Other personal comments were very similar to Rick's, not about their living conditions but about their emotional bonds with their families.

Ruth reflected on her relationships with her former husbands. When she wrote this response, she was planning a summer wedding and looking forward to a relationship with a new husband.

Harriet reminded me of myself. In the past, I had always wanted to do for and to please my husbands. I'd let them tell me what to do and what not to do until I came to a point when I had to do for myself and no one else.

Ann on the other hand reminisced on her life with her own father.

This story reminds me of how my own dad treats my sister and me.  
What sad creatures men are. I felt joy when Harriet finally took the exit!

(Ann never returned to class. Perhaps she finally decided to take her own exit to somewhere else.)

Jane, an older student and a nontraditional one, wrote about a personal memory of her own sister.

Harriet reminds me of my sister. She was determined to find out what life was like in the streets. When she ran off, it struck terror in our hearts. And it took us a long time to get over it. Everything turned out okay, but what misery she brought us.

And finally Susan. "The Exit" brought back unpleasant memories for her. . . and the loss of her own mother.

My mother left us too. This part of "The Exit" reminded me of my loss.

None of these experiences were mentioned in the oral discussions.

As I continued to read through the written free responses to nonfiction, I was

overwhelmed at times with their private and intimate responses. After reading the nonfiction written responses, I moved on to their written free responses to fiction.

With the students' written free responses to fiction, I discovered completely impersonal replies. In fact, these responses were calculated and analyzed. They wrote as critical readers. They were not as involved with the story; instead, they summarized it, analyzed it by using literary terms, and expressed judgmental concerns for the character Harriet. These were some of the typical comments from their written free responses to fiction.

I dissected the protagonist. I just do that. (Marsha)

The song on the radio could be foreshadowing. (Amy)

With fictitious characters you know they are not real and you can come down harder on them. (Donna)

The story was about a young woman who seemed to have everything in life but her freedom. One day she decided to be her own person. She sees these fellows and said to herself 'Hey, check them out,' whether she deliberately or subconsciously wanted to. (Latesha)

Some students even changed their written responses totally after their group discussions. An example of one student's total change in her response was Laura. In Laura's initial reading of the writing as nonfiction, her written free response indicated that Harriet would be grateful for her protected life if she were given the opportunity to abandon it for awhile and live completely on her own. After only the first group discussion, Laura became passionately opposed to Harriet's protected life. In Laura's

free-response to the writing as fiction she provides a complete turn around in her answers. This time she lashed out at Harriet's father for being so protective. She sided with Harriet and wrote that Harriet didn't even have to visit her father. She blamed something other than Harriet, writing that Harriet may have low self-esteem, low self-identity. Laura rallied around Harriet and sympathized with her, writing that "how sad it must be to constantly do what others want of you."

### **Laura's Written Response Before Group Discussion**

Harriet's inner spirit is screaming out for freedom and new adventures. She may think she wants a free life, but if she were granted that chance, **she'd be thankful for the protective life** that she's used to.

### **Laura's Written Response After Group Discussion**

Maybe Harriet never developed a self-esteem, a self-identity. She can hear the advice, but it's her choice to follow it. **How dare her father order her to drive a certain way home!** She doesn't even have to come home! How sad it must be to constantly do what others want of you!

**Typing of Nonfiction and Fiction Responses.** After color-coding the responses, I retyped the nonfiction responses (blue), the fiction responses (red), and the similarities (green) on separate sheets of paper. I began to read and reread the responses, seeing and seeing again. Certain distinct patterns slowly started to emerge from the nonfiction and the fiction responses, and the similarities also started to take form. The color-coded

Venn diagram shows the contrasts and comparisons of the students' responses to nonfiction and fiction. (Figure 4) Supporting quotes from the students are labeled O for oral and W for written.

## Emerging Patterns of Differences in Nonfiction and Fiction

**Preferred Genre and Least Preferred Genre.** Students overwhelmingly preferred reading “the Exit” as nonfiction. Students related to Harriet as a real person instead of as a fictional character. They thought that the story mattered more when they read it as nonfiction.

Latesha : It makes it even better that it is a nonfiction story. It's really special because I travel home late at night to see my parents on weekends. I really liked the story better as nonfiction because I felt like I was right there with Harriet and I hate to think that she wasn't real and that someone made up this story. (W)

Darlene: I was Harriet the first time I read it. I could have been Harriet. I put more emotion in the true story. When I read it as nonfiction I thought, ‘Okay, there has to be an ending here. This has got to be complete. I like her better as nonfiction.’ (O)

Laura: As nonfiction, she was like a real person and you could relate to it. (O)

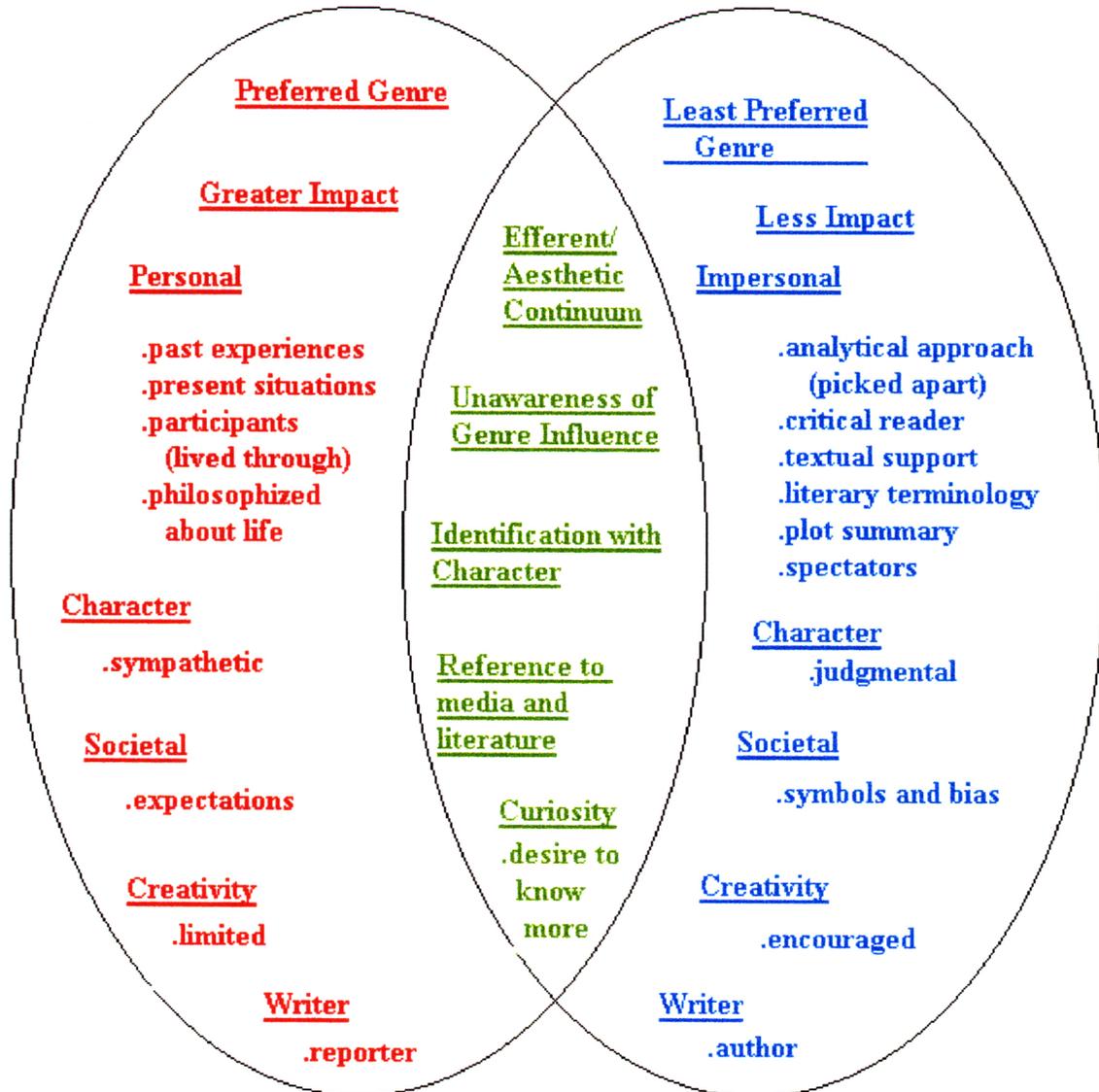
Marsha: I could picture her better knowing she was real than I could if she were fictitious. It just seemed more like I could relate to it better because she was real. I thought she was real. I related both to her as a person and her experience and how both could parallel certain situations in my life so it was easier knowing she was real and . . . . (O)

Lisa: . . . thinking she were real, you were not alone in your experiences. (O)

(Lisa finished Marsha's sentence. This illustrates camaraderie created through the

**NONFICTION**

**FICTION**



Differences and Similarities in Reading “The Exit” as Nonfiction and Fiction  
Figure 4

interchange of ideas.)

Miranda: I think it matters when it is real. I love to read biographies. I love to read about people's lives. (O)

Chris D: Now I am wondering if she is real or fictitious. If this woman turns out to be fictitious, I'm going to be very upset. (O)

Terri : I enjoyed the writing as fiction, but I liked it better when I thought it was nonfiction. (O)

Jack : My parents won't even watch anything on television if it's not real. I went to watch *Titanic* because it was based on a true story. I wanted to see what it was really like when the ship went down. I don't want to fill my mind up with memories of things that are fiction. Fiction, what's the point? (O)

Terra: I preferred the writing as nonfiction. (O)

Kristen: I don't think it would make me mad if Harriet weren't real. It seems better though if she were real. (O)

Amber: It won't be good if I know Harriet is not real. (O)

**Greater Impact and Least Impact.** The nonfiction reading of "The Exit" had the greater impact on the students. There seemed to be a cushion for them in fiction that there was not in nonfiction. They felt as if one could not be hurt as much or scared as bad in fiction. Just as the character actress Jamie Leigh Curtis had said during an interview promoting her latest horror film and comparing it to the war movie *The Saving of Private Ryan*: "War movies have a greater impact on the public than horror films because

everyone knows that the monster Michael Myers in *Halloween* does not exist, but war is real.”

Lisa: Anyone can write a story and make stuff up but to actually live the excitement and to actually have that kind of thrill in your life, whew! (O)

Chris D.: I want her to be true because I thought when we read the writing as nonfiction her going through all of that, well, I could picture her and I could get the excitement; but if it is not true, it's a lie. Golly, getting all of that excitement for nothing! (O)

Shannon: When we were reading it as nonfiction, you are thinking, ‘Man, this is an adventure that really happened’ and I can get right caught up in it, too. (O)

Chris W.: When we read it as nonfiction, her going through all of that I could picture her and I could get the excitement. (O)

Jason: It just has a greater impact--like ‘Man, this really happened.’ (O)

**Personal and Impersonal.** As mentioned earlier, the personal and the impersonal responses to “The Exit” as nonfiction and fiction are what I noticed first as I was reading and rereading their free response sheets. I noticed the same as I listened to their audio responses in their groups and looked further into their written responses. The nonfiction responses to the reading of “The Exit” were personal and internal. Some students referred to their past experiences and some to their present situations. They actually lived through the nonfiction reading while only looking on as spectator during the fiction

reading. The following are typical responses:

Miranda: When I read a story like this, I lose myself in it. Like, I was with her when she was driving in the car. I was there. I could feel the excitement with a kind of fear mixed with it. (W)

Chris D.: It kind of changed the whole perspective on the story when we read her as a person because as a person I could see and feel what was going on and I placed myself there. Well, I know in my heart Harriet did not go back. I know in my heart. I said in my heart. (O)

Jerry : To begin with, my mother would have chosen the safest route for me just as Harriet's father did for her. (W)

Kristen: I could not shake the feeling that it was real because I've got a 1974 Volkswagen and I am scared to death it's going to break down on me. (O)

Erica: The father reminds me of my dad and Richard reminds me of one of my old boyfriends. (W)

Billy: Harriet's dad reminds me of my dad exactly. (W)

Latesha: Harriet reminds me of my brother's old girlfriend. (W)

Laura: Harriet reminds me of myself and her father reminds me of my father. (W)

Jack: Different feelings spring up for me. I am concerned for safety but yet intrigued by what is really out there. I feared for Harriet and what happened to her, and I feared for her mother. But most of all I feared for the disappointment that her father would have in her. (W)

Some students even voiced their philosophies of life in response to “The Exit” as nonfiction.

April: All of us need to be free. (W)

Chris W.: Life is life. Harriet should just go for it and see what happens. Life is life I tell you. (W)

Marsha: It’s like “The Exit” is a stepping stone to the person she wanted to be. (O)

Chris D. For every exit there is a new road that has more exits and more roads. This is also true in life. For every turn we make we have that many more turns or decisions in life to make. (W)

Terra: I see her living happily ever after in fiction. But again, that is why we have fiction. Life, however, is never perfect for anyone or anything. No matter how hard we try or what we have, we will all face obstacles throughout life. (W)

April: And like all exits on the highway, it’s just a coffee break from the never-ending highway, not a permanent stop. (W)

But, their responses were quite different when they responded to “The Exit” as fiction. The students took an analytical approach to the fiction version. Some took on the role as the literary student or the critical reader. The responses were impersonal and analytical. They read as critical readers and dissected the writing. When free responding,

they quoted from the text and used literary terminology. They relied on the text to support their responses. They dissected, pulled apart, and examined the story and Harriet and questioned the author's intention. One or two even got caught up in the plot-summary web. They summarized the plot of the story and were removed and uninvolved spectators. Some took on the role as observer, removing themselves emotionally from the writing.

Marsha: Well, with fiction I just have this nasty habit of picking it apart. I don't do this purposely but when I read a work as fiction, I always try to analyze it. It's like I try to see if I can catch any way that the author might have slipped up. I try to disprove it and find some reason why that just can't happen in real life. (O)

Jerry: There are so many holes in this story. Holes. I mean unanswered questions. I guess the author meant for the holes to be there. (W)

Jason: Harriet is the subject of dissection. Throughout the story I've been able to pick up certain things the author is trying to set up. Foreshadowing, I believe, is the term. For instance the lyrics to the song. (O)

EuAnna: I'm pretty sure that song was used for foreshadowing. (W)

Amy O.: The song on the radio could be foreshadowing. (W)

April: The author used words like 'ominous' and 'flush of excitement' and 'triumph.' (W)

**Character.** In nonfiction, the students were sympathetic with Harriet and even in a group discussion brought up that issue themselves. The students also developed a type of bond or identity with her. Some reflected on their past experiences to strengthen their camaraderie with her while others compared their present circumstances to hers. The students readily proclaimed their allegiance to the nonfiction Harriet. They sympathized with her, showed her compassion and understanding, and praised her for risking everything for her freedom and independence from her tyrannical father and fiancé; and they did not judge her. Rosenblatt had already discovered that readers are less likely to judge nonfictional characters as my students were not judgmental of Harriet and accepted her actions and did not question them at all. However with fiction, the students were very judgmental of Harriet and questioned her actions. They were not as forgiving or sympathetic to the fictional Harriet as they were to the nonfiction Harriet. In *Literature As Exploration* Rosenblatt writes that “the average student spontaneously tends to pass judgment on the actions of characters encountered in fiction” (16).

Chris W. : When I read it as nonfiction, I felt sorry for the girl. Harriet is just a typical young lady. She is an average, adventurous young person like young adults of today. In fiction, I did not feel sorry for her. (O)

Dusty: I felt sorry for Harriet because her father and fiancé controlled her. (W)

Amy J.: I thought Harriet being a real person just would make you care more about her. It probably made me feel sorry for her more than if she were fiction. I think it would make you feel more for her if she is a real person. (O)

Donna: I could not help but be compassionate for her. I could feel how much she wanted to break free and be her own person. Freedom and rebellion. Two great things. When she was real, you felt bad for her. But when she was fictitious it was easier to get aggravated with her. I really didn't want to talk down on somebody when I thought she was real because everyone has reasons for doing the things that they do. With fictitious characters you know they are not real and you can come down harder on them. (O)

Maggie: I just felt sorry for her when she was real. I was feeling sorry for her and relieved in a way. I was like, 'Oh, no!' (O)

Chris D.: If she were real I felt sorry for her having to go through all of that but if she were fictitious then it was starting to read like a Harlequin romance. (O)

Eric admired Harriet when he wrote about her in nonfiction:

This is what young women do at a certain age. Harriet was a young woman out looking for adventure. She was trying to find herself. She's a real go-getter and she is down to earth to be so rich. (W)

But when Eric free responded to "The Exit" as fiction, this is what he wrote about Harriet.

As fiction, Harriet reminded me of an immature person who wants to have a lot of attention all of the time. She is very spoiled. If she's engaged, why is she flirting with those guys? (W)

Another student, Darlene, did not stereotype Harriet in nonfiction.

Harriet was a woman living in a little girl's world. (W)

This is Darlene's written response to Harriet as a fictional character.

Harriet was a spoiled, rich girl. (W)

The leader of one group, Sammie, posed her own question about character to her group.

Why do you think that we judge a fictitious character harder than we did when we thought she was real? (O)

Erica replied:

Because they're not real! You don't expect a fictitious character to have feelings. You think of Harriet as a real person and you think, 'Well, I'm hurting her feelings. Even though they would know but still you feel bad saying something bad about them. You tend to think about putting yourself in that situation if they are real, cause if they're fictitious it doesn't really matter. (O)

**Societal.** In nonfiction, the students visualized themselves as being in a battle with society and that society expected certain things from them. They assumed that the people living in the shacks were poor and people couldn't trust them (all except Rick). Harriet was protected from the real world, and they also assumed that nonfiction was fact. In fiction, the wealthy were assumed to be snooty and arrogant and insensitive to others, controlling those who had less. Wealthy people were seen as empty and unfulfilled. Some saw Harriet as a symbol of women's never-ending search for independence.

April: This to me is typical of what happens a lot in our society. We get caught up

in our own little worlds and are intimidated by everyone else's. The majority of people in our society are usually thrilled, turned on, or excited by doing something we shouldn't or told not to. Normally, as long as you keep winning, you keep on playing. (W)

- Amy S.: The Exit" for Harriet was a way into a whole new society for her. Releasing Harriet into a society she had never entered would not be a wise choice. The shacks remind me of poor people who really don't have much. They are handsome and may be nice, but nobody trusts people like that, do they? (W)
- Christy: I liked Harriet because she symbolized all of us because in our lives some of us well most of us battle against authority. We defy authority. Everybody does. (W)
- Marsha: Everything in poor Harriet's life is dictated to her. People in general don't think for themselves. Society does. (W)
- Misti: It makes me angry at how wealthy people just assume that people who live in a shack are bad people. (W)
- Jerry: Now if I read a biography or an autobiography, I automatically assume that it is fact. I just take it as being fact. (W)
- Jason: Harriet's family is the typical fiction rich family. Holier than thou. Snooty. Arrogant. (W)
- Luke: Looking at Harriet as fictional changes the perception of Harriet and the story. From Harriet being a spoiled brat to Harriet as a symbol of all women and their never-ending struggle for independence. (W)
- Jack: Many people don't have the privilege to come from wealth and power so Harriet was fortunate. But I can understand her thinking because wealth and power sometimes can leave a person empty. (W)

**Creativity.** In nonfiction, the students discovered that creativity was somewhat limited and that they could not in any way change the nonfiction version of “The Exit.” The students’ responses were serious and logical. The nonfiction was fact to them, and they knew that they could not change it. But in the fiction reading of “The Exit” they were more relaxed and playful and sometimes even frivolous. In fact, some of the students allowed their responses to become playful and satiric. They used their imaginations to create far out and unbelievable endings. They felt the freedom to be playful and even commented that it was just a story. They felt that they had more control of the situation and could create the story the way they would have wanted it to be. They realized that they had complete control over the ending of the story and complete control of the characters and their situations. Fiction created a cushion for them--they could not get hurt and they could not hurt anyone else either.

Erica: In nonfiction because Harriet was real, it limited what you could write. (O)

Valerie: In nonfiction, you have no choice but to go with what’s there. There’s nothing you can do about it. (O)

In nonfiction, Maggie wrote, “I think Harriet’s mother died of natural causes” but in fiction Maggie wrote, “Harriet’s mother died of natural causes I am sure!” Maggie exercised her authorship and control in the fictional reading of “The Exit.”

Marsha: I can add details in my mind that couldn't have been there if it were true. (O)

Shannon: In fiction, you want it to get better and better and more unbelievable and more unbelievable. And when you read it as fiction you are like well why can't all these things happen because the only thing that was binding Harriet was the mind of the reader and who is writing the story. (O)

Jason: With fiction, you can make up your own ending and everything. I'm thinking, if she doesn't go back I'll be angry and I won't like her as much. I believe if I were the author I would take the story in the direction of Mr. Rugged Romance. What do you think happened to her mother? This is what I think. Since it's fiction, I think she's working at a company that sends her all over the world. And she like fell in love with this young guy. She ran off with him and she just left everybody behind. I really think she just ran off with some young stud. (O)

Ryan: When I wrote about the story as fiction so many more ideas came out. I could express them in a positive way or in a negative way. You can let your imagination run and you can come up with a lot more answers. You could really build on to the characters and you couldn't with nonfiction. My imagination just went further when I thought it was fiction. With nonfiction you are so limited with the truth. When I look at it in a fiction way, I see it almost completely different. So many more things could have happened. In nonfiction, Harriet was sophisticated and smart; but in fiction, I want her to be a little tramp. In fiction, this leads to a sequel. You are so limited with the truth. I would have her die in fiction and the men would be like cannibals and eat her alive. (O)

Terri: Using your imagination is the best part of reading. (W)

Dave: Who was in the bushes? Johnny Mathis? (O)

Laura: As fiction you can rewrite the story to your own ending and make it all up. And you know that it really doesn't affect anybody. As fiction I could put my own conclusion in and not feel like I am screwing anybody's life up. I can be

wide open in fiction. I can change whatever I want to with it. Anything can happen. With nonfiction, it's like you know that it has already happened and stuff like that. As a fictional character I think Harriet would go back and take that exit again. But as a nonfictional one, I just don't think that she would.(O)

Chris W. : I picture the smallest of the young guys to be about 6'2" and huge. If they were not real you don't really have to think about it--you just answer the questions. (W)

Amy J.: I don't even believe Harriet had as much money as was described in the story . I wanted to add my own ending to it. I wanted Harriet to end up with the guy who was watching. I hoped everything worked out for her. (W)

Lori: Because it is fiction, I think she will go back for more adventure. (O)

April: In nonfiction, the fellow waiting in the bushes may have hurt her. But reading it as fiction, he was her soon-to-be friend, companion, or lover. (O)

Chris D.: It seemed that Harriet would rather have them control her life in reality, but in fiction she wanted and had the control. When we read it as fiction, it was more like I let my imagination take off and go wherever it wanted. (O)

Darlene: As fiction, I thought 'Well somebody just wrote this and it's not true. This would have been a romance in fiction. (O)

In the classroom discussion Darlene said, "But when I read it as fiction I realized 'Okay, I can make this the way I want it to be'" and she looked over at Jack, Jason, and Myaish and smiled, shook her finger at them, and said "This is my story."

**Writer as Writer and Writer as Author.** In nonfiction, students referred to the author as writer and in fiction they used the term author.

EuAnna: This passage is well written, but I wonder why the writer chose Harriet to write about. (W)

Luke : I would ask the writer if Harriet took that exit again. (W)

Jason: In nonfiction the writer was writing it for a reason. Also, the writer is trying to tell his reader something. Something like, 'I'm warning you so this doesn't happen again.' (W)

Shannon: Sounds like a reporter to me. (W)

In their free response to fiction and in their oral discussions, these were some typical responses.

Terry: I wondered why the author had Harriet's mother be out of the story. (W)

Amy O.: The author said that Harriet felt abandoned and alone. (W)

Shannon: In fiction, the character's fate is in the hands of the author. (O)

### **Emerging Patterns of Similarities in Nonfiction and Fiction**

**Efferent and Aesthetic continuum.** The nonfiction reading moved toward the predominantly aesthetic stance, and the fiction reading moved toward the predominantly efferent stance. The students, when reading the selection as both nonfiction and fiction, were so involved with the writing as participant or critical reader

that they were unaware of their own individual stance continuum. They read efferently and aesthetically---back and forth--in and out. All were unaware of their own reading processes. Rosenblatt tells us that “readers are not usually aware of adopting one or another stance. . . cues or clues have been used as the most general terms for designating the textual signs to which the reader responds. . . verbal [textual] clues (e.g., diction or syntax) and content clues arouse expectations concerning the stance to be adopted” (*The Reader, the Text, the Poem* 39, 55-56). One student’s written responses were activated by such distinct clues. (Figure 5) Although reading predominantly efferently, she drifted back and forth from the efferent stance to the aesthetic, quoting text from the story while interjecting personal thoughts from past experiences or her present situation. From *The Reader, the Text, and The Poem*, Rosenblatt wrote that “the reader’s attention to the text activates certain elements in his/her past experience--external reference, and internal response” (11). Sammie’s efferent and aesthetic stance continuum, the in and out, and back and forth movement occurred in her nonfiction written free response. The words “home” and “adventure” and “mother” served as textual signals to Sammie.

Harriet had all the comforts of **home**. (Efferent)

Sammie is relying on the text to aid her in her perception of Harriet and her home life. But her next response, still triggered by the word *home*, is from a past experience and is aesthetic.

I remember one day when my sister, who was always set on doing the opposite

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Sammie (efferent): Harriet had all of the comforts of **home**.

Sammie (aesthetic): I remember one day when my sister, who was always set on doing the opposite of what she was told, wanted to run away from **home**. **Home** can be comforting or it can be chaotic.

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Sammie (efferent) : Harriet wants the **adventure**.

Sammie (aesthetic): She did not give much thought to the danger that would come with the **adventure**.

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Sammie (efferent): Harriet sees a glimpse of her **mother** in her own reflection.

Sammie (aesthetic): She sees deep into her soul and missed being able to talk to her **mother** about the two people inside of herself.

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**Sammie's External References and Internal Responses**  
**Figure 5**

of what she was told, wanted to run away from **home**. **Home** can be comforting or it can be chaotic.

In this response, Sammie is relying on her own past experiences to aid her in her understanding of Harriet's situation. She relates "home" to memories of her own sister.

The same process occurred with the word "adventure." The cue is a textual stimulus and Sammie's stance is efferent.

Harriet wants the **adventure**. (Efferent)

Sammie has internalized textual content cues to reach this interpretation.

Sammie's next response to the word "adventure" has triggered the aesthetic stance.

She did not give much thought to the danger that would come with the

**adventure**. (Aesthetic)

This response has also been internalized by her own experiences and her own sensibility.

And last, Sammie's response to the word "mother" is first efferent and then aesthetic.

Harriet sees a glimpse of her **mother** in her own reflection. (Efferent)

These words are the author's actual words. Sammie is quoting directly from the text.

In Sammie's aesthetic response to the word "mother," she philosophizes:

She sees deep into her soul and missed being able to talk to her **mother**

about the two people inside herself. (Aesthetic)

Here, Sammie was internalizing and philosophizing about Harriet's loss. Rosenblatt

described this reading as a circular process:

A two-way, or better, a circular process can be postulated, in which the reader responds to the verbal [textual] stimuli derived from the text, but at the same time he must draw selectively on the resources of his own fund of experience and sensibility to provide and organize the substance of his response. (*The Text, the Reader, and the Poem* 43)

**Unawareness of Genre Influence.** In both nonfiction and fiction readings of “The Exit” the students were unaware that genre had influenced both their written and oral responses. This unawareness was quite evident in our class discussions. All of the students said that it didn’t really matter if the writing were nonfiction or fiction that they would have responded they same. The commonality that all students shared was a simple line: “It didn’t really matter to me if the writing were nonfiction or fiction, but. . . .” That is the response that brought a smile to my face every time I read it or heard them say it. The students were emphatic and confident that the genre really didn’t make a difference to them.

Chris W. : It didn’t matter to me, but when she was fiction it was easier to write about. You didn’t have to think as much. You could come up with your own ideas. If it is nonfiction, you have to think what she was thinking about when she did it. (O)

Mickey: And so really when I read it as fiction there was no difference.”

It really didn't matter to me. My answers were the same. When you read nonfiction you wonder how much is true and how much is the fiction. (O)

Ryan: My feelings didn't change any. (O)

Kari: Nonfiction or fiction--it didn't really matter to me. It really didn't matter either way. I think that if it had been more like something fictitious it would have been easier to read as fiction, but this was so lifelike. (O)

Dave: It didn't make a difference to me if Harriet were real or not. I felt the same both times because I knew it was real and I couldn't get that out of my mind. (O)

Jerry: : It did not matter. I don't think the story would have changed a bit for me. I did not interpret it any differently when I read it as fiction. (O)

Lisa: It really didn't matter if it were nonfiction or fiction. (O)

Amy S.: It didn't matter to me because I saw her as the same person both times. (O)

Shannon: It really didn't matter. (O)

Maggie: Really, it didn't matter. (O)

Eu Anna: It really didn't matter to me. It really didn't matter whether she were real or fake, but when she was fictitious it was easier to write about how you felt because you could make up your own ideas of how you think she might have felt, but when she was real, you were just thinking to yourself, 'Well, how did she feel. You just couldn't say. (O)

Donna : It really didn't matter to me. (O)

Erica: It really didn't matter to me all that much. (O)

Valerie: It didn't matter to me if Harriet were real or fictitious because I had the same feelings both times. You just put in what you want to put in when it's fiction. When I read it as fiction, I would have her to take that exit again. I wanted to add a little more to it myself. I could have been Harriet in fiction because that's me. I can do what I want to do. (O)

Amy J.: Whether it were nonfiction or fiction--didn't matter. I thought Harriet was going to come here in person. (O)

Jack: The difference between nonfiction and fiction is irrelevant to me. (O)

Darlene: It didn't matter to me at all. (O)

Jason: It isn't going to change because it is the same story. (O)

Myaish: It doesn't matter to me. (O)

Amy O.: I think knowing that it was nonfiction made it more real but even if it weren't real, it didn't matter to me. (O)

Lisa: To me personally, it didn't matter one way or the other. I think it made it a little more exciting to think that she was real and that the experience was genuine and not something that was made up. I found it more exciting to know that she was a real person. (O)

**Identification with character.** In both nonfiction and fiction readings of "The Exit," most students identified with the main character Harriet, even the males.

Terri: I have felt the same as Harriet many times myself. (W)

Amy J.: Harriet reminds me of myself. (W)

Jason: Harriet and I share a special bond. (W)

Myaish: Harriet reminds me of myself. (W)

Kari: Actually, Harriet reminds me of myself. (W)

Jerry: In some places I could be Harriet and I am a male. (W)

Dusty: I adore Harriet. I can relate to her. (O)

Amy O.: Poor Harriet, I feel sorry for her. I think in some ways Harriet reminds me of myself. When I was younger, I was held down; but not anymore. (W)

Kristen: I have a '74 Beetle and I am scared to death that it is going to break down on me. I always afraid that I am going to get stuck in the middle of nowhere. (O)

**Reference to Media and Literature.** In both nonfiction and fiction readings of “The Exit,” the students related the story to the media or previously read short stories. In fiction they seem to want to put a familiar face to the character, someone they know or a movie or television star or even a literary figure.

Kristen: The broken-down old shacks reminded me of the music video called ‘Fancy’ by Reba. The old house in the video took form in this story. Broken-down with

the rusted roof is the way Fancy's house looked (O)

Eu Anna: Harriet reminds me of Rosemary Fell in Mansfield's 'A Cup of Tea.'  
The depiction of Richard reminds me of Niles Crane from 'Fraser.' (W)

Chris D.: The story reminds me of the Rockefellers and 'The Godfather.' (W)

**Curiosity (desire to know more).** The nonfiction and fiction readings of "The Exit" evoked in the students the desire to know more. They all experienced the desire for resolution of the unresolved ending. Both in nonfiction and fiction, the students expressed a desire to know more about the events that were taking place, or had already taken place, and were yet to take place. Rosenblatt says that this need to know more is a part of the reading process.

The desire 'to see what happens next' in a narrative is the most obvious version of the basic forward movement of the reading process. Interest seems to be the name given to the reader's need to live through to some resolution of the tension, question, curiosity or conflicts aroused by the text. This need to resolve, to round out, gives impetus to the organizing activity of the reader. What we call a sense of form also manifests itself in such progression, the arousal of expectations, the movement toward some culmination or completion. (*The Reader, the Text, the Poem* 54)

Laura: As a real person, I would wonder what her life is like today. (O)

Shannon: I want it to be true and I want her to come here and tell us more. (O)

Ryan: In fiction, this plot would lead to a sequel. (W)

Felicia: After reading this story it makes me want to ask the author more questions than before. (O)

Terri: I do not understand why she is still with Richard if he were such a nerd! Why doesn't she break free of him? (W)

Valerie: I want the rest of the story. Maybe that's going to come later on. Who did she end up with? That's what I want to know! (O)

Dusty: I also wonder if I ever want to find out the ending to the story. Knowing the ending will ruin the story. (W)

Billy: The ending is really getting to me. I will be wondering for a long time. (W)

As Louise Rosenblatt wrote in "Writing and Reading: The Transactional Theory," *Technical Report No. 13* "no matter how much we may generalize quantitatively about groups, reading and writing are always carried on by individuals" (17). This study that my students and I had just finished was a "dynamic phenomena happening in a particular

context, as a part of the on-going life of the individual in a particular educated, social, and cultural environment” (17).

From this study, it appears that genre did influence reader response and that there were distinct differences in student responses to nonfiction and fiction yet some similarities. . . . and for my students and me this exploration of genre was a never-to-be duplicated unique event in time.

Chapter VII. What Happens When a Teacher, a Researcher,  
a Writer, and a Reader Reflect?

(Reflections on Exploration)

As the rain beat against my office window, I sat looking out at the students scurrying to their classes. An old tree branch swayed in the wind. It was a time for reflections.

As this study still swirled in my head, I thought to myself how it had affected me as a teacher, a researcher, a writer, and a reader.

**Reflections as a Teacher.** Above my desk hangs this saying by Piaget.

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*The principal goal of education*  
*is*  
*to create men who are capable of doing new things,*  
*not*  
*simply of repeating what other generations have done*  
*but*  
*men who are creative, inventive, and discoverers.*

*--Jean Piaget*

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As I sat looking at this quote, I thought of my students and could see and hear them as they talked over their discoveries as readers. I remembered their squeals when I told them that I had written “The Exit.” I thought of their comments and conversations with each other as they discussed their stances as readers and Rosenblatt’s theory.

I’ll always remember the twinkle in Myaish’s eyes as he discussed “The Exit” with his classmates. He and his buddy Jason relished in flavorful conversation about Harriet. I smiled to myself as I recalled their chat. They were primarily interested in the 1972 Super Beetle and conjectured on things like--what made it stall, how was the ‘72 engine different from the new engine today, and what was the price of a Volkswagen back then? Myaish loved cars and so did Jason. At times I figured that as long as Harriet’s Volkswagen survived, they were okay with Harriet’s dilemma.

The wind and the sound of thunder jolted me back to the present. Myaish was dead now. He had died in a car accident a few weeks after he had participated in this study. I sat thinking-- the bonds that a teacher and student form transcend lifetimes, especially in a transactional environment.

A transactional class is a comfortable yet challenged class, but it’s a friendly-challenged class. Nothing substitutes for that interchange or pass-the-ball momentum of ideas--that momentum of student ideas thrown back and forth to them by them.

But the most intimate responses were discovered in the students’ free response sheets. I found this exercise to be a most rewarding one. In free responses, students reveal what they normally would not reveal in open discussions with classmates or with the teacher.

It provided for me an insight into ethical issues that basically disturbed them, with biases that confused them, and with injustices that angered them. Free response was a method of understanding attitudes of innocence that otherwise I would not have discovered.

It is difficult for me to fathom that college students of today are still being taught as passive learners even though Rosenblatt first brought this to the academic attention in 1938. As I reflect, I ask myself what is the role of the teacher in the reading of literary texts: Do we believe that the meaning is in the text and that the teacher is an expert in asking the right questions to help the student get the right answer? The results of this study with my students was a warning sign for me as a teacher. These students read nonfiction as total fact. They lived through nonfiction aesthetically and fiction efferently. One purpose of my study was to help the students to become aware of the processes they had used for deciding if a text were reliable or unreliable. Imagine adults reading and interpreting political statements and advertisements as fact by reading them predominantly with the aesthetic stance. What would that create? In *Writing and Reading: The Transactional Theory* Rosenblatt wrote that “unfortunately much current practice is counter productive, either failing to encourage a definite stance or implicitly requiring an inappropriate one” (17).

As a teacher, my goal is to develop lifelong independent readers, those readers who read not to answer prescribed questions but who read to think for themselves, those readers who love to read and who want to read, and those readers who can live through a text and extract from a text knowingly. My study revealed to me that these students were

not aware of their stance at all and that they critically read fiction. Rosenblatt cautioned us about stance. “Students need to learn to differentiate the circumstances that call for one or the other stance. But recall that both stances involve cognitive and affective, public and private, elements” (17). Passive readers can easily become passive learners, passive citizens, passive leaders, and the beat goes on! This passiveness starts early.

A favorite illustration is the third grade workbook that prefaced its first poem with the question, ‘What facts does this poem teach you’?

Small wonder that graduates of our schools (and even colleges) often read poems and novels efferently or political statements and advertisements with an aesthetic stance. (17)

Teachers can stop this injustice by starting right within their own classrooms and by conducting their own research.

Louise Rosenblatt has given me the motivation to continue to bring to my students the quality experience with reading that I discovered as a child and as a teacher of her transactional theory. I will continue to celebrate Louise Rosenblatt’s transactional theory, for it nurtures as it strengthens independent readers and learners.

As I reflect, I know that teachers need to research and students want to be a part of that inquiry.

**Reflections as a Researcher.** I remember so well the last day of the three-day research exercises with my classes. When I asked them if they wanted to play a major role in this study, they consented without hesitation. A transactional classroom

encourages intellectual curiosity, and our students have an intellectual curiosity even though they may never admit it outside of the classroom.

Their inquisitiveness and enthusiasm to join me in my study was much needed encouragement when I saw the stacks of data on my desk. At first, the data that lay on my desk overwhelmed me. I kept asking myself the same question--What do I do with all of this stuff? The words “sorting and sifting” became a part of my vocabulary in a hurry. But as I steadily worked through the data, the task became more like a hobby than a chore. Even on the days when I came home exhausted from school, I would actually look forward to my time with my research data. It became a hobby--a researcher’s folly-- that I would recommend to all teachers.

As a researcher, I am so grateful to Louise Rosenblatt for her research. In the very early days of this project, I wrote to her to express my gratitude and appreciation for her work. Our communication with each other is something that I will always treasure. Without her research, I would be neither a teacher nor a researcher. Her work has given me the incentive to continue my work as a researcher.

Thus, my research has taken me through volumes of articles written about Louise Rosenblatt and her transactional theory. Other researchers of Rosenblatt will find a comprehensive reference in Gladdys Westbrook Church’s dissertation *The Significance of Louise Rosenblatt on the Field of Teaching Literature*. It is a bibliographic research study that lists every source that mentions Rosenblatt from 1978 to 1995: fifty-nine dissertations and 537 citations from the *Social Science Index* and *Arts and Humanities*

*Index of Citations* ( 57, 67). Church's research concluded that "no other person has emerged as having anywhere near the influence in the field" (105). Rosenblatt has certainly influenced me as a teacher and as a researcher. Her theory encouraged me to look further into my own study.

Throughout this exploration, one disturbing question persisted in my mind. It was a question that I couldn't dismiss. The question that kept burning in my mind was: Were the distinct differences in student responses to nonfiction and fiction influenced by the genre or by the second reading? During one of my first meetings with my advisor and committee members, a committee member suggested that I might divide the class in half, presenting the text as nonfiction to half and as fiction to the other half, eliminating a second reading.

At that time I chose to follow Louise Rosenblatt's method of the initial reading of the text, the free response to the text, the interchange of ideas and emotions evoked after reading the text, and the rereading of the text for my study. I wanted to determine if the same students would have different responses to the same text presented as different genres. All through the analysis as I discovered differences, I still wondered if the second reading were a factor in their responses.

To satisfy this new research question, I decided to do the procedure that my committee member had recommended. This past semester I divided three separate freshman writing classes into two groups each, giving one group in each class "The Exit" as nonfiction and the other half "The Exit" as fiction. For all groups, I had written on a

cover sheet the name of the writing and its genre with the instructions to free respond to the writing. The same questions that I had used in my study were attached, and I asked the students to answer them after they had free responded. These students were **not** instructed to divide into groups nor were they asked to take the questions home as a written assignment. I wanted only to look at their free responses and their in-class written responses to the questions. What I discovered was that the results were the same.

The students who read “The Exit” as nonfiction, read it aesthetically and were participants in the text. They related Harriet’s adventure to their own lives and were not judgmental of her. Those who read “The Exit” as fiction, read it efferently and were merely spectators and uninvolved. A typical example of participant in nonfiction and a spectator in fiction was taken from Wendy’s and Deborah’s response sheets. Wendy read “The Exit” as nonfiction and Deborah read “The Exit” as fiction.

Wendy: Harriet scared me to death when she took that exit. It wouldn’t have been so bad if it were in daylight, but she’s driving at night all alone. My heart was pounding when her car wouldn’t start. (W)

Deborah: When Harriet did take the exit and her car stalled, she felt excitement instead of fear. (W)

Wendy **was** Harriet. . . . Deborah **watched** Harriet.

When another student, Phillip, read “The Exit” as nonfiction, he related the story to

himself.

Phillip: I would have taken the exit just like Harriet. The back roads and the shacks are common place for me. Their cluttered yards are the same as where I come from. If Harriet wants love and tenderness she needs me not Richard. If her father has so much money, I would have asked him for a different car than a Bug. Her choice of music isn't much better than the Bug. (W)

Another student Vicki who read "The Exit" as fiction, analyzed each Roman Numeral section of the story. She literally critiqued each section. Other students who read the story as fiction summarized the plot, quoted text, and used literary terminology.

Another interesting aspect that arose with this exercise is that I noticed that the older students who had never experienced free response had a difficult time with it. One older student commented to me that she would much rather have just the questions to answer than to free respond. The free response inhibited her and made her feel uncomfortable. She preferred the control of the questions. She had never been introduced to free response before this writing class.

With this new exercise in exploration, the question of the second reading was somewhat resolved for me. This time, though, I had to consider that these were different students at a different time at a different event in their lives; and I, too, was different. Another never-to-be duplicated event in time. So I know that this very same question will continue to lead to more research, and more research will lead to more knowledge. It certainly will continue for me and with other students that I will teach.

As I reflected as a researcher, I realized how powerful classroom research is. Looking

for the answers in an authentic classroom empowers the profession. I also have realized that as a writing instructor, research leads to much writing; thus a researcher needs to write and write.

**Reflections as a writer.** As I reflected as a writer, I discovered that writing is intense--intensely individual and intensely social. What had been a private solitary experience had turned into an open forum. Writing had a few surprises in store for the writer. The squeals of delight from my students when they discovered I was the author of Harriet still bring a writer's rush to me.

Many things surprised me as the writer of "The Exit." The first surprise came right after I had finished writing it. Any possessiveness that I had felt toward any of the characters left me as soon as the story was down on paper. Of course, as I was writing it, I was right there with all of them. Over and over, I lived through the whole experience. Because the story is an open-ended one, the reader has more power than the author at the end of it. Handing that much power over to the reader is a liberating submission. Whether Harriet gained independence or not, I certainly did as the writer. Harriet's fate will always be in the minds and pens of the readers.

I have to smile as I reflect on the next shock. As I wrote earlier in the analysis chapter, I deliberately tried to write a story that would caution students about quick and rash decisions. I wanted to alert them to the dangers of poor judgment. Harriet's dilemma was to make students think that disaster can come from hasty decisions and that one decision can ruin a person's life forever. The students ignored this caution. Their need

for Harriet's freedom and independence became the dominating theme of the story. They insisted that her father and Richard were too controlling. The students used words like "honor her rebellious nature," "applaud her desire for independence," and "respect her adventuresome spirit." The students wanted Harriet out of her controlled environment no matter what the consequences.

My next jolt came from the students' apparent dismissal of danger for Harriet. I deliberately had planned to warn young women or even young men of the dangers that may await them on isolated roads, especially after dark. Words such as "ominous," "crouched," "a presence," or "shadowed figure," produced some fright in myself. After I had finished writing the story, I called up my sister Gloria and said, "Come over and read this story I have just written. I'm going to startle my students with this ending." After she had finished reading it, I said, "Did it scare you a little? Did you feel cautioned?"

And she said, "Definitely! What happened to her?"

Well to my surprise, the students didn't even attend to the words "ominous" or "crouched in the bushes" or "shadowed figure." They all excluded and denied those words. My intention was for the crouched figure to be threatening, menacing, and foreboding. However, the students in their transaction with the text, transformed the crouched figure in the bushes into a soon-to-be friend, companion, or lover for Harriet. What had been the reason for the disparate responses?

James Moffett called this non-response to peril or neglect of danger "agnosia," students simply do not want to know what was unpleasant. Robert Scholes referred to

this phenomenon as the “triumph [of interpretation] over almost any brute event or fact” (*Knowledge in the Making* 276). This lack of concern for harm or this overlook of danger surprised me the most with my students’ responses. It is their way of protecting themselves from the unpleasantness of life until they feel that they are ready to cope with it.

I had remembered when I first tried to create an original story for my own students that I had wanted to construct one that they could identify with and would live through. I wanted “The Exit” to be a story that the students could connect to their own lives. In Scholes’ *Protocols of Reading* he wrote about the need for connecting literature and reading to real life.

To read at all, we must read the book of ourselves in the texts in front of us, and we must bring the text home, into our thoughts and lives, into our judgments and deeds. We cannot enter the texts we read, but they can enter us. That is what reading is all about. (6)

Even though the students had lived through “The Exit” they did protect themselves from the unpleasant part of it that they were not ready to acknowledge. They had taught me a good lesson about the way they had read it. They had exercised their right as transactional readers and transactional authors of the text to do just that.

As I reflected as a writer, I realized that a writer needed to read to enhance her knowledge and to experience more about her own life.

**Reflections as a Reader.** As I reflect as a reader, I think about the experiences that I

have had with books as a child. The places I went, the people I met, the adventures I lived--all took place in a tiny reading room in my home. I sure did a lot of traveling for a little girl, and I didn't even have to leave the security of my family to taste the wonders of a little girl's dreams. Though my travels in books led me to discover much about others, the one I discovered the most about was myself--the universe of me. I learned who I was, who I wanted to be, what I liked, and how I dreamed. I knew at a young age that I would live surrounded by books forever, and that I would share with others the joy that I had found through reading.

I have often thought now that I am a teacher, how does one develop as a reader? J. A. Appleyard argued that whatever our individual differences of personality and background there is a regular sequence of attitudes we go through as we mature which affect how we experience reading, especially fiction. There are five roles that a reader assumes: the reader as player, the reader as hero or heroine, the reader as thinker, the reader as interpreter, and the pragmatic reader (*Becoming a Reader* 14-15).

The reader as player (the young reader around age six) occurs in the early years when the reader is not really a reader but a listener to stories where he becomes a participant, and not recognizing the real from the fantasy. When the reader (late childhood around age ten or eleven) discovers the world of heroes, he becomes one and joins the world of adventure with his/her heroes which becomes a substitute for his real world. When the reader enters the world of thinker (adolescence around age fifteen to seventeen), he may turn into a critical reader and searcher for the truth about what he reads in stories. As the

reader nears college age or a little beyond, he becomes the interpreter (college bound age and beyond) who may talk of structure or point of view or symbolism. But then, as the reader nears middle age, he leaves the world of theory and structure and focuses on more down-to-earth or practical approach to reading -- the reader becomes the pragmatic reader. The pleasure now lies in a personal experience with the text--one where the reader relates to the characters' predicaments in the books with situations in his own life (21-193).

As a teacher, a researcher, a writer, and now especially as a reader, the discovery of what takes place as a reader reads is absolutely mind-boggling. As I reflected on this study, I have discovered that reading is not a passive act and should never be. It is very dynamic and very individualistic. The stances that the student assumed even in the same piece of writing created his own personal understanding of the world that he lived in and it created his own perception of himself. Through the student's own reflection, he could see and see again why and when he reacted the way he did. Perhaps, the three original r's should be changed to four new ones: reading, reaction, reflection, and realization. Through these r's, I will continue to celebrate Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory and will continue to encourage my students to have not only personal discoveries about themselves as they read texts, but also to have personal encounters with the texts themselves, regardless of topics. Rosenblatt addressed this issue in *The Reader, the Text, the Poem*.

No matter how impersonal and objective, no matter how descriptive and

technical, historical or critical interests may seem, the raw data, so to speak, must be individual personal encounters with texts. (175)

Reading is and should be a personal encounter. Scholes wrote, “Learning to read books or pictures or films is not just a matter of acquiring information from texts, it is a matter of learning to read and write the texts of our lives” (*Protocols of Reading* 19).

With Rosenblatt, when we read we can have both worlds--a world of acquiring information from the text and a world of living through and writing the texts of our lives.

Sontag wrote, “None of us can ever retrieve that innocence before all theory when art knew no need to justify itself, when one did not ask of a work of art what it said because one knew (or thought one knew) what it did (*Against Interpretation* 4-5). With

Rosenblatt, when we read we can still have the innocence and joy of reading as we did when we were a child.

As I reflected on my life as a reader, I could see my father, my mother, and my sisters and me sitting together in our reading room. I could smell the warm cookies that my mother had just placed on the table to cool. I could hear my father say once again, “Okay girls, what have you been reading this week?” I could see me jump up as usual to be the first one to share. And I could see my father look over at me, settle back into his favorite chair, and smile.

Today, I still chase the moon; I still race the wind; I still quote from Longfellow; I still believe in a cause larger than life; and I still feel that magic from those moments with my family in that little reading room off from our kitchen. Reading to me is like coming home.

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## APPENDIX A

### **The Transactional Dance: Louise Rosenblatt's Presence in the History of Literary Criticism**

by Aleta J. Crockett

The two pillars upon which a theory of criticism must rest are an account of value and an account of communication. We do not sufficiently realize how great a part of our experience takes the form it does, because we are social beings and accustomed to communication from infancy. (I. A. Richards)

If a theory makes no difference in educational endeavor, it must be artificial. (John Dewey)

A text, once it leaves its author's hands, is simply paper and ink until a reader evokes from it a literary work--sometimes, even, a literary work of art. (Louise M. Rosenblatt)

I was one of those teachers who had fallen under the spell of a combination of theories--the old historicism and the American version of English Formalism called New Criticism. I had been taught literature that way so, therefore, I taught literature that way. It was an endless cycle and it continues to be one. This is exactly what happens in our classrooms today if teachers are not aware of certain theories. The keyword here is "aware." Once teachers are aware, they can make the theories their own and take from them what their students need in order to succeed.

Teachers can and should know why they teach literature a certain way. This awareness in itself is a form of empowerment in their own classrooms: empowerment for teachers--empowerment for their students.

These diverse ways of teaching will lead to even more varieties of theories and their theorists. The scope is immense. But, theories are only theories until they are internalized within a teacher's mind and understood. Theories are only theories until they are applicable. Theories are only theories unless they are beneficial to the student and practical for the teacher. Theories are only theories until they actually work.

Building on M. H. Abrams's triangle of author, text, and reader, scholar Terry Eagleton in his book *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983) divides literary theory into three primary segments: he simplifies it by suggesting that one might very roughly periodize the history of modern literary theory in three stages: a preoccupation with the author (Historicism), exclusive concern with the text (New Criticism); and a marked shift of attention to the reader (Reader-Response) over recent years. I have chosen a broader range of interpretive strategies for the major theories: text-based interpretation; reader-based interpretation; and context-based interpretation. The text-based interpretation includes Formalism & New Criticism and Psychoanalytic Criticism. The reader-based interpretation encompasses Reader-Response Criticism or Reader-Oriented Criticism. The context-based interpretation subsumes Historicism & New Historicism, Feminist Criticism, Marxist Criticism, and Deconstruction.

So, the purpose of this paper begins where the argument of this paper begins--with an introduction to or a reacquaintance with Louise M. Rosenblatt and her transactional theory of reader-response.

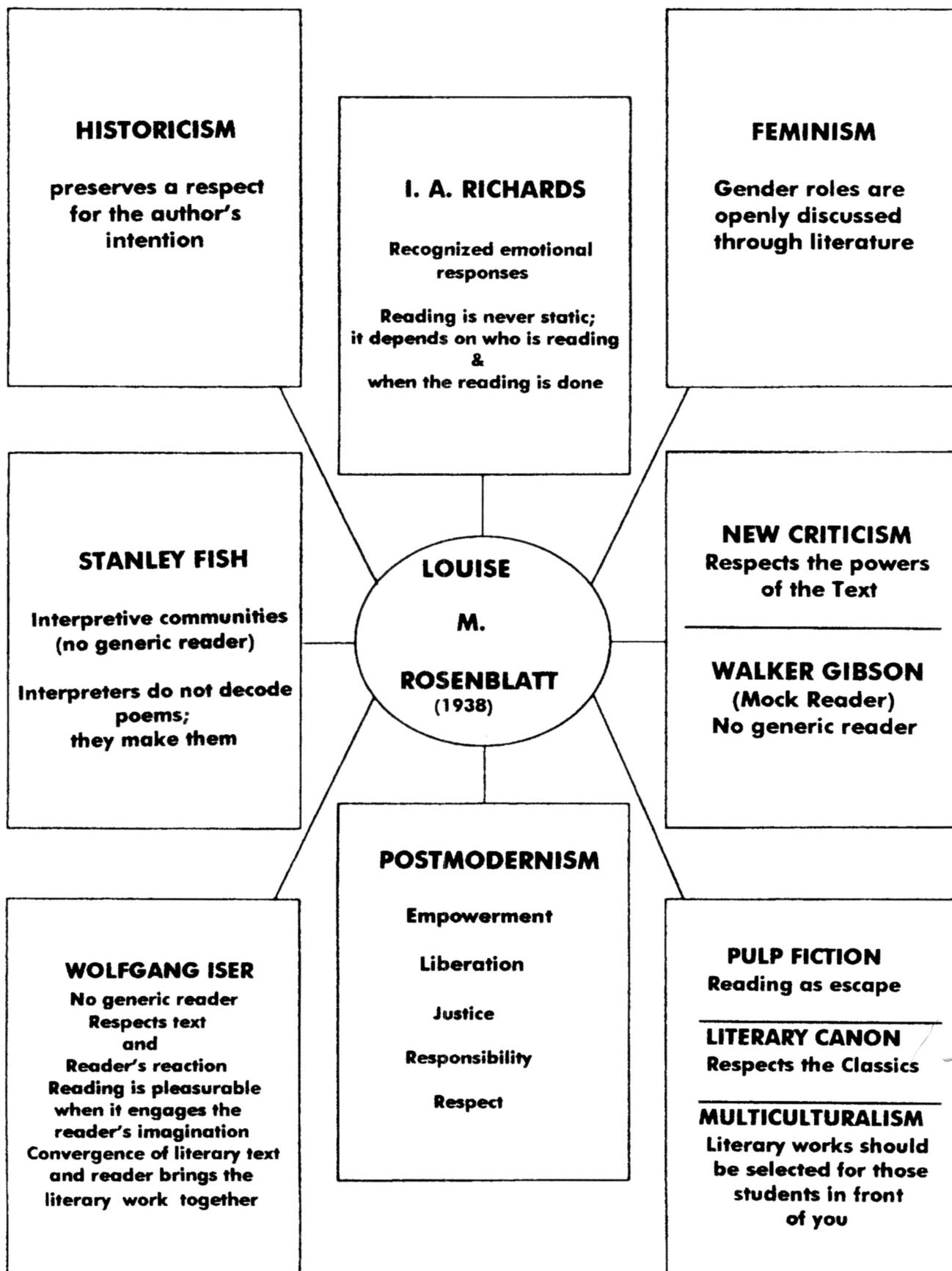
Within the realm of the interpretive strategies and their mind-boggling ideas and scope and in a society that traditionally conferred more status and freedom to men, there has been an overshadowing presence of one woman with her empowering ideas.

Rosenblatt's views on educating the person and her ideas on teaching literature are intertwined and paralleled with the major male-dominated literary movements and their male founders. (Figure 1)

### **Literary Theory from the 1920's to 1950's with the Presence of Rosenblatt**

Literary criticism is a way of looking at the many ranges of inquiries about literature--such as--what literature is, what it does, and what is it worth. The word criticism is derived from the Greek word meaning judgment (Trilling 1). The curricula of major colleges were more concerned with the study of Greek and Latin literatures targeting their grammatical (word constructions), rhetorical (persuasive devices), or philological (cultural history) structures. Francis Child, the first English Literature professor at Harvard, following in the footprints of the German universities, composed a list of readings for entering freshmen. He was "determined to turn the study of English from rhetoric to literature" (Bizzell and Herzberg 2).

Child bitterly resented the time he had to spend correcting student compositions. He delegated as much of his work as he could to faculty underlings and concentrated on



The Presence of Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory  
Figure 1

enlarging Harvard's offerings in literature. Child spent the next twenty-six years developing the English literature curriculum. (2)

Later as this historicism evolved in schools the focus on the biographies of writers and social factors and circumstances of the times became an integral part of the literature study. The literature studied was written by authors such as Pepys, Shakespeare, Coleridge, Pope, Poe . Interests in these men and their writings were focused on the authors' lives and their times. Events of the times could be mirrored in their diaries and the philosophies and social commentaries of the writers in their different genres. Any literary discussion was on the noble attributes of the text and the autobiography of the author. The author's intellect or genius or his creative power was inferred from his writings.

But, the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century ushered in a new way thinking. The National Council of Teachers of English was formed in 1911 "largely to consolidate resistance to these lists and to the conception of English studies they represented and began to publish *English Journal* in 1912 " (3).

The world was in turmoil; democracy was still being threatened everywhere. War was over but was imminent to recur. Writers such as D. H. Lawrence, T. S. Eliot, and Virginia Woolf were involved in a serious reevaluation of society--radical changes were topics of discussion---thoughts of impending doom and the end of civilization were rampant--a setting free of things from the past was longed for. The brief rise of Modernism--a call for form--promoted the belief that through new poetic forms new worlds could be created. But, it was still a man's world even though women were soon-to-be granted the right to vote by an all-male Congress in 1919 with an amendment (19th) to the Constitution. Science and mathematics were seen as saviors of democracy and the free world. Literature if it were to exist in colleges as a discipline had to appear more scientific and grounded in methodology. Thus, a new scientific and analytical approach to literature emerged. And once literature became an established discipline, theories began to sprout everywhere.

A very young Louise M. (Michelle) Rosenblatt was entering an exciting period of life during this male-dominated time. In 1921, she became a freshman at Barnard College. Barnard College, a woman's liberal arts college, was named in honor of Frederick Augustus Porter Barnard, president of Columbia (College) University from 1884 to 1889. Barnard had been an advocate of higher education for women; thus to honor him after his death Barnard College was founded in 1889. One year later in 1890, it became an affiliate of Columbia which was restricted at that time to males only. Columbia University did not become coed until 1983.

Both of these educational institutions, being located in New York City, were at the center of learning opportunities. In 1921, WWI had been over for three years, Warren G. Harding was President, the Jazz Age was off and running, the country was supposedly dry, and the literary world was flourishing. Dorothy Parker said that New York City was an arrangement of black and white. Blacks had come up from the South and W. E. B. DuBois boasted that they had brought with them their gift of story and song. Both whites and blacks celebrated the birth of the Harlem Renaissance with its culture and literature.

The world saw the publication of two 1922 giants--James Joyce's *Ulysses* and T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. The Book-of-the-Month Club was founded in 1923 and so was *Time* magazine, followed shortly in 1926 by The Literary Guild. The early 1920's were a hodgepodge of creative expression in politics and the arts. The Soviet states became the U.S.S.R. in 1922, Gershwin created "Rhapsody in Blue" in 1923, Hitler wrote *Mein Kampf* in 1924, and F. Scott Fitzgerald introduced the world to *The Great Gatsby* in 1925.

During her tenure at Barnard from 1921-1925, Louise Rosenblatt was being exposed to enormous cultural and literary diversities as well as educational diversities. Virginia Woolf's profound statement in 1924 prophesied what was yet to come: "All human relations have shifted--those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children. And when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics, and literature" (Davis and Finke 565).

Later we will discover just how much these diversities would impact and influence Rosenblatt's thinking on the teaching of literature. She, too, had opposed the old historicism approach to literature and would welcome New Criticism--an analytical, methodical approach to the text. She and the New Critics deplored the neglect of literature as an art. But, there would be a parting of the ways with the New Critics.

New Criticism favored the written text--the art of the words on the page and not the author's influence or any social implications on the work. The value of the text was in the text itself: its figurative language, its grammatical constructions, its rhyme and meter. This time no one cared if Coleridge had written under the influence of hallucinogenic drugs or if Poe had stupored for days in melancholia and drunkenness or if Shakespeare's "Dark Lady" existed in reality or only in his pen. No one searched for any hidden messages in the text. The focus was no longer on the work as a mirror of reality; the text stood on its own merit. It became an autonomous entity.

At Barnard, Rosenblatt was becoming an autonomous entity, too. Her family upbringing and her intellectual interests in European and American anti-authoritarian writers "saved [her] from acquiring lingering Victorian attitudes about gender, class, and

ethnic differences” (“Retrospect” 97) long before she had walked onto a college campus. She was a self-motivated learner and thinker and soon became interested in an issue that would allow students to become more responsible for their own education. She tells us “at Barnard my experience was not conventional” (97).

As her later reader-response theory would advocate, education promoted the values of a democratic society. As editor-in-chief of the *Barnard Bulletin* (a post previously held by her friend Margaret Meade) she wrote in an editorial “ we are now passing through a period of readjustment. Authoritarianism no longer holds sway in matters of intellect. New attitudes in politics, in economics, in art, in education, are manifesting themselves. New values are seeping into the thought of the time” (Pradl 23).

During her last two years at Barnard, she became a product of one such new value that had seeped into the attitude towards education. In an experimental study she was freed from the traditional liberal arts curriculum of study and was allowed to read freely on her own. This included extensive reading in the social sciences, English and American literature. Once a week she would confer with her professor. At the end of her senior year she took a week-long series of examinations.

Rosenblatt’s nontraditional education during her last two years at Barnard mirrored the beliefs of John Dewey though she writes she was not introduced to Dewey’s ideas until the 30’s. This is made known in a letter she would write in 1989 to professor George Pradl. Pradl had written about an incident when Rosenblatt was not only the editor-in-chief of the college newspaper but also in charge of the Forum Luncheon Series. Dewey was one of the guest speakers. Dewey’s remarks were published in the *Barnard Bulletin* on March 28, 1924 (Pradl 25):

The student cannot spend sixteen or eighteen years in habit formation and then expect habits of intellectual freedom to suddenly appear. If intellectual curiosity and freedom are to be dominating principles of higher education they must be equally prevalent in the lower schools. (Pradl 25)

Rosenblatt responded to his writing about the Dewey lecture at Barnard in a letter to Pradl dated January 12, 1989:

I was amazed to read your account of the reports of the Dewey and Kilpatrick lectures in the *Bulletin*. I have no recollection of hearing either. My recollections of Dewey date back to the thirties, but

not before. Perhaps this documents the fact that my interest in teaching (rather than general social theory) dates from the time when I started teaching. Before then, I took what went on in classrooms pretty much for granted. (44)

Dewey in his 1938 work, *Experience and Education* made it clear that “educative activities are to be judged on the basis of whether or not they enable the student to handle future experiences in a productive way” (Lucas 533). Rosenblatt in that same year in her book, *Literature As Exploration*, will echo Deweyan thought from the perspective of education and literature. Teachers, if they expect their students’ responses to a text to grow and mature, first must give their students the chance to express those ideas freely.

But 1938 was still a long way from 1925 and the young woman who would eventually write this monumental book was experiencing uncertainty about her future. Influenced by one of her professors of anthropology, Franz Boas, she at graduation in 1925 was having to make a decision on what path of study to travel: a literary one or anthropological one? As a compromise, she went to study at the University of Grenoble ( Pradl 29) and then on to France to seek acceptance into doctoral study at the University of Paris in Comparative Literature. Her study would include comparative studies in culture, art, writers, and literature. Keeping in mind that women had just been granted the right to vote in America, this was an extraordinary accomplishment and adventure for such a young woman.

Meanwhile during the late 1920's, while Rosenblatt was being educated at the Sorbonne, across the Channel a lecturer at the University of Cambridge in England was engaged in a teacher/research experiment. I. (Ivor) A. (Armstrong) Richards, disillusioned with historicism and its neglect of the text as an art form within itself, gave his students unidentified passages of poems(no authors and titles), asking them for a close analysis. His educational objective was to break from biographical and historical dependence. The students were to examine eight poems from the words on the page and to respond freely. These were done over the course of a week and involved repeated readings and reflections. Richards was disappointed in his students’ performances on these exercises because they had trouble “understanding the literal and poetic meanings in the poems” and brought what he called “baggage” or “preconceptions that keep the true meaning of the poem from being communicated” (Davis 89). What the students were asked to do was in opposition to the ways that they had been previously taught--the students were being asked to respond personally to the text (poems). They were literally at the mercy of their own selves and what that constitutes. Their backgrounds and previous experiences were used against them instead of a tool to further their learning.

In his introduction to *Practical Criticism* (Richards borrows this from Samuel Coleridge--Richards had studied Coleridge and had adopted his views on how to think about thinking (Berthoff 57), he discovers what he calls “an arbitrary list of the principal difficulties that may be encountered by one reader or another in the presence of almost any poem” (11). The list included ten student errors in literary analysis:

- A. failure to make out the plain sense of the poem, its tone, feeling, and intention.
- B. failure to grasp its sound and rhythm
- C. failure to grasp the function of imagery
- D. indulgence in mnemonic irrelevancies.

These are misleading effects of the reader’s being reminded of some personal scene or adventure, erratic associations, the interference of emotional reverberations from a past which may have nothing to do with the poem.

- E. stereotyped and stock responses
- F. inhibition
- H. doctrinal adhesions--certain beliefs interfering with the meaning of the work
- I. technical presuppositions--expecting similarities and disappointed if things are done differently (a view might be that poetry isn’t poetry if it doesn’t rhyme)
- J. critical or theoretical preconceptions  
(*Practical Criticism* 12-15)

Cambridge’s elite students had difficulty with poems that they had never seen before. Richards found an extremely wide range of responses to the poems, remarking “sometimes when widely different views are expressed we receive the impression that, through some twist or accident in communication, different poems are being discussed” (*Practical Criticism* 55).

Even the brightest could have difficulty and produce bizarre responses without the proper pedagogy was Richards’ conclusion. Interpretation should be taught. The proper pedagogy was instruction in how to look at the parts of the whole poem to see how wholeness was achieved, in how to examine the whole artistic creation in relationship to its parts, in how to focus on the poem’s figurative language, in how to search for patterns and repetitions, and in how to assess the use of imagery and irony.

Thus, Richards’ close reading became an integral part of America’s New Criticism in the late 1930’s to 1950’s. His findings, too, would interest another theory of thought that

would eventually rise in opposition to the New Critics-- the focus on the reader's responses. Richards' examination of his students' responses uncovered that the reader brought something with him when he read a text. As professor Alan Purves pointed out in "The Aesthetic Mind of Louise Rosenblatt" the perceived text is related to the perceived world as well as to the reader.

The reading of the text is a mental event determined in great part by the reader, but also clearly affected by the nature of the text. The reader is not independent of the text nor the text of the reader. More importantly, however, the way in which a text is read, which is to say the stance that one adopts to the text, is as important as what is derived from or adduced to the text. One may see the reading of texts as an individual matter, as Rosenblatt clearly claims.

(216)

Richards' discovery of close reading of the text would eventually influence decades of literary thought throughout college campuses; but in 1931 on the campus of the Sorbonne, Louise Rosenblatt was finishing her doctoral dissertation and this too would influence literary thought for decades to come.

This young woman theorist and her ideas were coming to terms with more than just the importance of the literary text and the close reading of the text. She was congealing the idea of the meeting of the reader and the text as more than just a literary experience that would involve all that the reader would bring and all that the text would bring --this encounter would encompass a much larger issue. As Purves writes, she would turn I. A. Richards' concept around into a positive reaction to his initial findings--"what is in the reader's head is not erroneous, but a necessary part of reading" (210). The human concerns of texts were more important to her than the language of the text or its structure or its style. Though she was aware of I. A. Richards' work and referred to his recently published work, *Practical Criticism* in her dissertation ("Transactional Theory of the Literary Work" 34), she was more influenced by those whom she had studied while at Barnard and while at the Sorbonne. She tells us in the Preface to *The Reader, the Text, The Poem* that "her first book written for the doctorate in comparative literature was a study of art for arts sake developed by the nineteenth-century English and French writers to combat the pressures of an uncomprehending or hostile society. Their texts possess the highest potentialities for bringing the whole human personality, as Coleridge had said, into activity" (xi).

Her educational background and her interests in sociology, psychology, and

anthropology solidified the framework for her transactional theory that would be a result of her experiences while teaching. So after she received her doctorate from the Sorbonne, she headed back to Barnard to teach. At Barnard while teaching English and comparative literature, she enrolled in a graduate anthropology course taught by Franz Boas and Ruth Benedict.

Her background in anthropology and the social sciences earned her a position on the Commission on Human Relations. The task of the Commission was to produce adolescent books on the importance of human development and the family. During her tenure with the Commission and at Barnard she worked on “helping the average student discover why one should read literary texts, given all the other interesting things in life” (*Literature As Exploration* 285). In 1938 her book, *Literature As Exploration*, was published and offered, and still offers after sixty years, a “universal appeal for the importance of literature as a way of exploring and celebrating human experience” (Pradl 31).

The foundation of her transactional theory was in the 1938 edition even though the word “transaction” had not been made available to Rosenblatt until 1949 in John Dewey’s and A. F. Bentley’s *Knowing and the Known* (Salvatori 50). Celebrating human experience and much more was to be discovered years later by Temma F. Berg, women’s theory scholar, who manifested in her 1991 article on Rosenblatt titled “Louise Rosenblatt: A Woman in Theory” that in 1938 “*Literature As Exploration* sought to help us learn to use literature as a survival mechanism in a world on the brink of war” (187). Even though the world needed survival tools, mankind sought to look elsewhere into masculine theorizing instead of feminine practicality.

Also in 1938 another major book written by two male scholars was published. Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren’s *Understanding Poetry* (an anthology for college introductory courses in poetry) also was published a little after the release of Rosenblatt’s *Literature and Exploration*. This book set forth a technique that would enable students to be skilled in close reading of the text. A set of questions followed each poem that led the student into a prescribed analysis of the poem. This method fit well into the New Critics pattern of thought--these steps if followed generated a type of scientific step-approach to the analytical study of a poem, and this is exactly what the New Critics felt that they needed for the discipline to be regarded as worthy of study. In the first chapter called “Poetry As A Way Of Saying,” the authors tell us that they had difficulty in deciding on the final title of their book.

It might, however, with equal reason have been called *Experiencing Poetry*, for what his book hopes to do is to enlarge the reader’s capacity to experience poetry. What

is at stake in the choice between the two titles is a matter of emphasis. The title *Experiencing Poetry* would emphasize the end to be hoped for--a richer appreciation of poetry, a fuller enjoyment. Our chosen title emphasizes the process by which such an end may be achieved. (15)

The age of science was dictating many of these new theories. Rosenblatt would write years later in the 5<sup>th</sup> edition of *Literature As Exploration* in the chapter "Retrospect and Prospect" her view of the success of the book *Understanding Poetry*.

Surely one reason for their success was that their approach fitted in with the postwar glorification of science, fueled by fear of Soviet scientific superiority. The New Critics and I seemed to start out on the same path by deploring the neglect of literature as an art resulting from the traditional preoccupation with literary history and the message of the work. But we parted company in our understanding of the nature of art. The New Critics treated the poem as an autonomous entity that could be objectively analyzed. (289-290)

To put it simply, the New Critics saw the literary work as an artifact--as Cleanth Brooks metaphorically referred to it as a well-wrought urn--a well-established form. In 1939, one year after *Understanding Poetry* and *Literature As Exploration* were published, NCTE began to publish the first editions of *College English* (Bizzell and Herzberg 3).

After the Brooks and Penn Warren anthology was published, John Crowe Ransom's book, *The New Criticism*, in 1941 provided the name for this new literary movement. New Criticism was gaining momentum as a strong intellectual force in literary thought. Other writings began to flood the intellectual market: W. K. Wimsatt, Jr. and Monroe C. Beardsley's in 1946 "The Intentional Fallacy" (author's intention) and later in 1949 "The Affective Fallacy (reader's emotional response ." In "The Intentional Fallacy" Wimsatt and Beardsley argue that because the poem is no longer the poet's but "belongs to the public" (Davis and Schleifer 45) any serious consideration of the poet's intention as an avenue for understanding the poem is invalid. Also in 1949, NCTE "mandated the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) and in 1950 the first issue of the journal *College Composition and Communication* appeared" (Bizzell and Herzberg 4).

Rosenblatt herself would later tell us that the "New Critics' attack on the intentional

fallacy and the affective fallacy diminished the importance of the author and decried concern with the reader's feelings and ideas. In the universities recognition of the reader did not begin until the late sixties and early seventies" (*L As E* 290). The New Critic thinking that a work of literature should be considered as an object independent of the author's intention or biography and independent of the reader's emotional reaction to the work would continue to flourish in colleges and universities for decades to come. Their motto echoed D. H. Lawrence's quip "Trust the tale--not the teller" (Beach 15).

By 1946 Rosenblatt had become intensely involved with the professional organization NCTE (National Council for the Teachers of English). In fact, she was busy editing an issue of *English Journal* that was devoted to furthering the concept of multiculturalism that she had advocated in *Literature As Exploration*. And in 1948 she joined New York University School of Education and was permitted to design a program for undergraduates and doctoral students in English Education.

During this period in her academic life, John Dewey would have a profound effect upon her view of teaching literature. In 1949 with the publication of John Dewey's and Arthur F. Bentley's *Knowing and the Known*, Rosenblatt's discovery of their word "transaction" would form the foundation for her theory in *Literature As Exploration*. Dewey had used this word as a replacement for the word interaction. Interaction had suggested that the entities involved were separate, therefore, acting upon each other.

Rosenblatt's entities were the reader and the text. The new word "transaction" implied that the entities reciprocally created their relationship. She borrowed their term because it created exactly what her theory had advocated in the first place. The word "transaction" would appear for the first time in the 1968 edition of *Literature As Exploration*. "The transactional phrasing places the stress on each reading as a particular event involving a particular reader and a particular text recursively influencing each other under particular circumstances"(Rosenblatt 292). In an April 20, 1950 letter to John Dewey, Arthur Bentley wrote that "[Louise Rosenblatt] was all excited about the application of *Knowing and the Known* to literature" (*Preface/The Reader, The Text, The Poem* xiv).

The 1950's being a powerfully threatening decade to the nation's ego and security (Russia's space exploration) and to the nation's youth (the explosion of Rock & Roll) a revival of another text-based criticism was being reexplored. The insecurity of the self or the reexamining of the self became a popular pastime. The text-based Psychoanalytic Criticism flourished. Psychoanalytic Criticism had focused on the interpretation of symbols in literature and symbolic relationships long before psychology was considered a science.

Psychoanalytic critics had applied the theories of Sigmund Freud to literary works. To

be brief, in *The Interpretation of Dreams* published in 1900 Freud's theory states that the human mind has three parts: the ego; the superego; and the id. The ego is one's conscious personality. The superego is the ego's overseer or censor that monitors unacceptable desires. The id is the dark side of the mind that contains sexual desires that would rage havoc on society if allowed to run loose. Freud advocates that one's sexuality is at the center of his behavior and that only the ego communicates in language; the others communicate in symbols only. Psychoanalytic Criticism would include a close reading that would focus on recurrent dreams, sexual symbols, and/or repressed feelings of characters that influence their actions. This criticism along with Formalism/New Criticism are still widely explored today in analyzing literature.

Also in 1950 a work by Walker Gibson called "Authors, Speakers, Readers, and Mock Readers" shed a light on formalism with a new way of looking at literature through the eyes of the reader. Professor Jane Tompkins in *Reader Response/From Formalism to Poststructuralism* asserts that this work "shows how reader-response criticism began to evolve within the confines of a formalist position" (x). This time the focus was on the reader--the mock reader as Gibson called him. This mock reader is not a real reader--this reader is there only to unlock new treasures in the text. The reader is involved in producing a new kind of textual analysis even though Gibson's focus was mainly text-oriented.

There are two readers distinguishable in every literary experience. First, there is the real individual upon whose crossed knee rests the open volume, and whose personality is as complex and ultimately inexpressible as any dead poet's. Second, there is the fictitious reader--I shall call him the mock reader--whose mask and costume the individual takes on in order to experience the language. The mock reader is an artifact, controlled, simplified, abstracted out of the chaos of day-to-day sensation. (2)

Gibson's idea of the mock reader will later on be seen in the works of Stanley Fish's interpretive communities in the 1970's. Gibson wrote "The realization on the part of a student that he is many people as he reads many books and responds to their language worlds is the beginning of literary sophistication in the best sense (5). Rosenblatt had written the same concept twelve years earlier--"there is no such thing as a generic reader" (32).

The decade of the 50's was swirling with the ideas of the different forms and shapes of criticism. Scholars were bouncing back and forth their own views of this method and that

method of looking at literary forms. The New Critics were basking in their accomplishments in the universities when a student of Sigmund Freud's idea took hold of the criticism world. Carl Jung's comprehensive theory of symbolic forms or archetypes began to exert some influence on critical thought even though his ideas had been around since the early 20's when he had studied under Freud.

In literary criticism an archetype is a universal figure-- character or personality that can be found in other literature, no matter the country nor the period in which it was written. Northrope Frye in *Anatomy of Criticism* in 1957 said that "archetypal criticism would be precisely where the prior movement [New Criticism] had failed" (Davis and Finke 570), thus, paving a way for a new movement with a new name--Structuralism. Archetypal criticism proposed that all human expression grows out of certain symbolic patterns. Structuralism is a theory that focused on human expressions. Generally we associate structuralism with such French thinkers as Claude Levi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, and Jean Piaget; but an earlier Swiss thinker, Ferdinand de Saussure, and an American thinker, Charles Peirce, both sparked an interest in what today is called semiotics ( a theory of signs and symbols). Semiotics is the theory that language is a system of signs and differences that generated meaning through its own internal mechanisms. Language to Saussure was an arbitrary system. He called semiotics a science that studies life of signs within society.

These signs enabled human beings to communicate with each other. Semiotics asked how the elements of language are configured in order to produce the results they have. There was no reason why any combination of letters or sounds could not represent any given thing so long as the difference between one word and another was clearly given.

Thus, language is a construct--a system based on the recognition of difference. Semiotics became a technique used in an even closer reading of a literary text. Semiotics became a part of a larger movement called Structuralism which went deeper into a literary work, not only looking at how signs and symbols were organized to create the whole but also looking at such things as structural binary oppositions such as light vs. dark--good vs. evil--poor vs. rich. Structuralism included more than just the literary work--Roland Barthes went as far as to do a Structuralist reading of fashion magazines.

Like any new movement, Structuralism was viewed very cautiously at first. Some critics saw it as a foreign import (French) of ideas while others saw it as too scientific thus stripping the literary work of its humanistic qualities. Structuralism's aim was to focus on literary form in a detailed manner that was similar to empirical research simply because of the science and space age competition between the U. S.S.R. and the United States. Literature to survive as a discipline in the universities had to be more scientific.

And where was Louise Rosenblatt during the 1950's? During the 1950's Rosenblatt was teaching at New York University's School of Education, writing various articles, and contemplating a new book that would empower the reader and teacher of literature even more than her first book. This new book would involve what she would call the reader's stance. Here she would introduce two terms that would explain how a reader reads: efferently and aesthetically and she would call this new book, *The Reader, the Text, the Poem*. Though much of this book was written in the fifties, it was not published until 1978. Rosenblatt had sent out part of it to a journal in 1956, but it was refused. However, in 1964 Chapter Two called "The Poem as Event" would be published in *College English*, an NCTE publication.

### **The Exploration of Change and Individualism in the 1960's & 1970's with the Presence of Rosenblatt**

The 1960's was a decade of change. The country had lost through an assassin's bullet a young and charismatic leader. Uncertainty and insecurity spread over the nation like uncontrollable wildfire. The changing of political leaders in midstream generated an even greater fear for the future. Virginia Woolf's words echoed again as they had in 1924: ". . . when human relations change there is at the same time a change in conduct, politics, and literature." The 60's and the 70's would be the heyday for two powerful movements: Structuralism and soon to enter the scene in opposition to Structuralism/Formalism/New Criticism--the reader-based criticism called Reader-Response.

I find it very difficult to write about the reader-response opposition to the text-based criticism without starting with the works of Louise Rosenblatt. But, in many of the reader-response anthologies she is only mentioned in various footnote references. Why this is so became clearer to me as my research encompassed the major theories. First, she was a young woman who was writing about responses to literature--emotional responses to literature.

I. A. Richards could mention emotional responses and later on other reader-response male theorists could do the same and be taken quite seriously by their male colleagues. But for a woman to do this was simply a woman-thing--not scholarly--not academic--but feminine. She was an educated woman writing in a male-dominated world. Who would take her seriously? Even though she had a teaching position at a prestigious university, she was still considered a woman teacher--a woman in education. Rosenblatt would write to Elizabeth Flynn who is a feminist scholar at Michigan Technological University and author of many writings on gender why she [Rosenblatt] chose to use the generic "he" in both of her books.

You might be amused at my troubles with the generic “he.” When I wrote the first edition of *Literature As Exploration* (that goes back at least to 1936), I was reacting against the fact that whenever the subject was “teacher,” the literature used “she.” My use of the generic “he” was a feminist gesture, to counteract the notion that teaching was a feminine, and hence rightfully lower-paid occupation! (174).

Just being born a woman, being a woman in education, and being a woman writing about emotional responses to literature-- somewhat hindered the recognition that her first work deserved. Also, her being associated with the progressive ideas of John Dewey may have slowed acceptance of her work since she had admired his work so much and as Wayne Booth acknowledged in the Preface of the latest edition of *Literature As Exploration*, “Dewey was one of her heroes” (ix). And with regret and embarrassment I think that her theory was so practical and so useful and so teacher and student friendly that the so-called intellectuals of the day perceived her theory as nonscholarly.

Rosenblatt’s ideas did not have a strong pedagogical impact until the 1960’s. She had continued to write and submit various works for publication. In 1964 she did publish the second chapter of her second book in *College English* called “The Poem as Event.” In this article she discovers from her students what happens when they read. In fact, she had performed a similar experiment that I. A. Richards had used with his students.

A specific reader and a specific text at a specific time and place: change any of these, and there occurs a different circuit, a different event--a different poem. . . . for the reader, the poem is lived-through during his intercourse with the text. (124)

Rosenblatt should come to one’s mind when literary criticism is discussed not just when reader-response criticism is mentioned. Formalists’, New Critics’, Structuralists’, Historicists’ ideas are embraced in her theory. She openly respects the text, she respects the imaginative parts of the work that create the whole, she respects the words as symbols, and she respects the author’s intention. But what she advocates that sets her apart from the others including the other reader-response critics is what she calls the relation between the reader and the text.

The relation between the reader and text is not linear.

It is a situation, an event at a particular time and place in which each element conditions the other. (16)

The reading of a text is an event occurring at a particular time in a particular environment at a particular moment in the life history of the reader. The transaction will involve not only the past experience but also the present state and present interests or preoccupations of the reader. This suggests the possibility that printed marks on a page may even become different linguistic symbols by virtue of transactions with different readers. Just as a knowing is the process linking a knower and a known, so a poem should not be thought of as an object, an entity, but rather as an active process lived through during the relationship between a reader and a text. (20-21)

This article “The Poem as Event” was the first explicit attack on the New Critics that called for a new criticism that was reader-based. Rosenblatt again was a leading force and was way ahead of her times.

In 1966, a Teaching of English seminar held at Dartmouth College, focused on the role of language learning in personal growth stressing the importance of self-expression in writing and in response to literature was brought to the nation’s attention. This seminar was attended by both American and British educators. “ The conference helped spread the conviction that writing instruction should emphasize self-expressive uses of language, assisting students in shaping their ideas through writing” (Bizzell and Herzberg 4). This new awakening toward the student’s self-expression in writing would influence a new awakening toward the student’s self-expression in reading literature well.

1967 was a memorable year in the English teaching field because NCTE began the journal *Research in the Teaching of English* “to give research an outlet” (Bizzell and Herzberg 4).

In 1968 the publication of the second edition of *Literature As Exploration* indicated a beginning resistance to New Criticism. James Squire in the Forward to the book said that this book is “one of the very few books on the teaching of English that I believe all teachers should read” (vi).

But because the 60's was such a volatile era, many reactions other than a reaction to

New Criticism were exploding: unrest over poverty and politics--the Vietnam War had started; unrest over racial issues--the Civil Rights Movement had erupted; and unrest over sexual equality--the Feminist Movement had begun. These Movements would affect the literature and its interpretive strategies. So just as Reader-Response and Structuralism were at odds with each other in the late 60's and early 70's, other explosive literary movements were forming at an increasing rate: Poststructuralism, Deconstruction, Marxist, and the Feminist interests--the context-based criticisms.

In the same year (1968) as the second publication of *Literature As Exploration*, a French radical was unhappy with the state of the economy and the politics in Paris. Jacques Derrida, perhaps disillusioned with the tradition of unfair and unjust structuralism from the so-called Western establishment--particularly that of the government of Charles de Gaulle, introduced the literary world to a new way of looking at literature.

His Deconstruction Movement was a philosophy of looking at a structure and having the ability to stand outside and apart from it and take a detached view of it. An example of a deconstruction of a literary work would be to actually confront one interpretation of a work with one that would be totally contradictory or opposite. Thus, the reader could have great freedom fitting together those black marks on the page, looking for a repeating mark or pattern or a differing from each other; therefore, the reader in one sense could become the author of the text-- and any text theoretically could be deconstructed.

This movement stemmed largely from a political disillusionment and a need for breaking away from the established order. But as with any new thought--unconventional or not--there were those who followed it. Those who were initially associated with deconstruction in America were professors of comparative literature and English at Yale.

Oddly enough, Rosenblatt's background was in comparative literature and Derrida taught philosophy in the 60's at the Sorbonne where Rosenblatt had studied years earlier. But, Derrida's influence at Yale prevailed because he taught regular seminars there in the 70's and 80's and formed a friendship with a very interesting professor, Paul de Man. De Man's work, *Blindness and Insight*, in 1971 encouraged this friendship with Derrida and promoted deconstruction until De Man's death. The essence of *Blindness and Insight* was that interpretation is misinterpretation and insight comes through error and that the only authentic path to knowledge about literary texts is through one's blindness.

One can readily see why this movement was considered to be very fashionable--it was politically and philosophically drenched with rebellion and individualism. So, the late 60's and early 70's overflowed with advocates of Structuralism, advocates of Reader-Response and advocates of Poststructuralism/Deconstruction.

But, the key philosophy of the 70's and 80's was going to change focus to a new generation with a new way of looking at the world: this new thought was going to focus inwardly to the individual and to the self. The Reader-Response Critics took advantage of this.

Reader-Response critics Stanley Fish, Norman Holland, David Bleich, and Wolfgang Iser became the prominent Reader-Response Critics of the period. My focus centers on Fish and Iser. Fish had written two works, one in 1967 called *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise* and another in 1972 called *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth Century Literature* both focusing on the reader's experience with the text. To Fish, "meaning and form were coextensive with the reader's experience; they were not produced after the reading activity. The phenomenology of time determined both the meaning and the form of a work" (Leitch 37). In 1980, Fish published his most well-known book, *Is There a Text in This Class?*, a collection of his essays on reader-response. The title of his book originated from a question from one of his former students.

On the first day of the new semester a colleague at Johns Hopkins University was approached by a student who, as it turned out, had just taken a course from me. She put to him what I think you would agree is a perfectly straightforward question: Is there a text in this class? Responding with a confidence so perfect that he was unaware of it (although in telling the story, he refers to this moment as walking into the trap), my colleague said, "Yes, it is the *Norton Anthology of Literature*," whereupon the trap (set not by the student but by the infinite capacity of language for being appropriated) was sprung: "No, no, she said, "I mean in this class do we believe in poems and things, or is it just us?" (305)

Fish's theory found its stability in the notion that readers belong to different interpretive communities and that texts emerge as the consequence of the interpretive models that have called them into being. Thus, the interpretive strategies made or created the text. These strategies came from the reader's interpretive community and all readers belong to many communities. "Interpretation is not the art of construing but the art of constructing. Interpreters do not decode poems; they make them" (327)--this statement came as a result of an experiment he had tried with his students by writing a list of six names on the chalkboard.

Jacobs--Rosenbaum  
Levin  
Thorne  
Hayes  
Ohman (?) (323)

The students had been studying how to identify Christian symbols and how to recognize typological patterns in English religious poetry. The names Fish had written on the board were names of linguists who had coauthored a number of textbooks, but the students interpreted the names as being a particular poem.

One student said that the poem was probably a hieroglyph although he said he could not tell if it were in the shape of a cross or an altar. Jacob supposedly referred to Jacob's ladder. Thorne was an allusion to the crown of thorns. Levin referred to a tribe of Levi or unleavened bread. The last word could have meant omen or Oh Man and so on. Fish's students had created their own poem.

Rosenblatt had also published by the end of the seventies. She had written what she called a complementary book to her first. *The Reader, the Text, the Poem* discussed the validity of interpretation and introduced two new terms in regards to the reader's stance: efferent and aesthetic reading. In the Preface to the 1995 edition of *Literature As Exploration*, she explained what her new terminology meant in its 1978 companion:

To abstract the information or the directions for action needed after reading a sociological essay or a medical report, for example, the reader must focus attention primarily on the impersonal, publicly verifiable aspects of what the words evoke and must subordinate or push into the fringes of consciousness the affective aspects. I term this efferent reading, from the Latin efferre-to carry away.

To produce a poem or play, the reader must broaden the scope of attention to include the personal, affective aura and associations surrounding the words evoked and must focus on--experience, live through--the moods, scenes, situations being created during the transaction. I term this aesthetic reading. These stances are not opposites but form a continuum of possible transactions with a text. (xvii)

Unlike the other theorists of her time, she prided herself in the fact that she had not introduced the typical barrage of new critical terminology.

### **The Endurance of Rosenblatt's Influence on Literary Theory from the 1980's to the Future**

In 1980, the same year as Fish's collection of essays, the first two reader-oriented anthologies were published: Jane Parry Tompkins's *Reader-Response Criticism* and Susan Suleiman's and Inge Crosman's *The Reader in the Text*. Neither included any writings of Louise Rosenblatt. But in both collections, she was mentioned in a footnote. Susan Suleiman in a footnote in her Introduction to the essays wrote:

To my regret, Louise M. Rosenblatt's pioneering work in the field of subjective criticism came to my attention only after this essay was in proof. . . . Although her work was influential among those most concerned with questions of pedagogy, its relevance for literary theory was recognized only recently, when it was rediscovered by Bleich and others. (45)

As Temma F. Berg noted in *Louise Rosenblatt: A Woman of Theory*, "women are not welcome--even by other women--in theory" (181). Even though Suleiman was apologetic, today since Rosenblatt's well-deserved recognition has turned into a bandwagon celebration, these two collections look rather incomplete and leave themselves open to the question of-- why not Rosenblatt? Why not?

Tompkins' mention of Rosenblatt was also in a footnote in her Introduction.

Louise Rosenblatt deserves to be recognized as the first among the present generation of critics in this country to describe empirically the way the reader's reactions to a poem are responsible for any subsequent interpretation of it. (xxvi)

And that was all she had written. Tompkins, however, had included two essays by Stanley Fish in her collection of writings and in the preface to Fish's 1980 book he wrote that "Jane Parry Tompkins has encouraged me and inspired me and given meaning to everything in my life" (vii). Perhaps if Sidney Ratner (Rosenblatt's husband) had edited an anthology on reader-response criticism, Louise would have been given a spot or two early on when the movement gained public notoriety. Jane Tompkins as she writes in

her book, *A Life In School: What the Teacher Learned* “fell in love with the man [Fish] and his theories and left her second husband flat, in the middle of his law school exam; and Fish left his wife and only child” (103). I am surprised at Tompkins--not for falling in love with Stanley Fish--but for not giving Rosenblatt the initial credit that she had earned and deserved. Tompkins, herself, had been treated unfairly in her early years because of her gender.

I was sure I was qualified, since my degree was from Yale and I already had two or three publications, whereas the two young men in my field who were on the tenure track didn't have their degrees yet and hadn't published a thing. The chairman looked down at me with his kind blue eyes and explained. The department couldn't put me on the tenure track because the two young men in question were 'men with families' . . . I was a woman, an outsider. . . my superior qualifications put me at a disadvantage because they didn't want me; they wanted the men. (97-98)

But this type of information is something that Rosenblatt would call “interest in the author's life is often on par with that of the Hollywood gossip column” (*Literature As Exploration* 60). This is taken from her wisdom on how much background information on literary works do readers and teachers need to know. However, with due respect to Tompkins's book--Parker Palmer author of *To Know as we are Known* says of Tompkins “Jane is well-known as one of our foremost literary critics. . . with this superb book she reveals herself to be one of our most resourceful and reflective teachers as well” (Blurb). As a woman in education, I do recommend Tompkin's *A Life in School* to women scholars. She is direct, honest, and sincere about her life in the academic world.

The end of the 70's and throughout the 80's brought attention to another foremost reader-response critic, Wolfgang Iser. In the same year (1978) as Rosenblatt's second book *The Reader, the Text, the Poem*, Iser published *The Act of Reading*. Both Iser and Rosenblatt respect the powers of the text. Iser stressed what he called the virtuality of the work. Virtuality meant to him something that was not all together real. It is “somewhere outside the world of things we can touch and smell and measure--and it has some special power, some virtue, beyond what the matter-of-fact words of the inert text can offer” (Evans 22). This virtual text is “conditioned by the text itself but only in a form that allows the reader himself to bring it out” (Iser 25).

Iser called this relationship between reader and text an “interaction.” This interaction allowed the work to unfold over time as the reader filled in gaps left by the text. “What is

concealed spurs the reader into action, but this action is also controlled by what is revealed" ("Interaction Between Text and Reader" 111). This structural need to fill in these gaps is the text's way of completing itself through the reader's experience. But, ultimately for Iser the text controls the reader. "The reader is given a specific structure by the blanks and the negations arising out of the text, and this structure controls the process of interaction" (*The Act of Reading* 170). To Rosenblatt, Iser's interaction gave too much control to the text--her transaction between the reader and the text gave neither control over the other; both are elements of empowerment.

Interaction, then, was seen as the impact of separate, already-defined entities on one another. . . the metaphor for interaction we have seen was the machine with separable elements or entities acting on one another. Another analogy would be an event as two billiard balls colliding and then going their separate unchanged ways. The metaphor for transaction was organic, the living organism. The human being is not seen as a separate entity, acting upon an environment, nor the environment as acting on the organism, but both as parts or aspects of a total event. ("Viewpoints: Transaction Versus Interaction" 97-98)

During the 80's and 90's, there has been a rapid increase in the reader-response critics: Applebee, Bleich, Purves, Corcoran, Evans, Beach, Clifford, Probst, and Evans. And, they continue to celebrate the work of Louise M. Rosenblatt. A collection of essays compiled by Charles R. Cooper in *Researching Response to Literature and The Teaching of Literature: Points of Departure* resulted from a 1977 conference held at State University of New York .

The main question attempted to be answered at this conference was as Cooper told us in the Introduction to the essays was "What theories should guide our study of readers and what methodologies should enable us to learn more about readers?" (ix). . . and what is the role of the reader? This research tradition actually can be traced at least as far back as Louise Rosenblatt's statement of her reader-response theory, *Literature As Exploration*, published in 1938 and reissued in 1968 and 1976" (xi).

To celebrate *Literature As Exploration's* 50<sup>th</sup> year, James Squire and Edmund Farrell published *Transactions With Literature* (1990), a volume of collected essays, and John Clifford in 1991 published *The Experience of Reading: Louise Rosenblatt and Reader-Response Theory*, also a collection of essays. And, there will and should be more of these collections.

It is difficult not to put everything from her writings under this category. This is for all of us who want to enjoy her wisdom about certain crucial topics that we may have as teachers .

## **Rosenblatt on . . . .**

### **1. Adolescents:**

The adolescent reader comes to the experience of literature out of a mass of absorbing and conflicting influences. . . . The girl or boy recognizes transformations in emotional drives and personality traits. A heightened self-consciousness and curiosity about the self usually follows. Obviously this will color attitudes toward the essentially human art of literature. ( 1995 *Literature As Exploration* 79)

The self-consciousness of the adolescent often centers on a concern with normality. His size, his height, his weight, his speed in movement, his strength are constantly measured against what is considered appropriate for his age and social group. Philip Carey's sensitivity about his deformed foot in *Of Human Bondage* or Piggy's self-consciousness in *Lord of the Flies* can symbolize the agonies of embarrassment that many boys and girls suffer because of much slighter and perhaps almost undetectable deviations from what they have come to consider normal. (79-80)

Even the subtler emotional traits, feelings of anger and envy, of loyalty and affection toward others, may trouble him if he is not sure that others have similar feelings. He seeks some standards against which to measure himself and derives his sense of them from great many different sources, among which may be literature. (80)

The adolescent in our culture often must seek knowledge about sex from surreptitious and unwholesome sources. . . . Another complicating factor is that youth are seeking to adopt adult behavior at progressively younger levels. (80)

Even teachers who are aware of this preoccupation of youth too often tend to evade or gloss over anything in literature that might have a direct bearing on this vital concern [sex]. They, thus, rule out one of the most unfailingly powerful factors in the student's experience with literature. There is, of course, the opposing danger: the adult excessively zealous to prove his emancipation may initiate a crude pendulum swing that will reinforce a self-conscious sexuality, already sufficiently exploited by advertisements, mass media, and recent fiction. The adult's responsibility is to free himself and the youth from the distortions of both prudery and exaggerated reactions against it. (81)

[As an] adolescent becomes more conscious of himself as a member of a family and a community[,] he becomes eager to impress others, to gain their friendships, and to be admitted

into special groups, particularly of his peers. This often leads to intense self-consciousness about his own personality and to a great interest in the ways in which people influence one another. (81)

Adolescents experiment with various ways of approaching people; they seem to try on different social personalities as one might try on new clothes. And, indeed, clothing is an important aspect of the adolescent culture. (81)

## **2. Background Information on Literary Works:**

They [teachers] read literary histories and biographies, criticism, introductions to editions, so-called study guides, and then, if there is time, they read the works. Their interest in the author's life is often on a par with that of the Hollywood gossip column; or they have learned at best to view the work as a document in the author's biography. . . they seem shut off from the personal nourishment that literature can give. (60)

## **3. Classics of literature (literary canon):**

Many of the great classics have elements of vivid action, strong emotion, and suspense that may provide an incentive for the more mature or the more secure student to clear away the obscurities due to unfamiliar language or literary form. (206)

Too often, however, the classics are introduced to children at an age when it is impossible for them to feel in any personal way the problems or conflicts treated. (206)

For the great majority it would probably be much wiser to postpone such reading [the classics] and to gradually build linguistic flexibility through the use of more familiar materials. (26-27)

When the students are more mature, more experienced, they will then be able to apprehend enough of what the great classics offer to be willing and eager to clarify any linguistic obscurities. (27)

## **4. Human Behavior:**

The literature classroom can stimulate the students themselves to develop a thoughtful approach to human behavior. The teacher will do neither literature nor students a service if he tries to evade ethical issues. The teacher should scrutinize his own ethical criteria, which must color anything that he says or does in the classroom. He should not foist his own bias on students, but objectively should not create the impression that value judgments are unimportant. (17)

When the student has been moved by a work of literature, he will be led to ponder on questions of right or wrong, of admirable or antisocial qualities, of justifiable or unjustifiable

actions. The average student spontaneously tends to pass judgment on the actions of characters encountered in fiction. Sometimes this tendency is furthered by the type of analysis and discussion of literature carried on in the classroom. (16)

Our primary impulse is to equate human nature with particular motivations, modes of behavior, and types of choice that we have from childhood observed in the society about us. The inescapable molding influence of the culture into which we are born is an extremely important concept. The teacher should have this clearly in mind before discussing questions concerning character and motivation or even before introducing the student to the images of human behavior presented in our own and other literatures. (14)

A classroom discussion of essays, letters, journals, autobiographies, or any of the other literary forms that deal with individual conduct automatically creates the necessity for advancing one or another view. Whether he wishes to or not, the teacher will either reinforce or counteract these assumptions. (15)

The students may thus very easily conclude that merely on the basis of one's own meager experience and casually acquired assumptions one may make valid judgments on human motives and conduct. To provide a critical framework, the instructor needs some knowledge of the dominant conceptions in psychology. (15-16)

## **5. Multiculturalism:**

America has become increasingly multi-ethnic. Whole literatures have been produced reflecting the interplay between the cultural past brought to the shores and the society established by the predecessors. Often these literary works present the inequalities between the dominant and minority groups and the tensions between less and more assimilated generations. The problem is to fulfill our democratic goal of equal justice for all without regard to differences and yet to maintain respect for such differences. (245)

In the schools the aim is to develop students' respect for their own ethnic or group background and for the cultural traits of others and at the same time to prepare the students for constructive citizenship in our democracy. (245-246)

The current movement termed multiculturalism is having widespread impact, but at times seems to be heightening the sense of difference and conflicting interests among groups. In 1915 Horace Kallen with support of Alain Locke introduced the term cultural pluralism and substituted for the metaphor of the melting pot the metaphor of the orchestra, with each instrument likened to a cultural group making its special contribution to the symphony of civilization. (246)

## 6. Readers Responding:

The young reader should feel free to let his comment take the form dictated by what he has lived through in reading the book. To set up some stereotyped form will probably focus the student's attention on what is to be required of him after he has read the book rather than on the work itself as he evokes it from the text. (64)

What, then, happens in the reading of a literary work? The reader, drawing on past linguistic and life experience, links the signs on the page with certain words, certain concepts, certain sensuous experiences, certain images of things, people, actions, scenes. (30)

## 7. The Teacher and Teaching :

First is the necessity not to impose a set of preconceived notions about the proper way to react to any work. The student must be free to grapple with his own reaction. This primary negative condition does not mean that the teacher abdicates his duty to attempt to instill sound habits of reading or sound critical attitudes. Nor does this imply that historical and biographical background material will be neglected. (63)

The difference is that instead of trying to superimpose routine patterns, the teacher will help students develop these understandings in the context of their own emotions and their own curiosity about life and literature. The youth needs to approach literature personally, to let it mean something to him directly. (63-64)

The classroom situation and the relationship with the teacher should create a feeling of security. He should be made to feel that his own response to books, even though it may not resemble the standard critical comments, is worth expressing. Such a liberating atmosphere will make it possible for him to have an unselfconscious, spontaneous, and honest reaction. (64)

When the student feels the validity of his own experience, he will cease to think of literature as something that only a few gifted spirits can enjoy and understand in an original way. (64)

The instructor's function is to help students realize that the most important thing is what literature means to them and does for them. (64)

Nor should there be constant insistence on summaries or rehashes of the work. That may become as artificial and inhibiting as any of the other routine methods. (64)

A much more wholesome educational situation is created when the teacher is a really live person who has examined his own attitudes and assumptions and who, when appropriate, states them frankly and honestly. (124)

To arouse in the student a desire for social understanding, the teacher of literature needs himself to be aware that such knowledge exists or at any rate that the foundation for it has been laid by the social sciences. (126)

He should be aware of the existence of the various behavioral sciences and should possess a general understanding of what phases of human life they treat. (126)

The training of English teachers should include carefully planned work in the behavioral sciences, and the practicing teacher should recognize his responsibility for constantly adding to his knowledge in these fields as well as in the field of literature. (127)

Teachers of literature and the arts often think of themselves as saving the student from the stultifying effects of our present scientific age. The early Romantic opposition to the scientist as one who “murders to dissect” (Wordsworth, “The Tables Turned”), lingers on. Teachers of English tend to consider themselves defenders for a lost cause, keepers of an imaginative or emotional oasis in the midst of our materialistic, science-ridden life. . . more and more evidence is accruing to demonstrate that science, properly exploited, may eventually reduce them devoted to work that the entire population could have the leisure and the energy for the rich imaginative life that literature and the arts offer. (127)

Conscientious teachers often thus unwittingly defeat their long-term aims by classroom methods, day to day assignments, and devices for evaluation. (65)

Those who cram the classics down students’ throats long before they are ready are careless of the fate of the great works of the past. (27)

## 8. **Transaction/Transactional Theory:**

My transactional view of the reading process affirms that a literary work happens in the reciprocal relationship between reader and the text. I term this relationship a “transaction” in order to emphasize the fluid, dynamic circuit, a to and fro process over time, the interfusion of reader and text in a unique synthesis that constitutes “the meaning,” whether it happens to be a scientific report or a poem. (*Language, Literature, and Values* 67)

For those who do know Louise Rosenblatt and for those who do not, I would like to recommend the following writings to reacquaint the reader with her or to introduce the reader to her. These writings are for teachers especially and for anyone else who wants to experience literature as an exploration.

1. Robert C. Small’s “Connecting Students and Literature: What Do Teachers Do and Why Do They Do It?” found in *Reader Response in the Classroom: Evoking and Interpreting Meaning in Literature*, 1992. Nicholas J. Karolides, editor.
2. Alan C. Purves’s *How Porcupines Make Love II: Teaching a Response-Centered Literature Curriculum*, 1990.

3. *Reader Response in Elementary Classrooms: Quest and Discovery*, 1997. Nicholas J. Karolides, editor. (Especially Allan Dean and Robert Small's "Sharing the Responses of Readers: An Interdisciplinary Pumpkin Unit in the First Grade.")
4. Arthur N. Applebee's *The Child's Concept of Story: Ages Two to Seventeen*, 1978.
5. Nancie Atwell's *In the Middle: Writing, Reading and Learning with Adolescents*, 1987.
6. Lionel Wilson's interview with Louise Rosenblatt from *The English Quarterly*, Spring, Vol. 14, 1981.
7. Rudine Sims Bishop's "Fifty Years of Exploring Children's Books from *Transactions with Literature: A Fifty-Year Perspective*, 1990. Edmund J. Farrell and James R. Squire, editors.
8. Kenneth Donelson's "Fifty-Years of Literature for Young Adults" from *Transactions with Literature: A Fifty-Year Perspective*, 1990. Edmund J. Farrell and James R. Squire, editors. (same as above)

and of course

9. Louise M. Rosenblatt's *Literature As Exploration*, 1995.
10. Rosenblatt's *The Reader, the Text, the Poem*, 1978.
11. Rosenblatt's "What Facts Does This Poem Teach You?" from *Language Arts*, Vol. 57, no. 4, April 1980: 386-394.
12. Rosenblatt's "The Reader's Contribution to the Literary Experience," from *The English Quarterly*, Vol. 14, 1981:1-12.
13. Rosenblatt's "Language, Literature, and Values" from *Language, Schooling, and Society*. Stephen N. Tchudi, editor.

For those teachers who want to know more about Rosenblatt's work, a complete bibliography of hers that has been compiled by her husband is in the back of John Clifford's collection of essays (219-222).

### **The Influence of Rosenblatt on my Teaching and my Doctoral Study**

Teachers and students bring to the classroom so many presences, all of whom have molded them into varied personalities. It can be a crowded room at times. In fact, in my classroom, we used to have to bump each other to make room for the most influential presence at the time: the one that was shadowing me or the one that was shadowing them. I would bump them; they would bump me. Sometimes it became quite difficult and even awkward as the years passed to teach and to learn amidst all of this bumping .

My ideas being so traditionally instilled had become stagnant and ineffective. My students on the other hand were coming into the classroom demanding an environment that was motivating and yet effectively challenging. The old historicism and new criticism modes of teaching literature that I was using were not effective and produced stagnant and ineffective learners. But in graduate school in 1989, I was introduced to Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory of literature, and since 1989 I have used this method in my classroom. Her theory addresses all of the concerns and questions that I had about teaching literature and more.

W. H. Auden in his "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" writes 'Poetry makes nothing happen--it is a way of happening.' Now I want to add--it is a way of happening only when there is transaction with its reader. She has liberated me and thus she has liberated my students.

As a woman, Louise Rosenblatt has conquered great odds in her academic life and I admire her for that. As a theorist, she has changed the way of looking at literature that finally is being recognized for its unlimited virtues and I applaud her. As a teacher of literature she has taught the world how to empower ourselves by empowering our students, and I honor her.

Her influence on me and on my students has been boundless. Since 1989 she has walked with me into my classroom everyday. Her presence has endured--no doubt about that. As long as teachers have the courage to give their students the opportunity to make literature their own, Rosenblatt's transactional theory will live on into the future.

In 1993 at Virginia Tech and in 1995 at Bluefield State College Maya Angelou

embraced her audiences with how literature had rescued her so many times because she had made it her own. From William Shakespeare to Edgar Allen Poe--it did not matter--both of those writers had written just for her. From the Shakespearian Sonnet 29, "When in disgrace with Fortune and men's eyes/ I all alone beweep my outcast state" as she quoted to her audience on both occasions, she said she felt those words in her soul. She knew exactly what Shakespeare was saying even though she was just a poor little poverty-stricken black female in a little Arkansas town called Stamps. This is the transactional theory of Rosenblatt.

Angelou had the same relationship with the words of Poe. In fact, she felt so close to Edgar Allen Poe that she called him EAP. This is the transactional theory of Rosenblatt. When a child can not put a book down because she is so engrossed with it--and feels in her soul that the author has written those words just for her--this is the transactional theory of Louise Rosenblatt. For that little girl in Stamps--she didn't care about the symbols on the page--she didn't care about the lives of the authors--she didn't care about the structural binary oppositions--she didn't care about the text being deconstructed into something other than what it was. She only cared about what it said to her and how it made her feel as a person. There is no other literary theory that can claim this declaration.

For me, as a teacher and as a writer, Rosenblatt's ideas gave me the courage to want to share with my students a short story I had written. She empowered me so that I had the courage to empower my own students. This empowerment of both my students and me is what led to my dissertation topic. The topic started first as a reader-response experiment with my students; now it has turned into a literary criticism adventure.

My story, "The Exit," revolves around a young co-ed in the prime of her adventuresome and rebellious life. Harriet, who is the protagonist, of my story has been reared in a wealthy family dominated by her father and her fiancé. One day on a visit to see her father, she encounters three handsome and rustic brothers who live in a shack on a very isolated road. Harriet's independence and imagination are tested and so are my readers. My plan of discovery is to present this story to one group of freshmen students as nonfiction and to another group of freshmen research students as fiction. My objective is to see if genre (nonfiction vs fiction) would influence my students' responses to eleven inquiry questions.

The world of literary criticism was a world that was foreign to me until Rosenblatt entered my academic life. Before her, there was nothing that seemed real. She had opened up a new world of exploration in my academic life: I want to continue the search for knowledge in the realm of literary criticism. I now want to explore the genre issue and other types of criticism. So, this paper and my exposure to Louise Rosenblatt have opened new worlds of exploration to me that I did not know existed.

In Constance Weaver's article "Parallels Between New Paradigms in Science and in Reading and Literary Theories" she refers to the metaphor of the dance adopted by quantum physics.

Just as the universe may be viewed as fundamentally a dance of transient forms that sparkle in and out of existence, so meaning, the poem may be viewed as an ever-fluctuating dance that occurs more or less simultaneously on and across various levels. As Rosenblatt has noted, Yeats expressed it well in "Among School Children":

O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,  
How can we know the dancer from the dance?  
(313)

As a scholar, as a teacher, and as an advocate of the dance, I will continue the exploration of Louise Rosenblatt's theory. She has always included the human element along with scholarship--she has always placed emphasis on the empowerment of the reader as well as the empowerment of the text. She has made it okay to react to a text. She has made it okay to be human. She has made it okay to find pleasure and enjoyment in the reading of literature. My only regret is that I did not find her sooner. I started teaching in 1974. I did not find her until 1989. 15 years wasted.

Rosenblatt continues to assume her role in history among the other theorists. It is the transaction that takes place when she and the others whirl their ideas around and then meet and glide back and forth-- always as partners in research. Even though their movements and steps may have been different, the dance was created and their artistic expressions formed out of each other's ideas. In the best interests of students and teachers, all of these theories have been needed to create a better understanding of what does happen when a reader and a text meet and what must happen.

Future generations will understand why Louise Rosenblatt's dance card has remained filled throughout time and why it continues to fill. In a time when only male theorists were recognized and applauded for their contributions to the world of literary criticism--Rosenblatt and her work steadily continued to endure the test of time and the outgrowth of many theories. And, with this test of time, her theory has emerged as the most practical and useful approach to teaching literature in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Now as literary criticism approaches the 21<sup>st</sup> century's futuristic dance floor, unlike as in earlier

times, it is very appropriate for this woman to lead.

Ann E. Berthoff said in her article “Democratic Practice, Pragmatic Vistas: Louise Rosenblatt and the Reader’s Response” that ‘Louise Rosenblatt makes me proud to be an American’ (84).

Louise Rosenblatt makes me proud to be a woman in education--a partner in research--and a dancer of the ever-fluctuating transactional dance.

## APPENDIX B

### The Exit

#### I.

The drive home from Briarwood College for Women was a monotonous drive and Harriet always dreaded it.

The Connecticut interstate was a continuous stretch of boring rows of gullied medians and numbered exits. Harriet detested this way home, but her worried father insisted that she drive on a well-traveled highway. He had heard enough horror stories about lone, unsuspecting women being abducted and violated, never to be seen or heard from again.

There was one exit in particular that would take twenty minutes off her driving time, but this road meandered and wound through a primitive isolated area. Broken-down old shacks sparsely lined the way with their rusted roofs, their yards cluttered with abandoned vehicles of every imaginable make and faded color. Her father had warned her time and time again of the perils of driving alone on back roads.

This exit though looked mysteriously inviting to her. It reminded her of a Frost poem about two roads diverging into a wood. She delighted in that poem because it dealt with making choices in life. Harriet had never been permitted to make her own choices. Someone had always been there to make them for her.

Intensely eager to explore life, Harriet was an impatient girl of 21. A senior at Briarwood College, she saw no harm at all in taking this restricted exit. But, she had promised her father that she would not.

Her father, Carter Alexandre Smythe, was just like his father before him and his father before him and all of the other Carter Smythes in their long family lineage. It was futile to argue with any of them. They got what they wanted--no matter what the cost or the consequence. Harriet's great-grandfather had a favorite line: "There's something you need to know about me," he would say, "I am very rich and I am very wealthy."

Richard, her fiancé, was from that same old school of money and thought. What he said, Richard thought, should never be challenged. Both he and her father adored her. Both men were Yale men. Both men had studied law. Both men controlled her. And, both men had always treated her like their little girl. But Harriet was not a little girl.

So, every other Friday she wrestled with the same decision of whether to take the interstate or whether to take this wooded exit road.

“What was the big fuss?” she had asked herself over and over. She and Richard had driven this road several times together, and she knew the way.

## II.

One summer afternoon in hot July on a surprise visit for her father’s 50<sup>th</sup> birthday, it happened. Harriet stumbled into a revealing self-discovery. This discovery enchanted her. This discovery frightened her.

It started the morning that Richard skipped his morning classes at Yale and was somewhat disgruntled about doing that. He had become even more disgruntled when Harriet insisted that they drive her convertible. Richard hated this convertible. It was too showy for him with its distinct color. And, no matter what the weather, Harriet wanted to drive with the top down. She loved the smell of the wind, and the rush it gave her when her hair blew out of control.

The run-down shacks along their drive had fascinated her too, and she wondered why people chose to live that way. She fantasied about what the dwellers thought about and what they ate and how they coped with the roughness of their situations. She had even daydreamed about living in one of the shacks. But, Richard wanted no part of them or their lifestyles and he made that very clear to Harriet.

“Look at them! Uncivilized creatures. If you ask me. . . ,” he would say in his ivy-leagued tone. . . .

“But who asked you?” Harriet would think to herself.

One shack in particular had caught her eye on this July day. It sat by itself on a weed-infested knoll. Scattered rusted cans and old abandoned cars and trucks made up a large portion of its yard, and sagging barbed wire tried to protect its perimeter. The shack itself needed paint, and a naked light bulb hung from the porch ceiling. One faded couch, a wooden swing, and an old rusty washing machine decorated the front porch. Rogue chickens perched cozily atop the porch beams. The odor of wild honeysuckle layered the hot air as a cool breeze slowly fanned her.

Three young ruggedly handsome men were in the yard. One lounged on a faded green army blanket under a maple tree and waved to her as she watched him bathe his chest with oil, his torso smoldering from the heat of the sun. His smile sent a suggestive thrill through her. The other two stopped wrestling long enough to make calls to her, asking her to leave the “Nerd” who was driving and to join them in their fun. She had blushed at their sensuality; yet to her surprise, she secretly wanted their attention. Their

whistles and winks released in her an emotion that she was unaccustomed to. She liked it. And, they had been correct in their analysis of Richard. He was a Nerd.

She thought of the three men on her lonely drive home every time she passed this exit. These thoughts made her nestle seductively into her seatbelt as she remembered their smiles and their bodies. But, her father's voice always reminded her of the promise she had made to him--"Harriet, no matter how much time it would save you--do not take this exit. That's an order!"

### III.

The October air was crisp and the smell of burning firewood from a nearby house drifted into the biology lab. Harriet had opened a small window so she could enjoy the smell of the autumn afternoon. Dr. Warner had left her in charge of administering his lab examination while he was away at a conference in Boston. She had been his lab assistant for three semesters now and he depended on her to look after things for him when he was out of town. He had once told her that he regretted that she would be leaving him at the end of the year. Harriet didn't regret it though. It had been a difficult three years of college for her. Wanting to be worthy of her family name, she had crammed four years of college into three. So, her summers had been filled with books and exams instead of beaches and sun. She was ready for her freedom.

As she looked out of the small open window, she thought of her graduation in May. She and Richard were to be married on the Sunday following Briarwood's Saturday commencement exercises. He had already made arrangements for them to live in New Haven after a brief honeymoon in the Bahamas. But, she felt bewildered, abandoned, and alone.

She wasn't even sure if Richard were the man for her. Their engagement had happened so suddenly. Her mother hadn't been gone two weeks when Richard surprised her with an engagement ring. He had thought that perhaps he could help ease her loss if she had something to look forward to and to plan for. Harriet knew better. She had told him many times before how she felt.

She had said to him, "Rick, I want love and tenderness. But, I want lust and sweat too! And even a little chaos now and then. Don't you? I want to do things without having to first analyze them to death. I guess I want it all! Can't you let go and be free for just one moment in your life? For one day can't you even go without shaving? Does every little void around you have to be filled?"

There was one void that Harriet knew he could never fill. It would take something more powerful than Richard's pale lean body, impeccably manicured nails, and chapped

thin lips to excite her about life again.

“Calm down my little girl,” he would say as he hugged her and patted her. “I’ll decide what’s best for us.”

As she looked out of the window, she remembered her first summer at Briarwood. She and her mom and dad had picnicked under the large maple that stood in Symthe’s Hall’s courtyard. Symthe Hall was the oldest and the most austere building on campus. It housed all of the science classrooms and laboratories. Her great-grandfather had donated the building to Briarwood so that his not-so-great granddaughter would be assured admittance.

While looking out the window, she caught a glimpse of her mother in her own reflection in the glass. She had her mother’s arched eyebrows and grey eyes that revealed a conflicting inner spirit—one of stability one moment and frivolity the next. She missed her mother. Her life had drastically changed since her mother had been gone. She now had no one to talk to about girl things and the feelings only another woman could understand.

To ease her father’s pain and loneliness and her own, Harriet had made it a point to visit him every other weekend although this constantly put a strain on her schoolwork and her relationship with Richard. These visits were not only an obligation but a comfort to her.

She locked the lab cabinets and packed her bookbag. She had packed her clothes the night before and already had them in her Volkswagen. This car had been a gift from her father on the day he had coaxed her into accepting admittance into Briarwood. Briarwood had been her father’s first and only choice of schools for Harriet. He had planned it that way. He had always intended to send her to her mother’s alma mater. And, he had always intended to send her to a woman’s college. Yale and Richard were only two hours away, and that was close enough her father had calculated.

The Volkswagen had been a type of bribe but neither Harriet nor her father would admit it. He had allowed her to special order it with all of the extras. This little car had gradually become her signature car. Everyone on campus recognized it on first sight because of its unique color. It was a 1972 lemon ice convertible Super Beetle. Everyone who saw it said it was as cool as Harriet.

As she hurried to the parking lot, the college bell tower chimed 5. The sun was growing dim. The chill in the air felt good to her face. She loved autumn and all of its splendors.

The traffic was unusually congested on this Friday. She wondered if her father had already started to time her. He was so afraid that something was going to happen to her. Harriet was afraid that nothing was ever going to happen to her.

The traffic on the interstate was fast and over-whelming. She was not in the mood to cope with the insensitive and hostile drivers. So, she pulled off at one of the rest areas to avoid the rush-hour madness, thinking that a diet Pepsi and a call to her father would pacify her until the traffic lessened. She was not in the mood for a fast-paced drive tonight.

Her father was in the middle of making Harriet's favorite, meatloaf with brown sugar topping for their supper, and he wanted to know where she was and how long it would take her to get home. She figured she would be home by 8:00 or 8:30. He and supper would be waiting for her.

Harriet's hometown was about three hours away from Briarwood, and she liked it that way. It was close enough to travel in one day and still far enough to allow her some space from her father. Richard was about two hours in the other direction in New Haven.

It was dark as she pulled out of the rest area. Her mind was tired and so was her body. All she wanted was some dinner and a good night's rest in the comfort of her own bed. She didn't even feel like the usual Friday night conversation with her father. She just wanted to sleep and to be alone.

The glare from the oncoming headlights rather dazed her. Wisps of fog clouded her driving and her thinking as the oldies but goodies on the radio swept her into a part of the long ago she remembered so well. Harriet loved to escape. And she escaped further and further as Johnny Mathis swooned the haunting song "A Certain Smile." Harriet softly sang to herself--"A certain smile/A certain face/Can lead an unsuspecting heart on a merry chase."

Sprinkles of rain trickled down the windshield, and she wondered if she should put the top up; but she wanted the freshness of the mist on her face and in her hair.

"A fleeting glance can say so many lovely things/Suddenly you know why my heart sings.../A certain smile/To haunt your heart again."

The lyrics, the mist, the coolness of the night air swirled around Harriet as she veered off to the right onto the wooded exit.

#### IV.

The shack stood in its own silhouette in the moonlight. A tiny mist surrounded it.

The sprinkling of rain had stopped. A faint light shone through the windows onto the porch. Smoke from the chimney filled the air with a hint of burning embers and musk.

Harriet topped the hill that ran almost parallel to the shack. She slowly eased her way down the other side. A winding sharp “S” curve slowed the Volkswagen to a crawl. The shack was located on a tiny knoll just beyond the winding curve.

Harriet could see the shack closer now. The Super Beetle sputtered and jerked, hurling some gravel toward the banks and then came to an abrupt stop. She had killed the engine.

“Oh, no!” she uttered, “Not here!”

Ominous thoughts filled Harriet’s mind as she felt a rush of excitement take her. She tried to start the car.

The door to the shack slowly opened.

A tall muscular figure filled the doorway. The figure motioned and another larger shadow joined him.

Harriet tried the engine again and it failed. She tried again and it failed.

The porch light suddenly turned on and the light bulb swung back and forth as if it had been hurriedly bumped. The glare from the porch shone into the car as the two bold shadows came running down the knoll toward her, shouting “Hey woman! Wait!”

Harriet excitedly turned the key.

As she held the gas pedal to the floor, the tiny engine finally chugged as the car struggled forward.

Breathless, she smiled at her triumph as she sped away, tires spinning gravel everywhere.

But, little did she realize that a third presence had seen her top the hill, long before

she had gone into the “S ” shaped curve. He crouched, hidden in a clump of bushes on the bank opposite her stalled convertible. Unnoticed, he had watched her desperate attempts to start her car and to escape.

He had heard her voice, and he had seen her face. Yet, it was her smile that haunted him.

Next time, he would be waiting.

The End



## VITA

Aleta Jo Crockett resides in Southwestern Virginia and teaches in Southern West Virginia. In 1974, she earned her baccalaureate degree in English from Radford College and a Master's Degree in English from Radford in 1977. She has been in the teaching profession since 1974. In 1977, she began teaching in higher education. Her teaching assignments include Composition, Research, and the Teaching of Composition. In 1984, she was a fellow in the Southwest Virginia Writing Project and presented her paper from the project at the October VATE conference in Roanoke, Virginia on journal writing. In 1986, she studied writing and writing theory at the University of New Hampshire.

She is a member of the National Council of Teachers of English. Her hobbies include writing, gardening, autograph collecting, classic video collecting, and her favorite hobby of all, teaching.