GENDER AND READING: THE GENDER-RELATED RESPONSES OF FOUR COLLEGE
STUDENTS TO CHARACTERS AND RELATIONSHIPS IN SIX SHORT STORIES

by

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ABSTRACT

This reader-response study focuses on the influences that four readers' relationships with families and friends have on their responses to several literary characters and the relationships among these characters as presented in six short stories. Four college students, two men and two women, read and responded to the stories in writing and in interviews with the researcher.

The stories depict men and women confronting gender-related family or individual crises concerning such topics as independence, autonomy, and the nature of the marriage commitment and male/female relationships.
Conclusions support the hypothesis that the relationship of these readers with families and friends influences their construal of characters and relationships in the stories. Additionally, findings support the following: 1) Men in the study generally assigned strengthening characteristics to male characters; 2) Women in the study tended to portray most of the male characters as insensitive and unemotional; 3) Each reader, in at least one case each, relied on stereotypes to portray a character or relationship; and 4) Men tended to admire characteristics they found only in male characters, whereas women tended to admire characteristics they found only in female characters.
PREFACE

How much can we ever understand about how people read? In so many ways, how a person "lives" a piece of literature is entirely personal. We can make guarded speculations about the causes of the reaction readers seem to have to a piece of literature and about their acts of reading. In recent years, much work has been carried out in the field of reader response to explore such influences. Some of the research is bound by professional agreement; other studies have created disagreement that has spurred researchers to continue studying the process. This study represents one more effort to observe this fascinating everyday process of a reader confronting a text.

By taking part in a study such as this, my subjects agreed to allow me a glimpse into their personal lives. The raw data they offered me as they read is, in itself, a body of literature; and I have, in my study, made decisions, judgements, and interpretations. I have approached this study with the same interest and love with
which I approach a book I have longed to read. I have considered the texts provided me by both authors and readers from as many angles as I know how. What I report and offer as analysis and interpretation is, at least in part, a product of who I am, what I have learned, and what I have experienced. The fact of researcher response to readers and literature and the readers' responses to that literature drives my research. Although I can only speculate about why a certain reader has responded in the way he or she has to a specific short story, I have tried to document the experiences that each of my readers has had with each work of literature and looked for patterns that have emerged.

In truth, as I carried out this study, I found that I experienced the same process of response to the texts my readers gave me as they experienced to the stories they read. Throughout the study, I have been mindful of the fact that this similarity between researcher and subject existed. As I progressed, I observed in my reading of the texts they gave me the same factors that made each of my readers' interpretation of each work of literature unique become factors in my analysis. So my study became a journal of the distinct, yet connected, interactions of literature with people, among people, and within people.
Equally important, it became a study of my responses to their responses to the texts they read.

During the spring of 1989, nearly a year before this study began, I asked the students in my freshman literature class to read Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s "The Yellow Wallpaper." I posed for them three analysis and discussion statements: 1) Describe the characters in the story; 2) Describe their relationship; 3) Identify the crisis in the story. We discussed their responses in class for an hour based upon the written responses they had prepared the previous evening. How the students responded to the characters interested me; the men and the women characterized the two main characters and their relationship quite differently. What they named as the crisis in the story generally corresponded to the reader’s gender. Most of the men felt that the narrator’s mental illness and her unwillingness to follow her physician husband’s medical advice was the crisis. Most of the women, on the other hand, felt that the husband’s condescending, unemotional, and insensitive response to his wife’s needs and desires was the central crisis. What interested me in this micro-study was that gender appeared to be a definable factor in how my male and female students perceived literary characters and their relationships. I discovered as well that some
individuals' responses could not be described in gender terms. Although the men in the class tended to sympathize strongly with the male character in the story, not all the men found it necessary to extend sympathy to either character. Although many women related immediately to the plight of the narrator, not all defined her plight in similar terms. At the end of my pilot study, I realized that the relationship between gender and reading might well be subject to fewer stereotypes than I had expected. There was, however, a significant enough disparity in the responses between the men and the women to encourage me to embark on a more intensive study.

People read texts differently because they are individuals, and a person's gender is a contributor to that individuality. Yet the study of the effects of an individual's gender on character interpretation remains a relatively under-investigated area, considering the attention given gender in most other aspects of twentieth century intellectual and cultural life. Yet, there seems to be very little research into gender and reading that yields indisputable results, and the controversy surrounding gender-related studies of any sort tends to produce tentative and arguable results. The objective of my study was not, therefore, to take sides in a controversy. Rather, the purpose was twofold: 1) to
make some guarded conclusions about how gender influenced several readers’ responses to characters and relationships, and 2) to observe the differences that occur between men’s and women’s responses. In doing so, I faced two questions: a) How can a researcher determine which responses to literary characters and relationships are gender-related? and b) What are the sources of these gender-related responses; that is, what cultural factors are involved in a reader’s gender-related responses? I believe I have found some tentative answers; but more importantly, I believe that I have discovered valuable information that will contribute to future work in this area.

Many readers are more interested in and interact more with literary characters than with the plot, setting, or other aspects of a work. They form more than literary relationships with the characters in a literary work, and these relationships, in some very important ways, may parallel real life relationships. Research suggests that a reader’s assessment of a literary character often is based on his or her interpretation of and feelings about a character’s actions and motivations. Also, as in life, a reader’s gender plays an important, if subtle, part in that reader’s relationship with the people he or she meets in the story.
This research adds to a body of related gender studies and is the result of my analysis of readers' gender-related responses and discovery of some connections among these responses that may help us learn how an individual's gender influences his or her interpretation of literary characters. Much of any qualitative study is speculative, and this is true of my research. Observation and speculation are the foundations of any research focusing on people, and all researchers are subject to their own beliefs and biases. The results of this study may be no more than one researcher's commentary on four particular subjects; but, since human beings share a myriad of complex similarities, this study may find validity in the general population as well as in the four readers and the six short stories I studied.
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CHAPTER ONE

Consider Jane Bradley's short story, "Mistletoe." It documents the inner struggle of a woman (the narrator) torn by her relationship with two men: her husband, Mitch, and her recently deceased long-time lover, Dean. One text, yet each of the four readers in my study, Arthur, Jane, Randy, and Ann (as I shall call them) responded to the narrator's crisis in very different ways.

Arthur described the narrator as "a self-centered bitch who will do anything to displease her husband." He considered the character intensely selfish and motivated entirely by her needs to create superficial excitement in her life, even at the emotional expense of all those close to her. He believed her "rotten to the core" marriage bored her, and he condemned her "loveless" affair with a man he considered as despicable as she was.

Jane, on the other hand, described the narrator as "very deep, sensitive, and thoughtful...she feels she's drowning--she wants to be one way but she's another way. She wants to be free and live the open life but finds
herself in the role of mother...." The narrator's relationship with her husband was not based on mutual tolerance, according to Jane: "they are trapped in marriage--neither understands the other." Jane also believed that the "passionate affair" the story's narrator had with her lover was stimulating and "natural," a symbiotic bond.

Robert's version of the narrator "lives in a dream world...longing for a special moment" in life. She is "awfully hard on her husband and often misjudges him...she never gives him a chance." Of her lover Robert commented: "She thinks he's the greatest thing since white bread...their relationship is interesting and filled with compassion."

Finally, Ann saw the narrator as "just a housewife" in a "safe love and life" with her husband with whom she "makes ends meet and provides a happy home for their children...they need each other for security." Ann found the narrator's relationship with her lover to be a "passionate affair...she's happy with him and that's how she wants life to be."

For each reader, "Mistletoe" is a different story, telling the interactions of three characters the readers interpret very differently, and they see these people as motivated by some dramatically different character traits.
What is it about each reader's personality that precipitates such diverse interpretations of the characters? Why does the individual Arthur termed a "self-centered bitch" appear "very deep and sensitive" to Jane? Why does Ann find "passionate" what Robert finds simply "interesting?" Is there something special about the process of reading that elicits such varied responses? Are these differing reactions simply reflections of how these individuals perceive and interpret events in their daily lives? What readers bring to a literary work may be similar to the attitudes and beliefs with which they confront their lives, and the characters they meet in literary works may not produce substantially different reactions than if those literary creations were real people. Hynds (1989) wrote that the readers in her study created literary characters in a manner similar to the way they would construe individuals in their own social environment and "draw upon a repertoire of constructs formed over many experiences in the social world" (p. 55) when making character attributions in a literary work. Holland (1968) suggested that readers satisfy their desires vicariously through literary characters. Kingston and White (1967) noted that readers extend themselves so far into a literary work as to use their own personalities to define or create the main character in the story.
RESEARCH IN READING AS IT RELATES TO GENDER

According to Louise Rosenblatt (1983), every reader brings to a literary work "personal traits, memories of past events, present needs and preoccupations, a particular mood of the moment, and a particular physical condition" (p.30). In addition to these reader conditions, she noted that setting, time, the circumstances under which a response takes place, and the social and cultural setting are factors critical to a reader's response. This view of response, which she termed "aesthetic," poses the reader as the central figure in the literary experience (Purves, 1980), an experience Rosenblatt (1983) stated is "'lived through,' something to which the student reacts on a variety of interrelated emotional and intellectual planes"(p.240). An individual's entire personality becomes a part of the literary experience as the text becomes a substitute external reality to which the reader responds as he or she would to an actual event (Holland, 1975).

Until recently, gender has played a rather small and ambiguous role in reader response studies, especially those involving college students. Studies have been revealing, yet often subject to a good deal of dispute, perhaps because of the controversial nature of any gender-
related research, especially claims that much of such research expresses a feminist bias. However, several gender and reading studies (Bleich, 1986; Flynn, 1986; Beyard-Taylor and Sullivan, 1986; Beach, 1976) have been successful in achieving the goal of making observations about the role gender plays in the reader response process. These studies have been of particular value to my research since they suggest that gender is an important factor in reader response.

Gender-related research poses special difficulties to the researcher. For example, will individuals, if they are aware the study concerns gender, respond in a "socially responsible" way, feigning equality among male and female characters so as not to be subject to criticism (or guilt)? Or will they mask prejudicial beliefs because they have not yet been able to come to terms with equality among the sexes or feminism? Or will they simply tend to give the researchers what they believe the researchers want to hear, just to be cooperative and to avoid facing such a potentially controversial topic?

Five Readers Reading, Norman Holland's (1975) psychoanalytic study of five college-aged English literature students, addressed how individuals re-created the details of a literary text. His Freudian analysis of each reader brought light to bear on what he called a
"matrix of psychological possibilities" (p.12) that comprised the basis for each reader to respond. He suggested his reader's responses to literature were "transformational," that is, that each reader recreated an original literary work in terms of his or her own personality.

He noted one of his subjects, Sandra, acted out her own style of dealing with experience, especially in using the story to create a pleasurable personal experience for herself. Sandra described the female protagonist in a story by using some of her own characteristics and projected her own style of dealing with experience onto the character, a practice Holland termed "expectancy enacted" (p.199). A male subject, Sam, adapted the interpretation of a story to create situations of mutual admiration and reassurance among characters, especially when responding to a character he found threatening. His method, according to Holland (1975), "came together around wishes to 'take in' or 'get out,' taking in passively or getting out actively" (p.75), of situations he found discomforting. In short, Sam showed a pattern of defenses one might summarize as an attempt "to get out of the dangers to his maleness and to take into his body love and admiration" (p.131).
Holland (1977) later noted several gender-related themes that emerged in his study of college students' reactions to King Lear. Five women in the study brought their own experiences as daughters, and the problem of women coping with a patriarchal society to the interpretation of Cordelia's relationship with her father. They openly compared Lear's actions to experiences with their own fathers' or to what their fathers "might have done" in circumstances similar to those facing Lear. One woman interposed roles entirely, spoke of herself as Cordelia and her father as Lear while responding to the events in the story. Another reader compared the father-daughter crisis in the play to the events that transpired between her and her father several years before she attended college. By making adjustments in her approach to the literary events, she created a context within which she could respond to them, and she used the experience with her father to understand Lear and Cordelia.

In contrast, the men in the study kept the story at a greater distance and made no comparisons to family relationships. This response may have been the result of the fact that Lear and Cordelia's father-daughter relationship was not one a man (or son) could easily understand and put into the context of his own experience. Several of the men, however, expressed helplessness over
Cordelia's fate, a fact that Holland interpreted as an expression of a need typical of men in society: to feel powerful and in control of events.

In his 1946 unpublished doctoral dissertation, Meckel reflected on some of the differences between the way high school boys and girls responded to a novel. He wrote in his summary: "Certain sex differences were apparent in the analysis of selections most vividly remembered: girls were more interested in the characteristics of characters than the boys; boys were more interested in events or situations as happenings" (p.167). Boys seemed more interested in work-related topics and the vocation of the central character than girls, and they focused more on topics of family independence (although the topic of this particular novel, the tension between a boy and his father, provided an opportunity for boys to identify more readily).

In an Indiana University study of comparative literary responses, David Bleich (1986) noted a significant gender-related difference in response to literature, suggesting that men perceived a strong narrative voice in a work while "women experienced narrative as the 'world,' without a particular sense that this world was narrated into existence" (p.239). He suggested "women enter the world of the novel as a result
of someone's action and [then] construe its meaning or logic in those terms" (p.239). Men in the study tended to distance themselves from and objectify ideas in a reading, whereas women entered into the human relationships and situations in a work. Women retold the story more in terms of interpersonal motives, allegiances and conflicts, and less in terms of the perspective of the author, whereas abstractions tended to emerge more readily from a man's retelling of the same text (Bleich, 1986). Men needed a more literal comprehension of a story, the author wrote; and, while comprehension was important to women, it was not as urgent a need in the response process as a "general affective logic" (p.261), even if they were not quite sure what was going on.

Bleich also concluded that women identified with more than one character in a literary work and "identify with feelings and situations, and experience the reading as a variety of social emotions"; in contrast, men needed to "create the story" or even "self consciously appropriate [take possession of] it" (pp.264-65) rather than be in it. Men were more prone to judge characters while identifying with only one or two, Bleich found; women were less likely to judge and more likely to describe different allegiances to various characters and situations.
Writing in the same year, Elizabeth Flynn (1986) found women more able than men to resolve tensions in a story. She suggested male students were often "closer to the extremes of domination and submission, and women were often closer to the interactive center" (p. 276). In her study, male students more often tended to reject or dominate disturbing stories, a strategy women did not employ. Women tended to arrive at more meaningful interpretations of a story because of their ability to break free of "submissive entanglement" (p. 285) in a text and to detach themselves from interpretations of characters and events. Some readers, she suggested, may purposely resist the alien thought and experience offered by engagement in a work and remain unchanged by the interaction.

Flynn also noted her male readers' tendency to react unsympathetically to female protagonists and to judge them as "crazy" or "insane." Women were more receptive to texts and attempted to understand characters before judging them. Flynn discussed Robin Lakeoff’s (1975) Language and the Women’s Place, and noted that Lakeoff suggested men have a tendency to use forceful intensifiers, such as "very," to describe literary characters, whereas women express uncertainty more often than men do and use questions in situations better
described by declaratives. Women, Flynn suggested, may use this tentativeness as an interpretive strategy—receptivity and yet critical assessment in the act of reading. A woman’s reading may be characterized, she pointed out, by "a willingness to listen, a sensitivity to emotional nuance, and an ability to empathize with and yet judge" (p.286).

Beyard-Taylor and Sullivan (1986) studied the reading preferences in terms of theme and sex of character among 7th, 9th, and 11th grade students. Boys preferred stories with male protagonists, and girls preferred stories with female protagonists. Boys’ preferences for male protagonists became significantly stronger as their grade level increased, while girls’ preferences for female protagonists significantly decreased as their grade level increased. Beyard-Taylor and Sullivan’s research supports Maccoby and Jacklin’s (1975) claim that boys prefer adventure stories, while girls prefer stories about love, private life, and glamour. Beyard-Taylor and Sullivan cited some conflicting research, however: they noted Gersoni-Stavn’s suggestion that the preference for same sex protagonists is not a true preference but a response to the negative stereotypes assigned supporting characters in books with opposite sex protagonists. The increasing preference for same sex authors among male readers may
also be attributable to Maccoby and Jacklin's contention that, as children grow, their environment becomes increasingly masculine and less feminine. Lynn (1975) noted that, because male roles have been traditionally more valued than female roles, men may learn to value their role to a greater degree as they grow than women do.

Beach and Brunetti (1976) studied the effects age and sex had on the reading responses of high school and college students. While he found sex to be a non-determinant in his study, he suggested that neither character in the story his subjects read exhibited clearly stereotyped sex role characteristics. Both characters in the story portrayed complex, ambiguous behavior and failed in their attempts to portray stereotyped relationships. He contended, therefore, that in the case of non-stereotypical characters and situations, readers may be less influenced by stereotyped self-concepts. He suggested that each reader "brings to a work a set of assumptions that certain cues (age, sex, verbal behavior) are related to certain character traits. Information may reinforce or deny these (often stereotyped) assumptions" (p.267). Beach noted, however, that, had the characters exhibited more stereotypical behavior, hence supplying more gender-related "cues," both male and female readers
might have recognized the behavior as familiar and perhaps have projected stereotyped self-concepts more readily.

In 1974, Maccoby and Jacklin used the term "sex typing" to describe the socializing agents that shape an individual's gender-related behavior, which they suggest is directly attributable to parents' direct or indirect pressure on children to make them fit sex stereotypes. Parental attitudes and feelings determine the nature of expectations placed on sons and daughters, and are translated into societal pressure to conform to established gender norms. "Sex typing" is brought about through "shaping" by socializing agents, according to the authors. The two sexes are motivated to select different models of behavior, a process which establishes the foundation upon which later self-motivation is based.

Psychologist Sandra Bem (1981) created the term "gender schema" to refer to "a generalized readiness to process on the basis of sex-linked associations" (p.355), the interaction between incoming information and the perceiver's pre-existing schema. This network of associations encompasses features directly related to male and female persons, such as anatomy, reproductive functions, division of labor, and personal attributes. A highly sex-typed individual conforms to his or her culture's stereotype and readily interprets experience in
terms of a gender schema. Gender schema, Bem noted, however, is a theory of process, not content. Sex-typed people process information in terms of conforming to their culture’s definition of masculinity and femininity—dividing the world into two classes based on gender. Strongly sex-typed individuals differ from other individuals "not in terms of how much masculinity or femininity they possess, but rather in terms of whether or not their self-concepts and behavior are organized on the basis of gender" (p.356). At this point, gender schema becomes a "prescriptive standard or guide" (p.355).

Taking a slightly different stance, Crawford and Chaffin (1986) defined "gender-related schema" as "one’s psychological sense of one’s self as female or male" (p.13). A gender schema develops as a "heterogeneous network of associations representing general knowledge rather than specific incidents and is used by an individual as an aid in assimilating new information" (p.17). Individuals pattern their gender behavior after stereotypes learned at an early age, behavior that later becomes assimilated into their self-schema:

"...inevitably gender becomes a part of our self concept" (p.20). Gender identity usually develops unambiguously and early in life, and individuals develop "various degrees of gender-typing, or acceptance of the culture’s
view of masculinity or femininity as appropriate for and characteristic of themselves" (p.13). Both authors admitted, however, that other social, cultural, and economic forces also play an important role in response to literature. Crawford and Chaffin noted that gender and gender-typing affect an individual's memory and organization of information; they stressed that the importance gender plays in reading is not an issue of masculinity or femininity but of sex-typed and non-sex-typed men and women. Two other forces, they suggested, the hormonal climate of the body and the gender label given to the individual, help determine gender.

In a study of gender role effect on adolescent readers, Beaven (1972) found boys identified exclusively with masculine roles in a literary text, while girls identified with both sex roles. She noted, however, that women characters are usually secondary or play minor roles in many literary works, a fact some readers may construe as good reason to consider female characters' actions and opinions of little importance. Men tend to have more power than women in literary works, she suggested, and may be more attractive to readers of both sexes.
INDIVIDUAL FACTORS

The "personal traits, memories of past events, present needs and preoccupations" Rosenblatt (1983) noted were all strong factors in my readers' responses, even though the individuals were generally the same age, came from similar backgrounds, and engaged in comparable day-to-day activities. Each reader described the characters and relationships with a sense of certainty. They felt they "knew" these characters well enough to discuss them and, at times, with a degree of intimacy, especially since they wrote about each character before discussing them with me. Each reader had come to terms with the identities and motivations of each character and expressed little hesitation about discussing them as though they were real people.

My readers, despite displaying some similarities interpreting literary characters, approached the process from considerably different viewpoints, and it became obvious that each reader read a literary work with at least a few personal and predictable traits, such as a tendency to harshly judge every character, to approach each character with a sense of compassion and understanding, to assign strengthening characteristics to all male characters, or to interpret each short story from a purely emotional point of view. These predictable
traits, in themselves, may explain little more than individual habits. What is clear, however, is that each reader displayed a unique individuality when interpreting literature, not unlike the characteristics he or she might display encountering day to day life. Certainly, then, it is possible to make observations based on how a reader’s gender may enter his or her response to literary characters, since this process may be quite similar to making observations about how gender influences real life events.

Gender is simply one of many factors that help determine how a reader will respond to a literary work. The works of Bem (1981), Crawford and Chaffin (1986), and Beaven (1972) support the contention that it may be possible to predict a reader’s gender-related interpretation to a literary character. If it is possible to predict a reader’s response, then a reader’s own gender-related characteristics and gender-related factors in that reader’s upbringing may well figure into how that reader comes to terms with the genderedness of a literary character. Of course, common, non-gender-related differences among my readers accounted for many of their responses, and I tried to be cognizant and respectful of these individual differences. Observing these individual and gender-related differences, and making some tentative
conclusions about how they manifested themselves across texts, stories, and individuals, were the focal points of this study.
CHAPTER TWO
THE STORIES

There is no "right" interpretation of a story. What a reader brings to a literary work, and what he or she finds in it are very personal. The stories I have used in this study are open to a myriad of interpretations, since they depict controversial characters in gender-related crisis situations. The stories I selected are ones about which it is easy to have a strong and emotional response, for each tale challenges the reader's beliefs about the nature of relationships between men and women. It has been my experience that most individuals, especially college students, are interested in how men and women come to terms with love, romance, attachment, and meeting their personal needs in a relationship. Discovering meaning in a relationship is of critical importance to most people, and finding meaning in a literary work may aid in this process.

Iser (1978) suggested that the search for meaning does not necessarily involve the investigation of a literary work for hidden meaning or universal truths. The
search is more of a "springboard" for an individual to discover relevant private (personal) and public (societal) meaning. Each individual actively engaged in the search for meaning does so in a unique manner, and the meaning derived from a reader's relationship with the text is not the result of a "static set of relevancies," Holland (1968) asserted, but of a "dynamic process of transforming one kind of relevancy, unconscious, to another, conscious" (p.28). Beach (1973), in his study of the literary responses of college students, noted the response strategies employed by his subjects: some responded inductively, seeking meaning from the work as a whole, while others sought personal connections in the work, such as a familiar word, event, or experience. From this start they moved "outward" to discover a sense of the whole. Several subjects in his study were more willing than others to bring personal experience to the literary work, whereas others were more adept at the purely academic process of finding relevancy in the work.

A literary work finds its fulfillment, according to Holland (1975), only after a reader gives it life by re-creating it in his or her own mind. Textual meaning as it was intended by the author may disappear entirely, depending upon the reader's re-creation of the work. Speculating about authorial intent may offer a framework
or even a "standard" from which to interpret a literary work, but the work's relevancy to an individual reader is a matter heavily influenced by each individual's personality. Aristotle noticed that audiences had an immediate need to find unity in a play or story, a central theme or idea around which the events and details could come into focus (Holland, 1975). Readers need to find "grounding," some central idea about the work upon which to build their own interpretation. For example, my literature students refer to this discovery of a central idea as "figuring out the story"; and, after they have done so, the anxiety of literary interpretation seems to take on a less threatening or even a productive nature for them. The student has found some personal relevancy in the story, a way to understand the characters and events, or a method of connecting the events or characters in the work to some personal experience or belief. In order for a reader to share an author's meaningful intention, Rosenblatt (1983) states, he or she must have a common background of experience or have shared some of the same needs, emotions, and circumstances as the characters in the literary work—on the basis of which it is then possible to find meaning in the situations the author has depicted. When a reader finds personal relevance in a
work, it becomes a means by which to hypothesize about the rest of the story or to discover deeper meaning.

Finding personal meaning is a reader's first need when confronting an unfamiliar work of literature, and students generally feel a great deal of tension, at least in an academic setting, until this need is satisfied. Perhaps many well-meaning but mis-informed high school English teachers (themselves the product of other mis-informed teachers), believing the author, or the critics, have the single "right" interpretation of a work, or that there was meaning to "find" rather than to "create," have led generations to believe that reading written works of art involves developing esoteric skills, skills that had meaning and utility in no other sphere than in the study of literature. Indeed, a student's fear of having the "wrong" understanding often, in itself, becomes an important factor in his or her interpretation of a literary work: students who feel inhibited will not discuss literature openly and may not discover the personal relevance upon which to build a meaningful interpretation. The stories my subjects read for this study offered many possibilities for personal interpretation, and, as they read, some very individual responses emerged.
I chose six short stories for the immediate experience they represented in depicting a character's gender-related conflicts. Each story portrays a strongly characterized male or female character interacting with individuals with whom he or she shares at least a moderate level of intimacy. In each of the stories, a character (or characters) is confronted with a situation in which they come into conflict with society's perceptions of acceptable masculine or feminine behavior. To resolve this crisis, each character needs to take steps to clarify or reconcile a relationship with another character(s) in the story, and with society's perception of acceptable behavior.

The crisis is so central to each story that my readers easily recognized it as the issue about which they needed to make decisions. I feared at first I had provided too much direction by choosing stories that encouraged sympathy for a particular character, all the time realizing this emotion was a product of my own gender-based interpretation of the characters. The gender-related crisis is different in each story, at least as I interpreted it. Although the central character in five of the stories is a women, there are principal male characters in each tale. The interaction among the characters is what convinced me to choose the stories, for
the male characters’ actions are as central to each story as are the females’ actions. I was aware of this imbalance when I began selecting the stories, but I seem to have chosen successfully because only once did one of my readers comment that so many of the stories focused on a central female character. My readers’ responses did not overwhelmingly favor discussion of the female character, and even when there was a tendency to emphasize the female character, the male character was always a critical element in the interpretation. Also, I attempted to balance the focus of my written and verbal questioning, so I did not stress a specific male or female character.

In each story, a character or characters was called upon to confront one or both of the following situations: 1) to question and clarify his or her own views on gender and sexuality and 2) to resolve personal issues that relate to stereotypes or socialization. Each of the characters in the stories needed to make choices based on the following factors: a) societal norms for men and women, b) other characters’ needs and actions, and c) his or her own needs and desires. Each literary character needed to redefine himself or herself to resolve the conflict in the story. In a sense, then, each reader was forced to make the same decisions, based on the same factors.
I chose stories that 1) were written by male as well as female authors, 2) span a century of writing (to offer a broad cultural perspective on gender), and 3) could not all be characterized as expressing a single philosophical outlook. Stories written by men and those written by women offer a particular gender-specific perspective. Only Arthur, during the final interview, lamented the fact that he didn’t understand the characters very well because most of them had been created by female authors. This fact was neither noted by nor do I feel it affected the responses of the other male reader, Robert. Neither female reader commented on this point, and each appeared to be equally adept at understanding characters created by all the authors. Each story presented themes that represented timeless personal or interpersonal struggles, despite the fact that they were created at various times during the twentieth century. I had speculated that readers would note the varying time settings in which the stories took place, but I hoped they would also recognize the universal struggles presented in each. Although occasionally a participant did mention how the social or cultural setting of a story affected the characters actions and motivations, it never seemed to separate the story from the reader. In two stories, "A Rose for Emily" and "The Yellow Wallpaper," the readers noted the nature
of social expectations placed on men and women of those time periods. Yet this fact did not seem to make it difficult for them to offer interpretations of the characters and their relationships.

If the stories expressed a single philosophical outlook, it was a reflection upon the difficulty of coming to terms with one's self and the complexity of male/female relationships. Although two of the stories were written by women, who in word and deed, consider themselves feminists in some sense, none of the participants interpreted either story as having a feminine or masculine bias. In fact, the men in my study tended to sympathize with the female protagonist in one of the stories and with both a male and female character in one of the other stories written by these feminists. The nature of the complexity of relationships was agreed upon by all the readers, and they openly expressed the difficulty they had at times coming to terms with the significance of events and actions they had never confronted before, either in literature or in life.

The nature of male/female relationships is of particular interest to most college students. College life offers the opportunity and freedom to initiate and experiment with relationships to a degree few of them have experienced previously. I had no doubt about two things:
1) student readers would be attracted to interpreting relationships in a story; and 2) they would have strong beliefs and feelings about how men and women ought to behave in relationships. Since the characters' relationships depicted in each of the stories were not always within the realm of my readers' direct personal experience, they were still relevant to them because the fictitious events represented were not far from what each reader might consider ordinary. This is not to say that the characters in the stories were all typical of the individuals my readers might actually encounter in their own lives, only that the characters did not demonstrate behavior my readers considered unusual, at least at the beginning of each story. The characters in the stories represent various believable age, social, cultural, and economic groups, a fact that made each character's approach to relationships unique in some identifiable way. The relationships depicted are human interactions my readers would term believable, and in two stories, similar to relationships that were within their personal experience. The purpose here was to involve the readers in relationships that were generally more mature than they themselves had experienced in order to determine how social and cultural stereotypes, and their own experiences, affected their responses.
The stories depict women and men coming to terms with such topics as personal identity, love, dependence and independence, and sexuality. In each case, the characters are responding in either a conventional or an unconventional manner to the conflicts they face. Most of the characters are passionate individuals motivated by strong personal and sometimes selfish needs. It was important to me that my readers could "relate" to each character, at least initially, in terms of his or her own experience. This ability gave each reader a basis from which to interpret, a general familiarity with each character. The contexts may, at times, have been unfamiliar, but the issues were relevant, and, at times, of critical interest, to all the readers.

THE STORIES

The six short stories used in the study were:

1) "A Rose for Emily" by William Faulkner,

2) "An Episode in the Life of Professor Brooke" by Tobias Wolff,

3) "Mistletoe" by Jane Bradley,

4) "Martha's River" by Ann Goette,

5) "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and
6) "A Good Man is Hard to Find" by Flannery O'Connor.

Synopses of each of the six stories are in the appendix.

In order to provide some standard against which to compare my readers' interpretations of the characters and relationships in the stories, I have provided, where possible, some critical work for each story. In cases where no critical work has been published, I have offered responses from the author and/or from my former literature students (I have referred to these students in the text of this study as "literature students") in order to provide at least some interpretive perspective with which to compare my readers' responses.

"A Rose for Emily"

Most critics agree on the characteristics of Faulkner's Emily and her father. Strandberg (1981) described Emily in the following way:

The facts in her instance are that she is a murderous necrophiliac; her truth is that she is a romantic heroine who, having yielded up her father to time and death and the townspeople (it took them three days to persuade her to give up the body) would never make that mistake again, and so maintained her lover against time, death, townspeople, and the lover's imminent desertion, all together. Crazed though she was, it suits my thesis that even Emily cannot live by fantasy alone; she too requires an objective correlative, an actual, tangible object in the real world that might confirm her inner truth—the object in her case, the bridal chamber in the attic.
complete with rose and silver trimmings, and skeletal bridegroom (p.47).

The denial of natural affection from her father, according to O’Connor (1968), was the primary cause of her frustrations and her retreat into the seclusion of her fantasy world. West (1973) contended that, when Emily was young and a part of the world with which she was a contemporary, she had a hunger to participate in life, a need denied her by her overbearing and protective father.

Although he is dead well before the story begins, it is through Emily’s personality that we learn about her father’s severity, her warped affection for him (O’Connor, 1968), and the fact that he prevented her from growing out of the family circle (Strandberg, 1981).

The second man in Emily’s life, Homer Barron, is a Yankee, "amoral and without loyalty" (O’Connor, 1968). Hoffman (1954) characterized Emily’s first love:

Homer Barron--whose name signifies not just ‘barren home’ but perhaps blindness, perhaps Oedipus--can also be seen as a substitute for her father. Like her father, he carries a ‘whip in a yellow glove’ when they ride through the streets during their ‘courtship’; more significantly, she completes with Homer’s body the gesture she began when her father died, of simply refusing to give up the body to the necessary authorities. Whether she actually makes physical love to this ‘father’ before he is murdered is not clear; but there can be no doubt that after his death she symbolically and repeatedly consummates the Oedipal dream (p.96).

West (1973) characterized the relationship between Emily and Homer as a "complex relationship between the
Southerner and her past, and between the Southerner of the present and the Yankee from the North" (p.195). Although Emily is the town's aristocrat and Homer is a simple day laborer, he manages to seduce her (violate her world) and then desert her. She had been initially frustrated by her father, who had prevented her from participating in the life of her contemporaries. Homer, too, subverts her attempts to achieve independence; she is manipulated by a man who represents the "new morality" (p.197) and is threatened by disclosure and humiliation. Homer's callous disregard for the past (tradition) and his "self-centered and rootless" (p.197) philosophy overcomes Emily's heroic resistance; her tragic flaw is her conventional pride. Homer's immorality and unfaithfulness represent the final act in the drama: Emily's struggle to escape from the past--from the moment she realizes that he will desert her, the struggle between the past and present becomes magnified out of all proportion. And, finally, with her dead lover, she retreats completely into her world of the past.

"An Episode in the Life of Professor Brooke"

"An Episode in the Life of Professor Brooke," one of many stories by Tobias Wolff, has not been the subject of any critical work, despite its popularity. The story
concerns one man’s crisis of jealousy with another man, or at least his perceived image of that man. Brooke’s decision to experience some of what he believes his colleague, Professor Riley, has experienced in life brings him into conflict with his own beliefs in marriage, the nature of sexual fidelity, life’s meaning, and men’s relationships.

Professor Brooke, according to many of my literature students, is an intelligent, kind, faithful, if lackluster, scholar and husband. His published critical work is widely acclaimed, but it is heartless and devoid of any perceptible human feeling. He is a good husband, is emotionally and sexually faithful to his wife, but is possessed of a rather stuffy and staid personality. He is terribly jealous and judgemental of Professor Riley; and, although most students didn’t believe, as Brooke did, that Riley was having affairs with his female students, they did consider him "full of life" and spirit. Riley may have been jealous of Brooke’s scholarly reputation, but he never let it show. Many students felt Brooke’s infidelity one night during an out of town conference was a direct result of Brooke’s jealousy for Riley.

Ruth, the woman with whom Brooke spent an overnight visit, has been uniformly perceived by my literature students as a caring and sensitive individual; she really
cares for Brooke and has helped him learn about a more emotional part of himself. This event, however, precipitates a mutual jealousy in the relationship between Brooke and Riley, which does not disturb Brooke as much as the problem of how to deal with his marital infidelity. Although the students felt Brooke's "relationship" with Ruth was generally genuine, some felt he had simply taken advantage of her sexually. They were angry with him for not being faithful to his wife; but, at the same time, they wanted to excuse him for engaging in an experience that turned out to be very meaningful to both Ruth and Brooke.

Brooke and Riley resolve their jealousies at the end of the story, for Brooke realizes through his experience with Ruth that he can no longer judge Riley. The opinions of my literature students were split as to whether Brooke is being fair to his wife by not telling her about Ruth. While some felt that Brooke's silence violates their marital agreement and is, hence, unacceptable behavior for a married man, others considered the one-time fling necessary for Brooke and non-threatening to his relationship with his wife. Everyone sympathized with Brooke's wife when she smells perfume all over his shirt the next day when she is doing laundry, and a few thought
her stupid for trusting him so implicitly and not confronting him.

Most of my literature students found this an easy story in which to relate, perhaps because of its familiar settings and current themes. I suspect their interpretations were fairly close to what might be considered authorial intent.

"Mistletoe"

"Mistletoe," by Jane Bradley, was published in The Virginia Quarterly Review. Since no critical work exists for it, I have used my casual conversations with the author and comments from my literature students to provide a standard against which to compare my readers' responses. The story depicts a woman in her thirties at the crossroads in her life. She does not love or respect her husband, Mitch, yet she has had two children with him. Her lover, Dean, who died tragically five months earlier of a stroke and subsequent suicide, gave her life value and meaning. The story represents her attempt to recover some of the feelings she knows she must now live without and to come to terms with how she will remain with Mitch, her macho and unromantic husband. Mitch feels the conflict his wife feels, but he is unable to express
himself, so he seeks escape in television, hunting, snide remarks, and cruel teasing.

Most of my literature students tended to agree with Bradley's concern for the narrator, and saw her as a sensitive and caring individual, dedicated to her children, and weary of the life she was living with Mitch. They saw her attempts to recapture the feeling she had with Dean as a survival mechanism: a way to continue her meaningful relationship with Dean and a means for her to escape her deteriorating relationship with Mitch. Bradley, in her comments to me, stated that she considers the narrator justified in her actions towards Mitch and that part of her problem was the mistake she had made marrying so inexpressive a man. The narrator is torn, however, between her own upbringing and duties as a wife and mother, and her needs to feel alive, a sensation she learned, perhaps for the first time, from Dean. The story takes place over the period of no more than an hour and describes the family's trip to a section of the forest to find some mistletoe to put in their house. Despite the fact that mistletoe grew in their own backyard, the narrator is determined to visit the spot where she and Dean used to rendezvous. Mitch's cynicism during the short visit to that spot in the forest is evident, a fact with which the students have sympathized.
While many literature students felt this trip was unfair to Mitch, since the narrator only needed him to shoot the mistletoe from a tree, Bradley told me that she felt less sympathy for the inexpressive husband. The narrator no longer considers Mitch a part of her emotional life, and he has proven to her that he is not capable of maintaining a relationship that meets her emotional needs. My literature students agreed, to a great degree, that Mitch is hardly "a find" for a woman as sensual and expressive as the narrator, but they felt it was her obligation to try to make the best of an uncomfortable situation or to leave him. Mitch's continual lethargy and snide comments gained him little sympathy from the students, and they felt he could have done a more effective job expressing himself. They felt Dean, however, was a good match for the narrator; he was respectful towards her and shared her depth of feeling. Dean was willing to share himself and what he knew of nature and the forest with her, and he expressed himself in an open and honest manner. Even though the students felt he would not have sacrificed his marriage to be with the narrator, they respected his depth of feeling and respect for her.

Bradley and the students agreed that the mistletoe is representative of the narrator's relationship with Dean
and that making the pilgrimage to that spot was ritualistic and inspiring for her. A number of students said that she should not have included the entire family on such an intimate trip and suspected that Mitch knew something of her reasons for wanting to visit that particular location.

Overall, my students tended to agree with Bradley on characterizations but tended to be more sympathetic with both Mitch and the narrator. They were mostly sympathetic with the narrator’s needs and supportive of her efforts to meet them, but they felt she might have maintained a greater degree of privacy and made the trip alone to find the mistletoe.

"Martha’s River"

When I first read Ann Goette’s "Martha’s River," I was sorry there had been no published critical response to it because the issues it deals with are controversial and relevant, especially to college students. Given the lack of critical material, I have relied on the responses from my literature students to provide a critical outline for the story.

The story depicts the conflict of a woman wanting to maintain her isolated rural lifestyle and her role as mother in the face of increasing opposition from her
husband. Martha is willing to go to extreme measures to resolve the conflict within herself and with her husband in order to protect her unborn child. It is an issue of feminine power and self-determination for her because she knows she is powerless in some very important ways, such as having the ability to financially support her son and herself. Her husband’s conflict is more clear cut. Alan needs to preserve his masculine lifestyle and is willing to go to great lengths to do so. His response to his own role conflict and the conflict with his wife is to demand greater influence over the entire family and to reinforce his vision of a family hierarchy.

During the two years I used this story in my literature classes, students expressed mixed sympathies for Martha, for they sympathized with her need to prevent Alan from forcing her to have an abortion, but felt that murdering him was, perhaps, a bit of an overreaction. Most of the students felt Martha was a fine mother and that her instincts were natural, but they did not feel she was justified fooling Alan in order to get pregnant (she said she had put in her diaphragm before they made love). Most of them respected her strength and ability to take care of herself and meet her own needs: it was her violent method of meeting these needs they feared. They also admired her nurturing qualities and her relationship
with her son, Jason, but felt she might have been too protective of him and not offered him the chance to mix with other children.

There was little sympathy for Alan among my students, beyond the fact that all but a few students felt he should not have been murdered simply for being insensitive and narrow-minded. No one considered Alan a caring father, and they rebuked him for referring to his son as a "millstone." Those who realized Alan was a drug dealer, and hence was absent from the family home most of the time, did not change their original opinion of him. Clearly, few students liked Alan, but the fact he was murdered at the end of the tale gained him more sympathy than they felt for him before that time.

There were many prescriptive responses concerning what Alan and Martha should have done to repair or end their marriage. Mostly, the advice centered upon how Martha could have managed to rid herself of Alan without resorting to such ghastly measures. In sum, there was considerable interpretive consensus among my students about "Martha’s River," and the students’ responses were mostly reactions to Alan’s murder, involving more sympathy for Martha and less for Alan, at least until the time he was murdered.
"The Yellow Wallpaper"

In Charlotte Perkins-Gilman's nineteenth century, feminist-oriented autobiographical portrayal of a descent into insanity, "The Yellow Wallpaper," the author presented her "mental illness" as a form of rebellion, a necessary step in her effort to achieve independence in era of well-defined women's roles. The narrator, according to Kennard (1989) is a victim of "an oppressive patriarchal system which restricts women and prevents their functioning as full human beings" (p.81). Hedges (1973) described the narrator as a woman who has been taken to the country by her husband in order to cure her of some undefined nervous disorder. Hedges described the narrator's relationship with her husband, John, as follows:

Although her husband, a doctor, is presented as kindly and well-meaning, it is soon apparent that his treatment of his wife, guided by nineteenth century attitudes towards women, is an important source of her affliction and a perhaps an inadvertent but nonetheless vicious abettor of it. Here is a woman who, as she tries to explain to anyone who will listen, wants very much to work. Specifically, she wants to write (and the story she is narrating is her desperate and secret attempt both to engage in work that is meaningful to her and to retain her sanity). But the medical advice she receives from her husband/doctor [and] from her brother, also a doctor, is that she do nothing. The prescribed cure is total rest and total emptiness of mind. While she craves intellectual stimulation and activity, and at one point poignantly expresses her wish for "advice and companionship" (one can read today respect and equality) in her work, what she receives is the standard treatment meted out to women in a
patriarchal society. Thus her husband sees her as a "blessed little goose." She is his "little girl" and she must take care of herself for his sake. Her role is to be a "rest and comfort to him." That he often laughs at her is, she notes forlornly and almost casually at one point, only what one expects in marriage. (pp.49-50)

Shumaker (1989) described John as a "clearly domineering husband who wants to have absolute control over his wife" and is an empiricist "who scoffs at things not to be felt or seen and put down in figures" (p.67). He offers his wife "tender love," according to Hill (1989) and "enforces inactivity which deepens her despair" (p.36). Kennard (1989) suggested that the narrator's mental illness is isolation and the removal of intellectual stimulation, being deprived of an opportunity to write, her opportunity for self-expression.

The story, according to Hedges (1973), recording the narrator's descent into madness, is a tale of intellectual and emotional violation, and the wallpaper in the room to which she is forcibly confined is symbolic of her plight. The figure of the woman she "sees" behind the pattern in the paper "represents a great many women behind bars, all trying to get free" (p.52). The narrator is finally defeated; she has fought against her husband, her brother, and some of her women friends, and she has tried, "in defiance of all the social and medical codes or her time, to retain her sanity and her individuality" (p.55). But, in the end, she is defeated: she is totally mad.
Kennard (1989) suggested that the narrator's descent into madness is "a way to health, as a rejection of and escape from, an insane society" (p.82).

"A Good Man is Hard to Find"

In this tale, a young father is about to take his family, his wife, two children, and mother from their home in Georgia to vacation in Florida. "While the entire family is portrayed as vapid and incorrigibly philistine," reported Browning (1974), "the grandmother especially displays a soul so empty that it seems to reverberate with the echoes of her own incessant chatter" (p.54). Grandmother has an "unerring instinct for trouble" (p.55) and is "smug, self-willed and obsessed with breeding and 'good blood'" (p.54). Her son, Bailey, according to Gentry (1986), is the "most repressed and orderly member of the family"; he is so easily controlled by his mother that Gentry termed him a "manipulable child" (p.35). Paulson (1988) suggested that Bailey "dominates his wimpy wife because he is henpecked by his mother" (p.87).

The Misfit is "philosophical psychopath" (p.55), according to Browning (1974), a "poor white cousin of Dostoevsky's tortured agnostic cousins" (p.58). He is, as well, a psychopathic killer,

    cutting through the cliche'-ridden, heedless lives of the people he murders to radical questions of depth,
of spirit, of the reality of good and evil as ontological entities. In his terrifying perverted lucidity, The Misfit implies that, if evil is defined as mere maladjustment, the concept of good then becomes meaningless. (p.58)

Grandmother's brief and fatal encounter with The Misfit demonstrates how the two are "bound together by the mystery of life and death, until this moment of extremity, the moment The Misfit shoots her. He realizes that her flattery is "undoubtedly meant to save her own skin (Paulson, 1988, p.90). Grandmother's "transformation" is a central issue in the story, as Browning wrote: "At last, faced with imminent death, the old lady grasps at the only supports available to her: conventional piety, her faith in good breeding, and the commercial ideals of the society she so pathetically represents (p.56). Browning suggested that The Misfit turns his back on the possibility of redemption, while Grandmother's gesture has often been cited as her "moment of grace." Grandmother's "head clears" for a moment, as she realizes her authenticity is being judged by The Misfit's honesty and spirituality, however distorted they may be (Browning, 1974). This is the high point of their encounter, and, "facing death, the grandmother," noted Paulson (1988), "finally manages to recognize what she and the criminal have in common...they derive from the same family tainted by sin and suffering in the material world" (p.91).
Using O'Connor's most popular short story was an experiment. All the other stories address at least potentially romantic male/female relationships. The relationship I hoped to address in "Good Man" was the mother/son relationship and, potentially, the confrontation between Grandmother and The Misfit. My findings were less rewarding here for several possible reasons. My readers might have been thrown off by the mother/son relationship, first of all, and by the awkward and threatening nature of Grandmother's brief encounter with The Misfit. Additionally, the conflict in the story, Grandmother's role conflict, was not essentially an outgrowth of her relationship with any particular person as it was in all the previous stories. None of the readers in the study had much to offer in our discussions, a fact I'll discuss at greater length in Chapter Eight.

Over the several semesters I used these stories in my literature classes, there has been greater consensus among the students in those classes in terms of interpretations of the characters and relationships than I discovered among my four readers. A classroom dynamic may have been at work here: very often the first comments made about a character or event in a story set the tone of interpretation for the rest of the class. Each next comment is the product of some individual response mixed
with a reaction to the public response represented by other classmates' opinions. My readers' interpretations, which I will examine in Chapters Four through Seven, seemed to be more purely individual responses, "raw," as it might be termed, and, therefore, more likely to be representative of their personal differences. The design of this study, to which I now turn, specifically and deliberately focused on these individual differences.
Designing a study to determine the "genderedness" of readers' responses to literary characters seemed like risky business to me before I began the study. It still does. For this reason, and others I'll discuss later, I decided to adapt Holland's "holistic" method of research and analysis that relies almost entirely on collecting readers' "free responses" to literature and determining minor themes, and, eventually, a central unifying theme for each individual. I planned, as well, to try to determine the thematic differences between the men's and women's responses.

I realized this approach might not give me the intimate and revealing responses that really interested me. However, I decided that this approach would, at least, help me to know that, if the readers did not know the purpose of the study, the defenses often characterizing peoples' discussion of such a sensitive topic as gender would not play a significant part in the
responses. At the same time, I decided that the primary purpose of the study, rather than seeking revelations about the role gender plays in response to literary characters, would be exploratory. I intended, from the very start, to be skeptical of my own beliefs and of the studies conducted by others. I was sure that the twenty years I had been interest in feminism and gender issues were not likely to give me the "unbiased" perspective I needed to conduct this study. However, I had become skeptical of my own beliefs during the two or three years preceding the study. I had decided that, perhaps, issues relating to gender had become so increasingly complex and ambiguous that I needed to re-evaluate my own approach to the topic. This state of "limbo" (or "growth" as I would like to think of it) described my state of mind as I approached the study. As well, two other challenges fascinated me: conducting research that tested my own long-held beliefs about gender and designing a study that could claim an unbiased data collection strategy, at least as much as that is possible in any qualitative or ethnographic research. The nature of the interaction between gender and social, cultural, and political structures makes the study of gender multifaceted. The fact that no researcher can fail to bring gender-related attitudes to such a study inevitably makes such research
subjective. The fact that such factors as race and class will influence such studies may also render their findings easy to challenge. However, a study that treats these factors equally, or in a manner that attempts to ignore these factors, may have some claim to being unbiased. I have attempted to design a methodology that can make a claim that the responses collected were based on a strategy that compensated for these mitigating factors.

Exploratory studies of this nature are demanding, and I expected it to be a difficult task finding significant indications that gender plays a critical role in the interpretive process. For every "certainty" I found, there was a matching "uncertainty," a situation that is best described by Schweikart and Flynn (1986): "Readers were continually producing counter-examples in the form of irreducibly different and often contradictory readings of the same text" (p.ix). This fact put the study in constant peril, and I felt at many times during the discussions with my readers that I would find out nothing except that all readers respond to literary characters differently: that no valuable themes would emerge that would allow me to generalizations about gender as an influence on interpretation. This, however, was not the case, and the responses of my readers did indicate that
gender played a demonstrable role in their reading process.

STUDY DESIGN

Selection of Subjects

In the Fall of 1989 I brought together four of my technical writing students to read and respond to six short stories. The two men and two women were third and fourth year students who had volunteered to take part in this study knowing little about its purpose. Following the in-class study I had informally conducted in my literature class the spring before (see Chapter 2), I had hopes of conducting an expanded study based on my "findings" that students appeared to make predictable gender-related responses to literary characters.

I chose my readers carefully for several reasons: 1) because this was a gender-related study, I wanted an even number of men and women who, to the best of my judgement, represented a cross section of university students and majors, as much as that was possible using only four participants; 2) I needed students who were reliable enough to complete the tasks thoroughly; 3) these individuals should be able to express themselves well verbally and in writing; 4) they should be open-minded--or at least not obviously invested in a belief system,
whether it be religious, political, or gender-related. Knowing these students in class for three months gave me some perspective on their interests in academic affairs and sense of responsibility. Considering there would be only four readers, I needed to feel secure about their commitment to completing the study.

I discussed the study with the participants and gave each of them a few days to consider the time commitment involved. All they knew of the research was that it would involve reading and responding in writing and in interviews to six short stories.

My readers then filled out a questionnaire (see Appendix C) asking for factual information on such topics as their family composition, parents' occupations, their own activities outside school and their reading interests. More importantly, I asked them to submit a one thousand word autobiography in which they told me more about themselves—what they believed in and what they thought was important in life. The questionnaires gave me some background information on family composition, and the autobiographies offered a more intimate picture of each reader, a chance for them to tell me about themselves in their own words. The autobiographies were similar in nature: the readers tended to discuss beliefs and activities they thought distinguished them as individuals.
In the initial interview that followed, I simply asked them to elaborate on what they had discussed in the questionnaires and autobiographies. I let their responses direct my questioning almost entirely, and I attempted to create an atmosphere in which they would talk at length about themselves and that would lead to responses among them that I could analyze and compare.

**Purpose of the Study**

In general, I wanted to gather information on four aspects of response:

1) How does a reader’s response to the genderedness of literary characters differ in each of the six stories?

2) How do responses to the genderedness of a literary character in the same story differ from reader to reader?

3) Does a reader’s real life experiences with the conflicts similar to those raised in the stories affect his or her response to those conflicts in the stories?

4) How do the gender-related responses of the two men to the literary characters and relationships in the stories differ from the gender-related responses of the two women?
How a reader’s response to the genderedness of a literary character differed from story to story was central to the study. How might the crisis in which a character is presented influence a reader’s perceptions of that character? More importantly, how might the literary character’s gender identity affect a reader’s response; will readers tend to strongly favor those characters whose philosophy is generally compatible with their own, or will they simply assess the crisis independent of the character’s or their own beliefs about gender?

I was also interested in how the responses to the genderedness of a literary character in the same story differed from participant to participant? I was primarily interested in whether the readers identified with male or female characters; what attitudes towards the literary characters’ motives and beliefs the readers exhibited; and whether they cited similar reasons for responding to the genderedness of a character in a similar way. In addition, I wanted to know how a reader’s gender-related interpretations of the crisis presented in the story affected his or her response to the literary characters.

It was a difficult and abstract task determining how (or if) the readers’ real life experience with the crises similar to those raised in the stories, if, indeed they had experienced a related crisis, affected their responses
to the stories. Certainly, personal experience with an issue presented in a literary work helps determine a reader's response, but to what demonstrable extent?

The possibility of gender-related differences emerging between the men's responses and the women's responses is potentially the most important finding in the study. If distinct differences were apparent, would it be possible to predict a reader's response based on his or her gender?

The Structure of the Study

The readers' responses to each story took two forms: 1) written responses and 2) discussions with me. Each week, I gave the readers a copy of the story they were to read and a list of questions and statements to which they were to respond (see Appendix B). In each story I marked a "break," a point in the crisis at which they were to stop and answer three questions using a tape recorder. When they completed each story, they responded in writing to the questions I had provided them. I asked them to be complete in their written responses but gave no other specific guidelines. After they had completed the response tasks for each story, I met with each reader individually in my English Department office to discuss and tape record our conversation. Again, although my line
of questioning did not generally depart from responses they had already offered in writing or in earlier stages of a particular interview, I continued to discuss their interpretation of the story until it became obvious they had nothing more to say. Some readers reached this point earlier than others.

After reading the story at home up to the stopping point, they taped their responses to the following questions:

1) What has happened so far in the story?
2) What do you think will happen next?
3) How do you think the story will end?

The first question was designed as a summary question, simply to give me an idea of how they understood the story to that point. The second question was inferential and required them to infer either what would happen next in the story or to anticipate what a character’s actions would be. This task required that they go beyond what they already knew about the text and rely on what Beach (1980) suggested is a tendency for readers to use their knowledge of social and literary conventions to predict events in a literary work. I had hoped their responses would be revealing about how each reader predicted the next step in the gender-related crisis. After they had finished reading the story, I asked them for their
interpretation of the story, simply to give me their version of what happened in the story and why.

I abandoned using the mid-story tape recorded answers after the second story. However good an idea I thought it was, only one of the respondents, Jane, seemed to have much in the way of a response to it. The three other readers generally submitted tapes that were quickly done (I had given them no guidelines as to length) and had responses to the critically important second question that barely went beyond a sentence or two. Several times the response was "I don't know." This response alone would not have deterred me, for I felt they might have learned to accept the task after a time, but Andrew and Jane both complained that it was an "unnatural task." Although they admitted they occasionally contemplated the final outcome of a book they were reading, they said the manner in which I asked them to respond in this case (taping) interrupted the continuity of the story. I wanted the task of reading to be as normal as possible for each of the readers, so I reluctantly omitted the task and asked them instead to jot down notes during the story if ideas came to mind and if it didn't disturb the reading. For the most part, no one did. In the end, I feel the mid-story responses would have offered some valuable information about social conventions they used to infer themes, but rendering the
reading process a less natural task seemed too great a risk.

In order to determine my readers' final responses to the stories, I posed a series of questions for each of the six stories to which they were to read and respond, first in writing and later in discussion with me. For example, these were the questions for Ann Goette's "Martha's River":

1) Describe: a) Alan, b) Martha.
2) Describe their relationship.
3) What is the theme of the story?
4) What is the meaning of the story?
5) What is important in life for Martha? for Alan?
6) What, if anything, does the river symbolize?
7) Do you think Martha's actions at the end of the story are justified?
8) Further comments?

Several of the questions purposely overlap, for I felt the need to make sure the readers addressed crucial aspects of the story. For the purpose of the study, I expected the questions addressing descriptions of characters and their relationships to be of greatest use for analysis and comparison. For each of the stories I provided printed questions (see Appendix B) similar to those above. I used
the readers' written responses as a starting point for the individual discussions.

I felt I had a good deal of control over the response tasks but only to a point. Since I did not want to be forceful about directing their responses to a story, as I felt it would violate the holistic nature of the process, I did a good deal of encouraging but demanded little. Consequently, as the study progressed and the readers became more adept at the task of describing characters and their motivations, relationships, and conflicts, their responses became shorter, more to the point, and more revealing. At first, I feared that shorter responses were simply an indication that they were simply doing less of the task and perhaps even losing interest in the study. What convinced me otherwise was when I compared transcripts from the fourth interview with those from the second; I realized the readers were simply getting more skilled at the specific response process assigned them. They responded predictably: each reader stated the essential information and waited for my "cue" to continue the discussion. At first, they waited for cues that would give the discussion direction and, later, cues that would determine the depth of analysis rather than direction, which, by then, they already knew. Each next interview was more true to the task but less of a "free response":
that is, even though they responded well to the task assigned them, each next interview was more confined to the response parameters I had given them and less expressive outside those confines. I continued, however, when we were discussing the stories, to encourage them to explore the characters and relationships but offered no topical guidance beyond asking them to go into greater depth on the questions they had been supplied and the nature of the responses they had already offered me. This practice forced them to use their own responses as bridges to later responses.

My role as researcher evolved during the twelve week study. Although this was my first formal reader-response study, my questioning strategies and interpretive skills had been well-tested during my nine years of teaching. I feel the responses my readers offered were, for the most part, "untainted" by their perceptions of my expectations or interest in gender. No mention was made of gender as an issue until Ann suggested that both the characters in "Mistletoe" were stereotypical. By the sixth (and last) story, all the readers realized the relationships of the literary characters were central to the study, but still no one ever mentioned what they thought my specific expectations might be. Since I knew from the beginning of the semester I would choose readers from my writing
classes, I purposely refrained from openly discussing politics, male/female relationships, and other topics I feared would give them too much information about myself. I was pleasantly surprised when both Arthur and Jane, towards the end of the study, asked me my opinions on several controversial gender-related issues; I assumed my attempt to maintain a "neutral" position was, at least in part, successful.

Moving from the teacher role to the role of the researcher did not present a problem. Most of my students, at least after a few weeks in class, do not identify me as a traditional authority figure. The informality and comfortable rapport I try to establish in my classes, was, in this case, easily transferred to the interview setting. I felt my readers' written and oral responses were honest and open, and our interviews were marked by a friendly continuity in content and process. Although I felt a need to keep us "on task" during the interviews, the conversation occasionally drifted to related and non-related subjects. These conversations raised issues that would never have come up in our discussion of the stories and always yielded personal information about my readers that later proved valuable when I was analyzing their responses. I began each interview with informal conversation; since I saw them
often, and had known them in class, light conversation about school or their outside activities came easily. All the readers felt comfortable talking about themselves, and they sometimes moved the conversation to more personal topics, especially Arthur, who was always anxious to tell me his beliefs on a myriad of topics, and Robert, who loved to answer my questions about his experiences in the Marine Corps. Jane and Ann were, as well, very open to this sort of informal exchange but tended to be somewhat less enthusiastic, perhaps because they were burdened by busy academic schedules. I did, however, learn a great deal about each reader from the conversations that occurred before and after the taped interviews, and I consider it an essential component of my data collection strategy.

Collecting data on gender-related topics is challenging, since sensitive topics are so easily encountered. Breaching an individual’s level of intimacy creates problems: he or she can either effectively end the discussion by being unwilling to discuss the issue or simply begin to give false answers. Schweikart and Flynn (1986) suggested a reader can avoid an encounter with a text by simply resisting it and, therefore, remain unchanged by the interaction. Holland (1975) found readers may defend themselves against a story as a
"potentially dangerous external reality" (p.121) and may actively shape it to fit their mental processes. In any case, an academic approach to the issue, such as the approach I took in this study, may never get to the real issues. In other words, in order to learn about how gender truly influences an individual’s life or relationships, a researcher needs to broach topics of intimacy which people may naturally resist, especially those individuals with whom the researcher is not well acquainted. Academic discussions of gender may be revealing to a point, but unless a topic is discussed in-depth, even intimately, the most important information may never be revealed. This is a "Catch 22"; in order for the study to be truly revealing, I had to discuss personal topics with my readers; but, if I did discuss such intimate topics, I was liable to get information that did not represent their true responses. My response to this problem was to leave decisions about intimacy to my readers. I was open to intimate conversations but did not encourage or discourage them; consequently, what I have recorded here is the result of very little intimacy on the part of my readers. They responded in primarily academic terms, except for Arthur’s defensive and theatrical responses to several of the characters, much as they might
have were they responding to the texts in a classroom setting.

Discussing these difficulties is not an attempt to invalidate my efforts to determine the part gender plays in response to literary characters but more to qualify the data I present. My readers offered me few personal admissions about themselves, and what I have to say on those topics is a result of my own interpretation of their responses, actions, attitudes, and use of language.

ANALYSIS PROCEDURES

The liberties I have taken with Holland's (1985) holistic method of research certainly do not reflect a disagreement with the method that has helped him conduct numerous revealing reader response studies. The changes I have made are more a result of my own reflections on the method and the personal approach that has emerged as a result of those reflections, that is, an approach that is best suited, I feel, to my skills and perspective on reader response. I have changed what was necessary to accomplish what I have determined to be the needs and scope of the study.

I am aware that the changes I made in the original questioning strategy yielded responses from my readers that Holland would not term true "free responses." The
questions I supplied my readers did help determine the
direction of their responses--it was a means of reaching
the topic of interest without gathering a vast number of
other responses that might have been valuable but that I
had neither time nor interest in obtaining.

Holland (1985) referred to the theme of holistic
research in the social sciences using the words of
philosopher Paul Diesing (1971): to "assert simply that
a certain uniformity exists in the data, that some sort of
clustering or syndrome exists in the system being studied"
(p.221). The theme is tested, according to Diesing, by
seeing whether further instances appear, and if not,
testing further by trying another theme. After
determining several small themes, one organizes them into
a larger theme, what he called a central or "centering"
theme. According to Diesing, the central theme should
connect the small themes in a coherent way, so that a
particular theme is given meaning by placing it in the
context of the whole. Holland (1985) used the same
procedure to study reading:

One gathers details about the ways different
literents transact different literary works. To
study them holistically, one converts those responses
or transactions into a text that one can then study
as subthemes, themes, and a central theme. Mostly
this means listening to what the literents say or
listening and then studying a transcription of what
they said during a recorded interview. (p.10)
He suggested it is important to notice that the readers are not saying things in an abstract way and to ask them to respond openly and freely. Holland viewed his method as an "open-ended way of gathering data, one not truncated by outside categories or fixed hypotheses. Simply listen to what students say...and organize it by subtheme, theme, and central theme" (p.11). Diesing (1971) noted that participant-observer holistic studies serve well to "describe the individual in its individuality, as a system of rules, goals, values, techniques, defense or boundary maintaining mechanisms, exchange or boundary crossing mechanisms, socialization procedures, or decision procedures" (pp.5-6). In short, he suggested, "its primary subject matter is a single, self-maintained social system" (pp.5-6). The holistic method is, according to Holland, less useful addressing the regularities across such individual, self-maintained systems than it is in determining central themes.

Combining and analyzing holistic accounts of individual transactions allows the researcher to investigate and explain regularities in response. Holland (1985) explained:

This kind of research would have to begin by collecting a large number of individual responses to a certain text, from both naive and trained critics and scholars. Such research establishes actual and therefore possible responses, not abstract categories of response, but a personal sense of responsive
possibilities. One gains wisdom about one's fellow humans rather than the kind of hard-edged knowledge psychological experiments are designed to provide. (p.11)

Although Holland admitted to working with more homogeneous groups than "naive readers and trained critics or scholars," such as groups of university undergraduates, he suggested it is still possible to summarize the individual responses as a "pseudo or quasi-impersonal conclusion." He applauded research of this sort--the close analyses of open-ended response to texts--as having great potential.

Holland stressed the treatment of responses as "possibilities," rather than as categories. There is no end to the number of possible interpretations to a text, he stated, and goes on to suggest that the overwhelming agreement in interpretation among respondents does not rule out the possibility of yet another valuable response, nor can we accurately predict the responses of others from a specific sample unless we have reason to believe the next sample is somehow quite similar to the first.

"Nevertheless," he wrote,

I think it is possible to use holistic research to study more than one person. In 1975 I proposed consideration of a tribe, a village, a corporation, a street gang, or even a nation as a "macroperson" (Holland, 1975, pp.233-245). In effect, you draw a line of definition around a group to be considered. Then you treat all the thoughts, words, and actions from that group as though they were one text from one organism. You can look at the centering unity in this "text" as a "macroperson" and so--perhaps--arrive at a group identity. I think it is possible to analyze a class, a program, or a school in the
same way, one would define the "single person," the undivided "individual" who provides the basis for a case study as a classroom of students with a teacher, a program within a school, indeed, the whole school or university, or just one student with one teacher in a one-on-one teaching setting. (p.12)

More importantly, he suggested, "even if we were to use holistic research this way to study more than one individual, we would still be studying uniqueness. We would not have tried to explain regularities in response which are applicable from individual to individual or group to group" (pp.12-13).

Finally, Holland suggested that holistic research serves the same purposes case studies do the medical profession:

each response we collect is a past actuality that represents a future possibility. Each response is a hypothesis to try out on the next response. Gathering responses does not lead to knowledge in the abstract, but to an active interpretation of new responses which must then be gathered. (p.13)

Holistic studies lead to new relationships between the researcher, the readers, and the texts with which the researcher is working.

Holland’s procedure for collecting and analyzing data can be summarized in four steps.

1) The researcher gathers information about readers’ interpretations of a literary work by simply listening and studying the transcriptions of recorded interviews.
2) The researcher converts responses or transactions into subthemes, themes, and a central theme.

3) The researcher compares small themes and identifies larger themes across stories, characters, and tasks.

4) The researcher looks for a central unity to which to respond (an identity for the group as a whole) and then summarizes it as a quasi-impersonal study—a close analysis of open-ended response.

I amended Holland's basic procedure to meet the needs of my study. I will discuss the changes in greater detail after outlining them by number to correspond to Holland's steps above.

1) I used several data sources: written responses of my readers and transcriptions of recorded interviews with them. My field notes, as well, provided data for analysis.

2) This step did not deviate from Holland's second step noted above, except that my research tended to address more individual themes, rather than to seek a single common theme and regularities uniting the readers.

3) I was interested in themes that could be compared across readers and stories. This approach allowed even minor themes a position of
importance if they occurred regularly across readers or stories.

4) Although I was concerned with major points of unity among the readers, I was primarily interested in establishing a number of unifying themes across readers and stories, as well as within each reader, to summarize and analyze.

Holland's definition of holistic research described a procedure "not truncated by outside categories or fixed hypotheses." I found it necessary, at least in general, to direct my reader's responses in order to obtain data I feared would not be forthcoming. While this aspect of my questioning may not have allowed for the variety of responses a "free response" approach might, it did give me the specific information on the characters and relationships I needed.

Holland's strategy for analysis focused on finding a "macroperson" identity for the readers. Finding such an identity for four readers seemed, to me, to be a task whose results could easily be challenged, and it was not my purpose to unify all the readers under one theme. Since my focus was gender, and I was interested in the differences between men's and women's responses, I attempted to identify themes that characterized the
differences between the men’s and women’s responses, whether they were major or minor.

My research and analysis strategy allowed me to observe and analyze the differences in my readers' gender-related responses from individual to individual, and between men and women. I discuss the nature of these differences and the specific gender-related response themes that emerged from them in Chapters Four through Eight.
CHAPTER FOUR

JANE

Jane's participation in the study, I realize now, was essential for its success, and I began my analysis with her written and recorded responses. Her determination to be an ideal participant in my study was successful, and her rich offering allowed me to arrive at some valuable conclusions about how an individual's past experience with relationships helps shape his or her responses to literary characters. I met Jane the day before Fall Semester began.

"Are you Professor Pappas?" Jane asked as she planted her thin but sturdy frame in the doorway of my office.

I nodded and smiled.

She returned a confident smile. "I'm Jane Jones. I'm a graduating senior in biology and need to take technical writing, but I've been closed out of the section I registered for. Susan Smith, a friend of mine, had you for technical writing and said you might let me force-
add," she said in one breath, ending with a "will you do me a favor" look.

She had the forms already filled out and just needed my signature. She said nothing of her silent assumption that I would let her add the class. My pen hardly left the paper before she popped up, thanked me sincerely, promised she would work very long and hard in class, and left, I assumed, in search of a registration terminal.

The first day of class she was waiting in her second row seat when I arrived. She wore a university logo sweatshirt, clean bluejeans, and running shoes—nearly identical to the manner in which she would dress the remainder of the semester. A pile of books sat next to her on the long lab table she shared with another student, Arthur, who also would become a reader in the study. She seemed surprisingly eager and unnervingly ready to work; her eyes seldom left me during the first class (and for the four or five following weeks as well).

"She's too eager," I thought, "not in a phoney way, but she must get tired of being so cheerfully serious." I assumed, erroneously I would find out later, that she was a "straight A" student. And eager though she was, it would not be until I started the study that I would find out why she was so motivated and intentional about her activities and thoughts.
I paid little special attention to Jane for the first weeks of class but for the fact I realized I could rely on her to offer intelligent and contemplative responses to questions no one else volunteered to answer. She was always present in class, on time, and ready to work. As I began to know her better, I realized her enthusiastic approach to her studies extended into her life; her almost lighthearted manner complemented her academic seriousness well. Most of her work for the class exceeded requirements: she once submitted a 12 page homework assignment, even though I had requested only a page or two. We spoke several times after class, and I asked her about her plans after graduation. I sensed she was confident about her biology skills, and she seemed unconcerned about finding a job. When I asked her to participate in the study, she seemed pleased and anxious to help.

On the day she was to give an oral presentation of her semester project, she seemed nervous, very much out of character. She was uneasy in a dress and heels (I asked all presenters to role play a formal presentation), and the confidence that marked her presence in the class was noticeably absent. She fiddled with her notes until it was her turn to speak; she rose from her desk, a bit awkwardly in her formal attire, walked to the front of the
room, and began her presentation. Her voice quivered, and she rocked back and forth from one foot to the other the entire presentation. Her presentation was about the life cycle of tropical fish, and she kept the class's attention as much with her uneasiness as with her well-planned delivery. She later admitted that, although she was nervous in front of the group, it was an experience she needed if she was to be a professional. I had expected such a response.

It was this sort of maturity that characterized Jane's involvement in most aspects of her life. Her "balanced" perspective on life allowed her to be determinedly serious and at the same time genuinely lighthearted.

On the initial research questionnaire, she confidently described herself as "hardworking, energetic, and creative; willing to work overtime, independently, and as a team member." On a more personal side, she stated she was "friendly, caring, loyal, and independent...I take pride in my work. I try to please everyone, and I'm a good, tactful, mediator." She suggested she may have inherited these traits from her hardworking parents: her father, a salesman for a textile company, and her mother, a sales manager for a phone
company information system. She described her relationship with them:

My parents recognize me as a competent individual when I'm here at school. As soon as I'm home, they gradually fall into the "we are always right" and "you know nothing" roles. We work as equals for about two weeks, then the situation becomes tense.

The importance of relationships in Jane's life cannot be overstated. Her troubles and joys in relationships have provided the foundation for her philosophy on life, and the impetus for her drive towards increasing independence. Early in the initial interview she discussed her relationship with her mother:

I thought I was different from her but I'm not. We're a lot alike, and during high school we had lots of problems. I wanted to be my own person, and I didn't want to be anything like her at all. It turns out that a lot of my personality and a lot of the way I deal with things is the way she deals with things, so I just adjust that and stuff, and we've become good friends. Our relationship is really quite good now.

Jane's relationship with her father was more problematic, and she discussed it at great length:

Well, Dad and I had a real rough time in high school. It was a very violent breaking away, and we lost touch for a while, and up until recently, we had nothing to talk about; it was really difficult to find subjects we could both sit down and talk about. But now we make an effort to sit down and listen to each other, and I listen to what he does and he listens to what I do and how I feel about things. Just recently, I asked his opinion on some personal things...he was highly impressed by that, but we really did have a rough time in high school....
I asked her to talk about the split between her and her father, if it was not too personal an issue. She shrugged off my caution and continued:

I don't know...being his first child, as his little girl, he didn't want to recognize me as an individual. I was trying to be more of an adult, and he was treating me very much as a child. During one point in time, he refused to listen to me, and I blew up at him, and that was it. I mean I really hurt him publicly, which was stupid [of me]. I admit that now, but he wasn't listening at all, and he was just wailing on me for something. He was just yelling at me for something that he thought had occurred but never listened to what it was, and that was it for a while. We just did not get along.

Later, during the discussion of "The Yellow Wallpaper," Jane revealed something of her father's insensitivity to her while describing John and the narrator's relationship in the story.

He treats her like a father treats a child. I mean, he says: "don't think about that, don't talk about that"; he listens but doesn't believe her. I mean, parents tend to be that way about children.

Jane's relationship with her younger sister, Ellen, has also helped shape her personality. Being a big sister was not always an easy job, and the task of getting along with Ellen became Jane's responsibility. Jane spoke of the time Ellen, who is two years her junior, was born and usurped her role as "daddy's girl":

That's a rough point of contention, my sister and I. There's a lot of problems in that Ellen became his little girl...everything rises and sets on her; she can do no wrong. She's really hard to get along with sometimes. I really feel we should get along, so I make an effort to give in on things, and it wasn't
until recently when I said I've had enough. I'm
tired of her always being right, of always giving in
to her. Our relationship's going to have to stop for
a while.

Jane is painfully introspective about her
relationships with family and friends. She remembered her
first relationship crisis:

I had a great friend in the second grade. She
decided she didn't want to be my friend any more
around the fifth grade. Completely dropped me,
publically. I mean, she was my only friend, my best
friend, and she decided that she wanted to be a part
of the "in crowd." Being my only friend, that had a
major impact on me, and I completely withdrew from
making friends for a long time. Losing the "home
touch" had a lot to do with it because not getting
along with either of my parents and not having any
good friends made me very independent.

It was not until much later that Jane would find a
relationship to parallel the early days of this childhood
friendship, and she claimed that her college friend,
Cathy, was her first real female friend:

Actually, she's my first real female friend, I guess
you could say. I deal with men really much better.
I understand them; well, we deal much better one to
one, whereas I really don't understand females.
Cathy and I get along really well because she leans
towards the masculine, so I deal with her better.

Coming to know and trust Cathy has not been easy. Jane
claimed that Cathy was the first female she could "talk to
about anything." Commitment did not come easily either,
she claimed, and it took two years to build the
relationship with Cathy.

Commitments scare me. My friend Cathy once joked
that every time I see commitment, I break out in a
rash and go into fits. Part of this stems from being
hurt in relationships. I have an overdeveloped sense of caution when it comes to making friends. Not committing myself also gives me the freedom to bail out at any time. Kind of a protection system against failure and guilt.

Jane did, however, talk about the commitment she made to her first college boyfriend, whom she dated for over a year. Although she wanted to break up with him for most of that time, she felt she could not handle the guilt she would bear if she hurt him.

I felt trapped, but the goal of making [the relationship] into a friendship, and making sure he could become more independent...he was "stacking" on me. He was basing his life on me, and it took a year before we worked it to a point that he wasn’t basing his life on me anymore or that he was basing his life on himself.

So she waited until "he could handle the transition" to becoming just friends again. "It was rough," she said, "but we are now good friends." She summed up the relationship: "One of my greatest lifetime accomplishments...and sacrifices."

Personal freedom and independence are important topics to Jane, and her discussions of them were very serious. The conversation came back to this topic again and again, as though she balanced her relationships with others with her own drive for independence and autonomy:

I am very self-analytical and self-critical. For a long while, I didn’t like myself. Now I’m content to be Jane Jones, with all my problems but also with all my good stuff, too. I’ve gotten to the point where I can recognize that I’m good for something. I can define myself with my own terms and in relationship to myself, rather than in relationship to another
person. I tend to empathize a lot with other people's feelings and situations.

Jane sees herself as what I would term an "emerging woman," stable, intelligent, in control of her life and relationships. She takes for granted, it seems, that it is possible for a woman to embrace a role that includes power, independence, and self-determination. Her mother and father both seemed to discourage their daughter's independence, perhaps because Jane expressed the need "to be my own person" at a young age. As well, Jane's early experiences in relationships seemed to have hardened her and made her less easily accessible to others. She expressed her defenses openly:

I've become very independent and self-sufficient. This makes commitment to other people and friends even harder. I like to be in control. When you are in a relationship, you are never really sure where that other person is coming from. Life is lonely if you think of it in terms of the only person you are really in touch with is yourself. I'm me, you're you, and never the two shall truly understand and share with the other. Kind of sad and very lonely.

Living with these realizations about life has not always been easy for Jane. "Friendships have become very important because I realize how alone I am in the world. Having people to whom I can relate is very important."

She discussed the potential insecurity this approach to life brings her and about her dependency on her pet cat, whose presence in her apartment last fall forced her to relocate:
The landlord found out we had a cat. All of us decided to move out. They [her roommates] had a place to go. I could have stayed in the townhouse if I got rid of the cat. Much to my parents’ dismay and disgust, I decided to look for a new place to live; the cat means more to me than they’ll ever know.

Later in the interview she discussed her dependence on her pet, following her comments on how difficult it was to be alone in the world:

I’ve wanted a pet for years upon years. I enjoy the fact that he’s really dependent on me; I’m really dependent on him, too. He provides me affection that I don’t normally get. If I’m not dating somebody, then I’m very much alone. He provides a lot of affection, and he needs me to a certain extent. I enjoy him; that’s important to me.

Being in control of herself and taking care of her emotional needs are critically important to Jane, since she has been so hurt by her family and friends. She said she has developed a clear sense of identity through having to handle difficult relationships, and she was resolute about how she would like her life to be. About her plans for the future she, said:

I don’t want to go into the work force and be tied down to a specific task. I feel that would be boring. I enjoy integrating my knowledge on various things into being used for problem solving or just understanding what other people are talking about. Little obscure bits of information about all topics stimulate me. My goals for the future, after college, are very undecided. I don’t know whether I should look for a job that pays a lot of money or one that interests me.

In her rather lengthy discussion of the future, Jane exhibited a sense of personal confidence that convinced me
that her future was, at least as she interpreted it, mostly a process of making choices among a number of interesting possibilities. While discussing her relationships, friends, or her plans for the future, she never openly discussed the role of women in society with me, but I sensed from my discussions with her that she was aware of the topic, and ready and willing to take her place in society as a woman equal to men.

**JANE'S RESPONSE THEMES**

Five sub-themes grouped under a major theme, "the emerging woman" grew from Jane's responses to the characters and relationships in the stories. I found evidence for each theme in her discussions of how she came to her identity as a woman and partly from her direct experiences with friends and relationships.

**The Five Sub-Themes**

Jane's sub-themes are characteristics of an "emerging woman." Not every sub-theme is evident in each story; consequently, I have noted in my discussion of each story which of these sub-themes appeared. The sub-themes are:
1) Jane depicted most of the female characters as independent from men or working successfully to be independent from them.

2) Jane was protective of most female characters' roles, regardless of what those roles were, and interpreted each role as respectable and having value.

3) According to Jane, the search for fulfillment was central to all the female characters. She interpreted their actions in the stories as moving towards the definition and fulfillment of needs, and sometimes of dreams or fantasies.

4) Each female character, according to Jane, exhibited emotional needs they found satisfied only by men. This expression of needs was often central to the crisis in the story.

5) Jane felt the characters expressed a need to be in control of their relationships or, at least, to have as much control as the men to whom they relate.

The Emerging Woman Theme

I created the term "emerging woman" to describe Jane's approach to life: Jane assumes that what she has done with her life and relationships has been entirely
under her control. Jane, like many of my female students, has not been aware that increasing opportunities for women are something new, something women twenty years ago did not enjoy. The themes that emerged from Jane's responses to the stories reflected her identity as a woman "coming of age" at a time of increasing awareness among all people that women are capable of being independent, self-directing, and highly talented in disciplines that until now have been reserved mostly for men. The "emerging woman" is not necessarily an avowed feminist but a woman who has reached maturity in an age, that for the first time, that women are increasingly considered equal to men in all respects.

This overriding theme characterized Jane's responses to the stories; and, since each sub-theme of this main theme was not clearly evident in each story, I addressed sub-themes in the context of the general theme in each story as they contributed to her interpretation of the characters and relationships. Jane did not consider the characters to be "emerging women" themselves; she simply used emerging woman characteristics to describe their actions and motivations. She described the female characters as exhibiting the same tenuousness and contemplated caution that has governed her own life and approach to relationships. Jane superimposed her approach
to life onto the characters more than she did the content of her life. She was more concerned with *how* a particular character made life decisions than *what* those decisions actually were. Because of this, Jane did not need to be philosophically compatible with the characters, since she was not really concerned so much with the result of the characters’ actions but only the process they experienced coming to deal with the important events that contributed to their sense of independence and autonomy. She assumed the characters possessed the strength she does, and she interpreted their actions non-judgmentally and as the logical result of mature contemplative introspection. There were no crazy women here, no murderers without a reason, and no women weaker than the men who surrounded them.

It is clear that Jane has identified herself, to a great degree, through the interactions with individuals with whom she has shared some intimacy and the very purposeful contemplation of those interactions: "I define myself with my own terms and in relationship to myself in relationship to another person." Her response themes are the guidelines for her own life that she projected in varying degrees onto nearly all the female characters in the stories, whether she identified with them or not. Jane’s early relationship crises, and the cultural
atmosphere of her early years that offered increasing equality to women, occurred during her grade school and high school years, the time, according to Maccoby and Jacklin (1974), that the foundation for gender identity is mostly developed.

Jane's Response to "A Rose for Emily"

Considering more conventional interpretations of the character of Emily (see Chapter Two), Jane's response was one I had never encountered before. Despite my having heard hundreds of my former students interpret the character, she surprised me when she said she thought Emily's purpose in life was to "strive for stability and create an ideal to live by." The link between Jane's version of herself as an emerging woman and Emily's struggle was clear:

I think she's very insecure because she doesn't have anyone to rely on. At first she didn't rely on herself. Under her father, she didn't have a need to, but when she was forced to do so after his death, she didn't immediately. She had to build a foundation around herself, and she couldn't do it. It seems once her father was gone, she got sick. She didn't want to have to become independent, but she was forced to. She slowly worked on becoming more self-reliant and then Homer came into the picture. He was a temporary crutch, but she did not want to base herself on him entirely. She could have lived out her life being totally submissive under Homer, but she chose not to.

Jane's Emily was not defeated by her relationships with men; she was a growing woman: "She has strength; she
doesn't take the easy way out by suicide." It was clear
Jane defined Emily using "emerging woman" characteristics. 
Emily was beaten down by life and was struggling to live 
an independent existence. Emily has a "very quiet 
strength," Jane remarked, a "self-sturdy foundation" and a 
"new founding of self." She elaborated:

To tell you the truth, I don't think she was insane. 
I guess morally...society would call her insane, but 
I don't think she really was insane. I think it was 
almost logical what she did; I mean, she had to 
build up a foundation around herself. She killed 
Homer providing her some foundation. I think the 
foundation part really is important. It's real 
important to me as a person. She based herself on 
something other than him...

Jane's own logical and determined approach to personal 
fulfillment was reflected in the steps Emily took towards 
independence.

She started doing things on her own. She started a 
painting class; she invited people into her home. 
She couldn't turn to the townspeople for help; she 
was on her own.

Jane may have been admitting to herself that Emily 
actually took a step towards independence that she, 
herself, had not yet taken. Emily was "doing it on her 
own," while Jane still admitted needing others to help 
define herself. For Jane, self-preservation may be the 
measure of a woman's strength--doing what is necessary to 
survive. Jane has done it, and so did Emily.

She couldn't accept the town's sympathy [after her 
father died], so she separated herself from them. 
Self-preservation is not insanity. To me, it's the
whole purpose of being. I'm a biology major; preservation of the species is supposedly the...pure psychological self-preservation is very important.

I asked Jane if Emily remained dependent on Homer after his death, assuming Jane interpreted the story as most others did. Jane believed that Emily used Homer for a time and was then truly independent of him:

I mean, he was there, and they don't say how long. I think she lived until 72 or something like that. Something I picked up out of this story that seemed interesting was that after Homer was murdered, her hair started to turn to steel grey in a short period of time. It seems that the room was shut up for years. Now, she met Homer around age 30. She died around age 72. It was possible that during that time she was also developing more for herself, so it was possible that she didn't need Homer anymore, and she had shut the door for years. It was entirely possible that she needed time after her father died, after the such amazing sense of insecurity. He (Homer) was there as a kind of foundation, and when she didn't need him any longer, she closed the door.

Perhaps Jane's father "died," too, following their "violent breaking away" during her early teens. Jane's struggle for independence in her relationships with her mother and sister may parallel the time Emily attempted independence. Both Jane and Emily 'fall back' on men to learn about romantic relationships and used those relationships to achieve independence. Jane holding on to her first college boyfriend for a year more than she deemed necessary for herself may well have been analogous to the period of time Emily held onto Homer before achieving independence. Perhaps her insistence that Emily
was no longer dependent on Homer was a way for Jane to demonstrate her own independence from her college boyfriend. The story of Emily and Homer could be the story of Jane and her boyfriend, or it explains, at least in part, how she projected herself into the context of the literary relationship.

For Jane, overcoming her past was the same as overcoming her father's and mother's influence on her. Jane did not openly discuss her father when she discussed Emily's father, but the connections seem apparent:

Emily's father seems like a domineering man or controlling man, one that feels that none of the town's boys are good enough for his daughter. She is dependent on him to such an extent that she denies his death.

Jane had discussed how her father did not want to admit she "was growing up...he was still treating me like a child." Emily, she said, "was ruled by her father...her problem was his fault--he protected her too much." As much as Jane identified with and understood Emily, she was unsympathetic to her plight. Emily...and Jane...did just what they had to do to survive.
Jane’s Response to "An Episode in the Life of Professor Brooke"

During our discussion of "Professor Brooke," Jane began to reveal her strategy for responding to the stories:

I have a real problem empathizing or getting into this story—it seems surreal. I can’t fit the characters with me or people I know.

Later in the interview she said the story was "too normal," a sentiment shared by other readers of Wolff’s stories. Jane did not have much to say about the story that differed from the comments of the other readers in my study or from many of my literature students. The sub-themes associated with the "emerging woman" theme, however, were still evident. I noted early in our discussion that, as with "Emily," Jane made no negative comments about Ruth, the female protagonist. While Ruth was an easy character to like, she was certainly not faultless in the eyes of many of my literature students. And despite Jane’s suggestion that she couldn’t "fit" the characters with herself or others she knew, she came close to doing just that with Ruth:

Ruth is sensitive, deep, caring, and spontaneous. She seems to be a dreamer: she likes to read about lovers...about how beautiful the mountains are, and the stars...about taking care of injured animals and setting them free again.
Ruth's interest in Professor Brooke, with whom she initiated a meeting, was intellectual, according to Jane, despite the sexual connotations associated with women initiating an encounter with a total stranger:

I mean she felt he was highly intelligent. I think she respected his intelligence, respected his opinion, almost a mentor-type of relationship, it seems.

The description of the relationship fits well my interpretation of Jane's motivations towards men. Not once in her hours of discussion with me, despite the fact she was openly revealing about many aspects of her life, did she mention her relationships with men as sexual. She focused on the intellectual and friendship qualities as the ones that were important to her. Teaching her college boyfriend how to be friends with a woman (herself) may have had some parallels with how she described Brooke and Ruth's encounter. I asked her what she thought Brooke and Ruth got out of their brief encounter.

She opened up her soul to him basically. She shared things that were really important to her; she lowered her barriers completely; she took off her wig and admitted she had been in chemotherapy, and how Dillon, the poet, made her think she could make it through it [cancer]. She shared a part of herself in the relationship with Brooke, and it seemed he didn't do that. It was a one-way relationship. She put into it more than he did. He went along with the flow; he let his barriers down for the first time, but he didn't put much more into it than that.

Ruth was in control of the relationship. She initiated the encounter and controlled the time they were
together with her openness and honesty, while the fascinated Brooke simply, as Jane put it, "goes with the flow." This behavior was out of character for Brooke, whom Jane described as "agressive, a realist," and judgemental of those unlike himself. Jane discussed what Brooke might have learned from Ruth:

It affected him, and he allowed it to affect him. Maybe he would be more tolerant and understanding of Riley and the way Riley was. Maybe Brooke would see things a little differently. He let himself believe in the ideals she did at that moment in time. He starts to enjoy the poem she is reading and even allowed himself to believe what it was saying. He allows himself to relax from being a realist for one night. I think there’s a good possibility that a better relationship between him and [his wife] could have come about...at least something went on that’s significant in his life that has changed.

Like Emily and Jane, Ruth had ideals about life, and her need for sensitivity from a man was what she wanted from the night she spent with Brooke, according to Jane:

She felt good about sharing a piece of herself, that she felt it was fulfilling to share herself with someone she respected so much. It didn’t seem she was looking for a relationship at all beyond that one night; she was looking for a way to share.

Brooke’s intentions may not have been so honorable, Jane suggested: Brooke "wasn’t looking for an affair necessarily," but he went along with how Ruth envisioned their encounter.

Jane may have projected her needs onto Ruth, and she envisioned Ruth as being more independent and significantly less needy than did the other readers. My
literature students, in general, have depicted Ruth as a mature and well-balanced character, but they saw her as having more needs than simply wanting someone with whom she could share herself for an evening.

Jane not find it easy to relate to Ruth, for reasons that are unclear to me, but it was evident that she managed to project some of herself as an emerging woman onto the character. I thought it odd that Jane found it easier to relate to Emily, who has often been termed by critics as a "murderous necrophiliac" (see Chapter Two), than to the sensitive and serious Ruth, a nurse with a superficial interest in literature. Perhaps Jane felt she had more in common with Emily, who had more to overcome, including a history of failed relationships.

Jane’s Response to "Mistletoe"

Although the actions of the narrator in "Mistletoe" fit four of Jane’s five sub-themes, she, like the narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper," was not as powerful a character as the other female protagonists in the stories. According to Jane, the narrator

is trapped, yet pines for freedom. She is very deep, sensitive, thoughtful. She is trapped in a relationship with a man she does not like or respect. She feels she is ‘under water,’ drowning and suffocating, not really enjoying life, just going through the motions.
Jane identified a gender conflict, and she was very clear about how the narrator construed her plight:

She feels she's drowning—she wants to be one way but she's another. She wants to be free and live the open life but finds herself in the role of wife and mother. She saw herself in two different lives; her life as a housewife and married to Mitch was a drudgery, was something to be endured. Her relationship with Dean, however, brought her out of that, made her free; it was an escape from the drudgery. She tried to escape reality by playing outside of what was. It was a time she was free, expressive.

The narrator's search for personal fulfillment, although it was less creative than that of the other characters, was frustrated by the death of her lover, Dean.

Fulfillment, for her, was to "actively live and enjoy the world," and it was dependent on a man, in contrast to the manner in which she described the other female protagonists. Her fulfillment was frustrated by what she created for herself, a fantasy life, an "escape route, rather than making the best out of what she had." The mistletoe, wrote Jane,

symbolizes freedom from reality, life, escape from the present: the scent triggers memories and fantasies. It was the catalyst for memories, memories of what it was like with Dean, another life, beyond housework and staying in the little house and caring for the children. It was a representative of what was versus what could be in the future.

The relationship was, however, as it was for Emily, a dependent one, but one from which the narrator could not break free. The narrator admired Dean and modelled his
sensitivity but became dependent on him for her own emotional needs. In doing so, she lost some of her own emotional independence:

I think Dean was the catalyst for teaching her how to enjoy life. He enjoyed life, obviously; he enjoyed fishing and the outdoors, and he introduced her to that. She relied on him tremendously for what she wished for, the type of person she wanted to be. She relied on Dean for that, and by relying on him, she destroyed, it seems, some of the stuff within her to create that out of the situation she was in.

The narrator, however, was not without power; and, except for her relationship with Dean, a man from whom she does not desire to be independent, but must be, she was in control of her relationship with her "simple, shallow, self-contained, and 'machine like' husband," Mitch, even though she felt she could not leave that relationship. Mitch did "suspect an affair went on behind his back, and asks dangerous questions" during the trip to get the mistletoe, especially since it grew in abundance in their own back yard. He went along, however, "just to avoid a conflict." Jane suggested that the narrator took care of Mitch's sexual needs but noted that she had their youngest child, Marta, against his will, and had aborted two pregnancies since that time, denying Mitch the possibility of having the boy he so wanted.

The narrator was, perhaps, a failed "emerging woman" in Jane's eyes. She was clear about what she wanted in
life, and how she might get it, yet she wasn’t strong enough to do it:

She is so dependent on Dean for bringing happiness into her life, but with him being gone, she senses the loss, but she doesn’t know how to create that in herself. She could succeed in gaining something like being more free, but it would require remaining dependent on the memory of Dean and what they had together. Aside from that, I don’t see her being successful at all.

Despite the life the narrator has accepted, she will not give up, if for no other reason than to believe life could be better. Jane noted the narrator’s strength in terms of endurance: "she’s trapped underwater, drowning yet not dying...." She was trapped, she realized it, couldn’t escape, yet, in Jane’s words, she "strives and yearns."
The narrator’s strength in seeking fulfillment may be in her active fantasy life, which Jane mentioned several times. She described the narrator as "playing out a fairy tale. Sensitive people need fantasies and escape if reality does not live up to needs and expectations."

Evidently, for Jane, attaining freedom by creating a fantasy life is an acceptable substitute for achieving a more tangible fulfillment. The narrator was not as strong as the other female characters, but Jane believed that she will dream her way to freedom if that is the only way to achieve or maintain her happiness. While many of my literature students have interpreted the narrator as weak and dependent, Jane refused to give up on the character.
Defeated though she may be, at least in her day to day reality, she found inner strength, in this case represented by an active fantasy life and denial of reality, to at least be able to continue to envision a sense of fulfillment--to at least know what it was, even if it was out of reach. There may be an autobiographical note here: Jane knows what it is like to be alone, without the close male companionship she needs (especially when it was from her father) and may have projected her own strengths onto the narrator when she discussed sensitive people needing fantasies to escape reality. Jane exhibited an enormous faith in the character: the ability to survive, to envision a better life, but one, in this case, however, that was not independent of men.

Jane has had some difficulty being independent of men, as she stated several times, although she has, at times, been forced to be so. The narrator may not represent to Jane all that she would like to see in herself, but it was clear she admired the character's strength and ability to survive, two qualities Jane clearly feels she, herself possesses.

Jane's Response to "Martha's River"

Martha may champion the ruthless extremes of the "emerging woman" themes Jane so skillfully assigned her
female characters. Martha was in complete control of her life, was acutely aware of what she needed to be fulfilled, and took decisive action to protect her role as a mother and caregiver. Martha was as extreme a character as Emily, and Jane excused Martha’s violent measures as she did Emily’s, even though she did not agree with the actions.

Jane described Martha:

Selfish. She wants her world to remain the same. She’s wrapped up in the world of the farm. I mean, she and the child did things together, and she didn’t want him to go off to school. It seems she wanted to keep him there on the farm with her for the rest of their lives. It doesn’t mention her thinking about sending him out into the world. She wants Jason to be solely dependent on her—doesn’t want him to go to school and be brainwashed, and she isn’t concerned with his future or his ability to survive in the world. She is only concerned with her present and immediate future.

On the three separate occasions I asked Jane to describe Martha, only once did she describe her in terms other than through Martha’s relationship with her son, Jason, or in relationship to her husband, Alan. Martha was, however, as were all Jane’s other female characters, sensitive and feeling. Jane described how she interacted with her environment:

Her paradise...with the river, away from the world, secluded in the valley. Martha enjoys the seclusion from the world, runs naked in the woods. The river was her friend.
Every other description of Martha focused on her interactions with her family. Jane described the relationship between Martha and Alan:

Alan is an intrusion to be tolerated. He is gone for long periods of time and tries to control Martha when he is present. She runs free when he is absent. Martha and Jason are quite content to be left alone. Alan is an intruder or stranger in their little world (Jason hides behind Martha’s leg when Alan returns from a trip). Alan wants Martha to be dependent on him and make his desires hers. Martha just desires Jason, the baby, and the farm. So he wants to send Jason off to school and not allow Martha to have another baby.

Martha has learned to tolerate Alan in order to remain on the farm. It was her means of controlling her life and a man she did not love, according to Jane:

She gives in to Alan sexually in order to get what she wants; I mean, she decided she wanted another child. Even if she didn’t want it right at that point in time, it gets the ends of her having another child.

Jane did not describe Martha as having a need for sensitivity from men, the only characteristic of the emerging woman Martha lacked, although she was obviously dependent on her son, Jason. "Neither understands each other," Jane stated, and "there is no room for compromise." In her attempt to maintain control over her life and preserve "her little valley, her utopia," as well as the baby Alan was determined to abort, Martha decided Alan must be "done away with." Jane continued:

I’m getting to know the characters; both of them are pretty selfish in their own desires. Martha didn’t
really care that he didn’t want another child, and Alan didn’t care that she wanted another child. They were very selfish; this is a very superficial relationship, and they use each other for what they want. In the end, when he was no longer useful to her, he has to be discarded. Just as casually as that; he threatened what she wanted and had to be gotten rid of. It’s a little too cold-blooded to me...

Despite the fact that Jane felt that cold-blooded murder was too extreme for her own tastes, she clearly accepted Martha’s actions as necessary and justified, a position few of my literature students took.

Basically it was murder; she knew exactly what she was doing. She could have considered divorce, but he owned the farm, she didn’t want to leave it. How was she going to keep the farm? Paradise was threatened; it was part of her utopia. Martha chose the easiest way to solve her problem, the one that gave her everything she wanted. Something very wonderful was threatened, so, therefore, the ends justified the means; they got rid of him, period. I understand why she did it; it doesn’t mean I like it. It seemed the best method, and in her situation, I wouldn’t have done the same thing, but I understand why she did it. In this situation, that’s all there was to do.

The theme of fantasy worlds was evident here again. Martha’s drive for fulfillment was simply to "revolt against change," according to Jane, "to protect her paradise" and to live her ideals:

Martha desires the simple/happy life she has created for herself. Going to the river, collecting berries, exploring with Jason, and staying naked if she chooses in the seclusion of her valley.

Martha, in her own twisted way, represented a fulfilled woman in Jane’s eyes: she took care of her needs swiftly and decisively to meet her own needs and her
son’s needs (at least how she perceives them). Even more importantly, she acted to protect the baby Alan had decided to abort. Martha, except for her wanting to become pregnant, was not dependent on men, a characteristic Jane admitted she may not yet possess. Jane respected Martha for having the strength to meet her needs and live her ideals. Regardless of Martha’s ruthless ways, she was strong and willful, she managed to control her life, to be happy, to have admirable ideals, and to control the relationships in her life—all qualities Jane aspires to in her own life or characteristics she feels she already possesses.

Jane’s Response to "The Yellow Wallpaper"

The narrator in the "The Yellow Wallpaper" is the character about whom Jane was least sure and whose characteristics she described with less certainty than all the others. While she admitted liking the story, partly because it was "easy to follow," she was less sympathetic with the narrator than she was with the other female characters because the narrator lacked the strength to forcefully make her needs known and take control of her life. Beyond this reservation, Jane seemed to respect the narrator and defined her in terms similar to the female characters in the other stories.
Essentially, Jane felt the narrator was a creative and thoughtful character; she was aware of her personal needs and what activities in life would bring her fulfillment:

She is an imaginative person, full of fancy, but she's living in a world that doesn't have any stimulation. I mean, she doesn't do anything: she doesn't have any responsibilities. Other than the fact that she wants some excitement and change, she wants something to concentrate on, but she has to be sly about the things she wants to do, like write.

The narrator was more aware of her medical needs, according to Jane, than was her doctor husband, John.

I think she needs to talk about her feelings about what she sees [in the wallpaper], what she thinks, and he doesn't allow that at all. I mean, she wants people to come over, she wants some excitement and change, and he doesn't see that as helpful. She needs something that will distract her, something she can concentrate on. The world she's living in doesn't have any stimulation, she doesn't do anything, she doesn't have any responsibilities, and she's told to sleep all the time.

Although Jane felt John had his wife's best interests in mind, she thought he was not qualified to treat his wife's disorder.

He seems very much to want her to get well, and it seems he cares for her, but he kinda treats her like a father treats a child. He does not listen to her needs and just thinks it's a bunch of fantasy that she should not give in to. He feels she should be able to within herself overcome the problem without any help, and it's obvious she couldn't. He thinks she should be able to concentrate and completely block out the problem. She's not able to do that; she doesn't want to. He provides a stimulus-free environment, and he doesn't listen to her opinions or wishes.
Jane felt the narrator was unwilling to give up on defining and thinking about her needs, a characteristic she admired. The narrator was, however, weak and unable to express those needs to her husband or to take control of her situation. However much Jane was critical of this weakness, she was supportive of the narrator's ability to endure, and she tempered her comments by reflecting upon the narrator's imprisonment by her husband and the fact she was forced to do nothing with her time.

John is fueling his wife's problems by not giving her time; I mean, she was forced to take care of her time. I think she could have a more firm base on reality; instead, they let her sleep and do whatever she wants without having any responsibility. If she had responsibility, her imagination would be kind of a minor escape thing like everybody else uses them. But, instead of having something to hold on to, something real, she is forced to roam around her room with little to concentrate on. She takes her thoughts and fantasies too seriously. I think this is her problem. He husband is very much just treating the symptoms of what you see on the outside versus the more important mental things that are going on.

I feel Jane made an attempt here to describe the character with the "emerging woman" characteristics she used for the other female characters. She obviously felt the narrator had "a mental problem," but she was very much aware that the narrator was a thoughtful and imaginative character, aware of her needs and how they can be fulfilled. She was, however, unlike the other female characters in the stories, ultimately not independent of
men, nor was she in control of her relationships with them. I wondered how much it bothered Jane not being able to project onto the character as many of the "emerging woman" characteristics as she did on the other female characters.

She's very passive. She allows him to treat her even though she doesn't think he knows what her problem is. It seems she's very much a child-type. She thinks he's wrong, subliminally, but then again she thinks he's right, so she allows him to treat her, and there's not much more she could do than say "I think this is a mental problem, and we should go to a psychiatrist."

I sensed a weariness on Jane's part when discussing the narrator's struggle with independence, her confusion about what she needed and what role John played in her life. Jane's responses here became repetitive and not as rich and descriptive as her characterizations of the other female characters. I think, perhaps, she became increasingly unhappy with the narrator, that her central weakness, her dependency on her husband (or maybe men in general), was her downfall. Jane did not express this disappointment in so many words, and her characterization of this particular character was her most abstract expression.

Her responses expressed less certainty when describing the narrator, and she used qualifiers that appeared significantly more often than in her responses to the other stories: "seem," "seems like," "could be like,"
"sort of," "might," and others appeared often in her written and oral responses. Additionally, she expressed contradictions in how she characterized the narrator. These contradictions, I expect, were due to Jane's increasing frustration and her gradual withdrawal of support for the narrator. For example, in her written response, and in the early stages of the interview, she assigned the narrator some strength:

She seems imaginative and full of fancy. She knows there is something wrong with her. She wishes she was allowed to work; she wants some excitement and change. She goes behind John's back and writes down her thoughts and feelings.

Although the narrator's condition does worsen during the course of the story, Jane expressed little faith in her ultimate strength, and appeared to distance herself at some point, terming the narrator "passive" several times and "childlike" at other times. Even though Emily, the narrator in "Mistletoe," and Martha exhibited significantly fewer admirable characteristics, Jane did not withdraw her support from them. Additionally, Jane did not respect, as she did with the narrator in "Mistletoe," the present character's transition to "fantasy" or "insanity" (she calls it both) to meet her needs.

My feeling is that Jane did not judge these other characters because they did not succumb to their
dependency on men. Jane was repeatedly critical of the narrator’s passivity and acceptance, and maybe crippling dependency on her husband in this story, even though the narrator knew what her illness was and what she needed to reach fulfillment (or at least stable mental health). Although one of Jane’s sub-themes that binds together all the female characters is a dependency on men, Jane may have felt the narrator had completely lost herself, succumbing to her husband’s treatment and condescending affection without resistance:

It was a stereotypical type of way he was treating her, and he was convincing her that she was sick; therefore, she was dependent on him. He treats her like a father treats a child. John takes care of her, listens but won’t believe her. He cuddles her and reads to her. She follows his directions.

The narrator’s need for sensitivity and approval from a man robbed her of her independence and autonomy; none of the other characters went so far, and neither did Jane.

The narrator’s fate, according to Jane, was insanity, and she blamed it mostly on the character’s passivity and inability to take control of her life. This was the only character on whom Jane passed judgement. She did not even judge John, who she felt was unwilling even simply to listen to his wife and who was “wrapped up in his own practice and not around enough to really know what’s going on, and he won’t even allow her to talk about it.”
The evidence of the "emerging woman" theme here was, I believe, as strong as in the other stories, but it manifested itself quite differently. The narrator did not possess emerging woman characteristics in a manner similar to how Jane described the other female protagonists, but she still subjected the narrator to the standards she had set for herself and the other characters. The narrator has, for the most part, failed the test, and Jane was unwilling to pass the blame to John, as do most conventional critics and many of my former literature students. Jane subjected the narrator to the same standards by which she judges herself, and she would not lower her standards. The emerging woman is responsible for herself, and to admit that her fate is under anyone else's control may be admitting that Jane herself is not the emerging woman she believes herself to be. Despite the fact that she tried to assign strengthening characteristics to the narrator, the evidence was too strong in Jane's mind. The narrator failed because of her dependence on her husband.
Jane's Response to "A Good Man is Hard to Find"

The grandmother in this story fit the emerging woman themes in a significantly different manner than most of the women in the other stories. The grandmother's relationship was not with a lover or mate, but with her son, in one case, and in another case with a stranger who murdered her. Although I chose this story to be purposely out of character with the other stories (see Chapter Two), Jane did respond somewhat predictably. She liked Grandmother, as few who read the story tend to, and she defended her role as a "lady," her need for sensitivity from a man (her son, Bailey), and her need to be in control of her life in an attempt to preserve her sense of security or fulfillment.

Jane reflected upon what she considered to be authorial intent:

They portrayed Grandmother as being very annoying, and I don't like reading about annoying people. She may have been annoying on the surface, but it seemed there was something more, but they really didn't put it in depth. When I looked at Grandmother in depth, I liked her much better; I understood her more.

While Jane did not describe Grandmother as sensitive or creative in so many words, the way she did all the other female characters, she did attribute admirable human qualities to her:
She tried to share with the rest of the family. She tried to share her feelings and her knowledge about what she saw along the route and everything, and they didn't accept it. I mean, they weren't the slightest bit interested and stuff, and she was talking a lot more to herself than to them, but she needed to share herself.

The other readers were not so kind to the grandmother, nor were my former students. They termed most of Grandmother's stream of roadside comments as bigotry against Blacks, the poor, and nearly everyone who did not share her narrow world view. But Grandmother, according to Jane, was a more self-directed character than that: she knew her identity, what brought her fulfillment, and she sought to preserve it.

Well, she wanted to be a lady. She felt it was honorable to be looked upon as a lady, so she dressed the part; she dressed in lace and sachet and everything. She felt it was her responsibility to be polite as well as to listen to other people, and she chose a role in society that she wanted, and she tried to fit in and everything. She saw nothing wrong with playing that part.

Jane admitted she did not like the way Grandmother manipulated the family to get what she wanted, but she excused these acts in an expression of empathy: Grandmother was "trying to get attention, trying to get respect and feel needed...I can understand her."

If the other female characters' search for fulfillment was sometimes stifled by their relationships with men, Jane felt that the Grandmother's relationship with her family stifled her:
The family treated her so poorly. You know how rude they were, and I was just annoyed by the first few paragraphs. The only way she could put forth her ideas was to manipulate them [the family] somewhat, like when she wanted to go to Tennessee instead of Florida, so she tried to manipulate them. But they would have none of it, and they just lambasted her; it was really embarrassing to read because they treated her so poorly, and no one deserves to be treated like that.

Grandmother's encounter with The Misfit transformed her into an even more admirable character when she realized that The Misfit "needed her." Her sense of fulfillment, according to Jane, took on a new dimension and quality.

It seemed very much that all of a sudden it clicked. He needed her; he was very much lost, didn't understand what she saw, and so she wanted to comfort him. In the end, it seems the way she dealt with people changed...instead of being a polite lady and everything, she turned into more of a mother-type, and she wanted to reach out and comfort. The Misfit instead of trying to manipulate and trying to make him see her way and stuff. It seems she transforms more into a mom-type.

Compared to conventional criticism (see Chapter Two), Jane assigned very strengthening characteristics to Grandmother, excused her weaknesses as other peoples' insensitivities, and portrayed Grandmother as reaching an even greater fulfillment at the conclusion of the story than she had before that. Grandmother found her true role in the world, one that was honorable and giving. The sensitivity she did not get from Bailey, which Jane
suggested she greatly needed, she does finally get from The Misfit.

Although the grandmother is, in many ways, unlike any of the other female protagonists, Jane used sympathy, empathy, and identification to portray Grandmother in a positive fashion. Jane had little of the trouble many readers experience interpreting Grandmother's encounter with The Misfit. She read the event as a revelation for the old woman, as many do, but one that further reinforced her identity as a strong and independent woman.

FURTHER DISCUSSION

Jane drew close connections between herself and most of the female characters in the stories. Her written responses and conversations always centered on the female characters; and, when I managed to divert the topic, she would either come back to it directly or frame the discussion in the context of a particular female character. This habit may have been a response strategy. In a note that accompanied her first written response, she expressed some insecurity: "It has been a long time since I interpreted or answered questions about literature." Perhaps, in order to give informed responses, she chose the easiest characters for her to discuss, women, and to a great extent, discussed those characters as herself.
She may have used this strategy all along to make it easy to discuss characters so unlike herself. If she could manage to make strong connections between a female character and herself, discussing them in depth would become an easier task, since she would, in effect, be discussing herself. Holland (1975) discussed one of his female readers, who, like Jane, had created her own style of dealing with the experience portrayed in the story in order to create a pleasurable experience for herself. The fact that she drew so many diverse characters in vastly different situations into her realm of familiarity leads me to believe that she regularly identified (or at least empathized) with characters, as she had stated in the initial interview, in order to understand and discuss them. This approach, too, might be evidence as to why she seemed less interested in the male characters and described them in far less detail.

Despite the parade of fairly despicable characters presented in the six stories, Jane passed judgement on none of the female characters, except, perhaps, the narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper." Even though she cited the men in the stories as often being controlling, self-centered, or insensitive, she never condemned them. She pointed to them as part of a female protagonist's problem, but rarely did she feel that they were the primary cause
of the crisis in the story. Jane, if she blamed anyone, blamed the women themselves for their situations, if indeed, she even deemed the situations crises. Mostly, I think, Jane viewed the crises in the stories as events testing a woman's strength, and she firmly placed responsibility for facing these tests on those women.

A most fascinating aspect of Jane's response to literature was her tendency to concentrate on the process of how characters worked out their lives rather than the product of that process. Her interest in process, in part, gives clarity to why she was reluctant to judge characters and released her from the task of deciding whether the actions and motivations of characters were compatible with her own beliefs. I feel her approach is indicative of an open-minded attitude towards literature, and maybe to life in general. In the one case she did judge a female character, the narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper," she was mindful of how the narrator came to terms with her crisis. Jane seemed unconcerned with the outcome itself and only interested how the narrator was or was not taking control of her own life. Independence and autonomy are central to the emerging woman theme, and Jane validated any efforts of female literary characters to partake in a process that led to this end, regardless of the nature of that final outcome.
Working with Jane was fascinating. She is so clearly an example of what she projected onto female characters. For me, her interpretations were clearer because of this fact, and I would cautiously offer the notion that how she might interpret female characters in other literary works would be, at least in part, predictable. It is clear that, for Jane, gender is a critical factor in how she responds to literary characters. Empathizing or identifying with a literary character is common to readers, but the consistency with which Jane applied similar characteristics to all the female characters is what makes the emerging woman a theme upon which predictions about Jane’s responses may be made. In a sense, she built, using an approach, the same character in each story, a character that in so many ways resembled her own real and imagined person.
CHAPTER FIVE

ANN

During our initial interview, Jane and I had the following conversation.

Eric: What is important to you in life?

Ann: I guess being happy. Being successful, like liking my job. That's why I switched my major because I knew I wasn't going to be happy with what I was doing. So, and money's a part of it, I want to be stable, but it's not like I'm going to do something I don't like, like be an engineer.

Eric: What else figures into your happiness?

Ann: I like having lots of friends; I like knowing people; it makes me feel good.

Eric: You talked about becoming an attorney; I sense this is very important to you. Why do you want a law career?

Ann: I think it's neat. I think it's an important job, and it's something I like and I'm good at. Probably since I started taking Constitutional Law, it interested me more. I enjoy it, and I'd like to help people.

Eric: Tell me more. How do you think you would be helping people?

Ann: A lot of things I've seen I don't agree with.
Eric: Like?

Ann: Like I guess this abortion thing; I don't like it, and I want to fight for it, and that's one way I could help. People who have been hurt by other things—I'd like to help them.

Eric: You said you'd be good at it, why?

Ann: People have told me that I'd be good at it. Just because I can talk to people once I get to know them...I loosen up. I worked as a waitress this past summer, and so many customers, like when they got talking to me, said: "Oh! You'd be a great lawyer" and all this stuff. I just talk to people and listen, too. That's important.

Eric: Why do you want to affect other people's lives?

Ann: I don't know; I always feel like I should do something with my life instead of just being here.

Eric: Well, isn't having a family and a job doing something?

Ann: That's important, but I want more. A lot of my friends are just like that..."Oh, I just want to be a housewife." That's fine for them, and it's an important job, but I've just always needed more, something interesting to keep me from getting bored, I guess.

Eric: Why?

Ann: I guess I just can't sit by and just be happy. I always feel we need to fight for something. It's not like I'm going to go out there, and I'm not as vocal as some people, but I just don't like to sit by and let other people take advantage of things and not think about the consequences.

Earlier, in her written autobiography, she had expressed a similar sentiment:
As far as my views on the world go, I’m not a person to go out there and try to change the world. I have my opinions, and I stick by them. I’m not unwilling to listen to someone else’s point of view, just unwilling to change mine. I guess I never really thought about it much, but if I had to say, I consider myself a liberal. As you saw from my paper, I feel very strongly about abortion rights. I believe in helping the lower class through welfare programs, protecting the environment, and putting more money towards education. I most certainly believe in equal rights for all minority groups like Blacks and women. I don’t know if I’m prejudiced. I guess I am because I wouldn’t go out with a Black man. If I did, my family would disown me, and they are too important to me. I know for a fact they would disown me; they would not have anything to do with me, and I wouldn’t be like that. They grew up in West Philadelphia, so their whole idea of going out with a Black man is to rebel against your parents because that’s what their friends were like, and that was the only reason to do it. That doesn’t stop me from being friends with interracial couples. I am worried about our natural resources and feel that something should be done to help preserve them. I am very against the drinking laws. I feel if the state considers me an adult at 18, then so should the liquor stores. I know I drink a lot more responsibly than some legal people. I don’t mean to put an emphasis on drinking. My parents hardly ever drink, and I never drank until I graduated from high school. Drugs I do not approve of. I guess I figure that drugs are more harmful than alcohol. I don’t need either to have a good time.

Ann’s parents may have influenced her attitude towards political issues. She described them as being working class kids who grew up "in a real bad part of Philadelphia," got married young, and had a baby (Ann) when they were both 19. Although neither of her parents finished college, they worked long and hard to become successful and "comfortable" and to offer their kids what they themselves did not have as children. I sense her
parents’ struggle to become successful has influenced
Ann’s attitude towards social injustice, and perhaps her
parents’ successful rise in social class has given Ann
confidence in herself and the social system—that she is
capable, and that the social system is not unchangeable.
Her parents proved all this for her.

Ann’s relationship with her parents, who "have always
been real supportive of whatever (Ann) did," has been
strengthening, as well.

I have always been very close to my family. I
can talk to my mom about most anything and my
dad, too. I guess I had a very normal and happy
childhood.

I asked Ann to describe her relationship with her father.

He never had much of a family life when he was
younger, so I guess it’s hard for him to relate to
people, but we’re still close, and we always joke
around and fight, and we’ll do stuff, go places
together. I’m not as close to him as I am to my
mother, but I can talk to him. He always took an
interest in me, like he coached my softball team
when I was younger, and he always came to my band
concerts in high school.

Although Ann’s "not exactly sure what he did" before her
father opened a sporting goods store, she said he
"basically had a 9-5 type job working on computer systems
doing payrolls and that kind of stuff." When describing
her mother she said:

I can talk to her more, I think. We have more in
common. She’s always taken more of an interest in
whatever we [Ann and her brother] did. She put forth
an effort, like when we’re going out, she asks where
we're going, how was it, and stuff. Dad doesn't care unless she's not there.

I asked Ann if there were other important people in her life. She mentioned her brother first. He is 18 years old (two years younger than Ann) and is a first year college student this year.

My brother and I always fought as kids. I think most of the problem was that we were so different, him being an athlete and me being more scholastically-oriented. I used to be insanely jealous of him in elementary school because he was so good at sports, and that was an important thing when you are younger. Then I got over it and discovered what I was good at. I guess about the time he was in junior high school we suddenly became good friends. We never really had anything in common before then. It's funny because he was trying to compete with me for grades and achievements.

Ann's relationship with her best friend from home, a young man named Harold, has helped shape her relationships with men.

My closest friend is my friend from home, Harold. We've been friends since first grade; we lived a block apart and so...he's not like a normal guy to me, I guess. It's not like he's a guy and I'm a girl; it's like we're friends, and we go out, like go to a mall and he'll buy me lunch, or I'll buy him lunch. It's not like people here think we're dating; we're not. We're just really good friends; I can talk to him about anything.

Ann expressed a good deal of confidence when discussing her relationships, and I sensed she felt as though she was a good daughter, sister, and friend. On the participant questionnaire she described herself as "independent, flamboyant, stubborn, outgoing, intelligent,"
and a good listener." When asked how a former employer or teacher she knew well might describe her, she wrote:

An is a pleasure to work with. She is a very responsible and courteous person who takes initiative. She is an asset to have because she is also reliable, prompt, and willing to put in the extra time and effort that any employer would appreciate.

I was fascinated by how Ann so easily summed up the efforts of her parents to influence her, especially when I told her I sensed she had strong beliefs and that I was convinced she was interested in defending them.

Eric: Why do you think you feel the way you do about your beliefs?

Ann: I guess because of the way I was raised. They [her parents] just always let me form my own values, so I was never really committed anywhere. I guess through high school and beginning in college I started getting a feel for what I was, so I kinda always valued that. They had their effect on me and always said that kids are, you know, a direct result of their parents' beliefs....

Eric: Who do you think is most responsible?

Ann: I think my mom had more to do with the way we were raised than my Dad, just instilling those things. He was there, but he just kinda didn’t do much, so I guess it was her.

Values are obviously important to Ann, but organized religion has not played a big part in her life.

My family never went to church or put much emphasis on religion. My parents always felt that religion was something personal, and good people do not necessarily go to church. We’ve never really gone to church or had a formal type
of religion, and some people say: "Oh! you’re a bad person." I have my own beliefs, and I don’t think I'm a bad person for it. Some people like to go to church, and that kind of stuff is fine, I don’t have any problem with it. I just don’t want people to push their beliefs on me. I gained a negative attitude about religion because the kids in my neighborhood who attended Catholic school looked down on the public school kids. Then it was a big deal to me, but now I just blow it off. I try to avoid the subject of religion altogether.

Politics is another subject Ann often avoids, especially with her more conservative sorority friends. She said she joined a sorority as a way to meet people, have fun, and participate in philanthropic projects, but she finds her sisters tend to argue with her about her progressive views. She accepts the differences she has with them and feels "people are entitled to their own opinions." My feeling was, from what she told me of her relationships with her sorority sisters, that she tended to be more serious about her life and education than they were.

Academics has played an important part in Ann’s life, and she expressed confidence in her academic skills:

Throughout high school, I always received top grades and was on the honor roll. In fact, I was salutatorian of my graduating class.

She spoke calmly about her plans for the future:

The main reason I’m at school is to get my degree. I began as a math major, but I never enjoyed any of the classes. Last Spring I decided math wasn’t for me, so I decided to switch majors in order to pursue a career in law, so I had to become a political science major. After I graduate
from law school, I’m not quite sure what I want to do. I could be a lawyer, but I also want to be a spy. That sounds silly, but it’s what I really want to do. I’d work for the CIA or FBI. I’m very determined if I want something...I’ll do it, and I’m going to do it right.

Ann expressed a sense of assurance, a sometimes naive assurance, that bespoke her upbringing. Ann has grown up in an atmosphere that has supported her dreams and aspirations, and reinforced her achievements. This atmosphere has fostered a sense of confidence and independence in Ann concerning her future, as though she knows it will be a challenge, but one she can handle.

ANN’S RESPONSE THEMES

While a number of themes emerged from Ann’s interpretations of the stories, her responses to the male and female characters was the most defined and pervasive. Ann did not identify with the characters the way Jane did, and her analyses were often intellectual, rather than emotional.

Ann found it very easy to discuss the women in the stories, perhaps because of the intellectual distance she maintained, and it was sometimes difficult for me to move the conversation to deeper levels of character analysis. She had much less to say about the men, and those responses were, in all but two instances, negative. Since the male characters in the stories are not, generally
speaking, an admirable lot in most of my former literature students' opinions, I did not find her responses unusual. The fact that she characterized each male character in a similar way and sometimes used similar adjectives led me to believe that she may have stereotyped them.

The predominant theme in Ann's responses to the male and female characters was, in short, stereotyping. While the use of stereotypes often tends to be the result of prejudiced attitudes, her use of stereotyping, especially with the female characters, was not judgemental or condescending. On the contrary, her analysis of the female characters in the stories was a portrait of women in three stereotypical female roles. These portrayals were not intrinsically negative or judgemental in tone, but they did tend to express how such roles prevented women from active participation or equality with men in family and society, and the fact that they frustrated women's attempts at self-realization.

These female stereotypes did not seem to be the product of oversimplification; rather, they were the result of some intelligent deductive thought. Ann's stereotypes of men as unemotional and inexpressive were less detailed, and I found it difficult, from her descriptions, to distinguish among the characters. She
portrayed all but two of them using these same stereotypes and, in some cases, using the exact same words.

I worried, at first, that Ann's often scant written responses and rather short discussions would yield little of interest to the study, but the opposite proved true. Ann expressed herself with fewer words than the other readers in the study, was more direct in her characterizations, and was less willing to "chat" about the characters if she had nothing left to say about them. Nevertheless, her characterizations were, I feel, revealing.

**Ann's portrait of women in stereotypical female roles**

In our final discussion of the stories, Ann suggested that most of the stories "tell a lot about society's expectations on relationships" and that there was a "dominant person" in each story who "shapes the other one." She did not refer directly to men as the dominant characters in the stories, but her consistent characterization of the men as "overbearing, unemotional, and insensitive" led me to believe that she felt men were at least partially responsible for the women in the stories occupying the roles they did.

When I asked Ann what connections she made among the stories, she replied: "Well, it's all about relationships
and how society looks on them, and about people's interactions with each other." Despite the fact that her response stated the obvious, it succinctly defined how Ann perceived the stories from the very beginning and how she used it as her primary analysis strategy for each story.

Ann grouped the stories according to characteristics that normally lead to assigning stereotyped roles to women.

1) Emily ("A Rose for Emily") and Grandmother ("A Good Man is Hard to Find") represented traditional and outdated Southern female roles, according to Ann, "old values, old traditions."

She added: "They have trouble connecting with society, modern society, in that respect."

2) Martha ("Martha's River") and the narrator in "Mistletoe" she characterized as mothers: they "sacrifice for their children, they put their children first."

3) Professor Brooke's wife ("An Episode in the Life of Professor Brooke") and the narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper" she characterized as weak and oppressed: "they were being 'held back' to be like the husbands wanted them to be," Ann said.
Referring to all the female characters, Ann stated, "Society was pulling them away from what they wanted to be."

Ann's characterization of men using such terms as "unemotional, overprotective, insensitive, and uncaring" fits her analysis strategy of using gender stereotyping. I sensed her responses to the characters were an expression of how she saw the "reality of the story" and maybe the reality of men and women's lives in general. On the other hand, there was little in her responses to suggest a stereotypical feminist bias: no rhetoric, no excessive criticism of men, no drawn out characterizations of women's misery, just a direct intellectual statement of interpretation. And, as was characteristic of her analysis style, she stated her responses once, usually, and rarely came back to emphasize her interpretation of a character or situation.

I thought of Jane's "emerging woman" theme and wondered how Ann fit it. Ann does possess the will, strength of character, and skills to be successful in a world where being a woman is often considered a handicap, and she is keenly aware of how hard it is for a woman to be successful in endeavors dominated by men. Ann and Jane are the same age, but Ann was more aware than Jane of the political and cultural issues their mother's generation
confronted. The "emerging woman" is, perhaps, less aware of the course of women's history than are women like Ann. The emerging woman may enjoy the benefits of the past two decades of women's struggles but may not necessarily be aware of what that struggle entailed.

ANN'S RESPONSES TO THE STORIES

Ann's Responses to "A Rose for Emily"

Ann paired Emily with the grandmother in "A Good Man is Hard to Find" as representing stereotypical Southern women who possessed "outdated values and traditions," a fact she thought was the reason Emily could not relate to the society in which she lived. Emily's father was depicted as controlling, overbearing, and unemotional, in short, characteristic of a stereotype Ann used to describe most all the male characters in the stories.

Ann described Emily as "a Southern aristocrat, a recluse, and a spinster." I asked her what motivated Emily, following her father's death.

Ann: I think she exists because she has to, she has to go on, she just feels it's kind of like her duty to take care of the house and...

Eric: Why?

Ann: Because that's how it's done; she obeys the old aristocratic ideal that her father instilled in her. That's how it's done; that's how she lives her life now. She can't fit in with modern society. Her ideals
aren't the same as the society she lives in now.

Ann described Emily's father as "a brick wall, a stone wall, overprotective; he had a 'high and mighty' attitude" and "took care of everything: he took care of her, the house, everything, and I don't think she knew how to get along on her own." He dictated a role for Emily, and it was now impossible for her to change: "He just believed in what he believed in, and nobody could get to Emily." The result, according to Ann, was a woman imprisoned by her role in society:

Emily was the daughter of a Southern aristocrat, and she acted as such. She blindly obeyed her father and all her family's "rules." After her father's death, her existence was mainly to care for the house since she was no longer a part of society.

Emily's upbringing ostracized her from society; her role as a young Southern aristocrat prevented her from leading the life of her contemporaries or any sort of normal existence, according to Ann.

She didn't know how to handle the tax people. He hadn't trained her for that, and I guess he kinda didn't think ahead because he didn't think about him dying and leaving her. He should have found somebody for her to marry if he wasn't going to train her to be independent.

Clearly, Ann was not critical of the role Emily had been given and was fairly unemotional about discussing the life Emily had been forced to lead because of her father's ignorance or neglect. Even though Ann felt he had a major
part in fostering Emily's inability to lead a "normal" life, she didn't condemn him. She ended her discussion of him in this way: "Women, according to him, weren't supposed to be able to take care of themselves, or a house, or their finances."

I asked Ann what Emily was trying to accomplish in the story, despite the fact that she had been crippled by her role in society.

Ann: She doesn't try to accomplish anything in the story; she just kind of exists.

Eric: Why do you characterize Emily as being so powerless?

Ann: I think that's just the way she was raised, always dependent on her father. When he was gone, she was dependent on Homer. That's the way she'd been all her life, and at that point, she couldn't change.

Ann, along with many critics and many of my former literature students (see Chapter Two), believed that Emily's role in society was not only one from which she could not escape, it was one that was imposed on her by a man. She was bound by her role in society and prevented from seeking an identity of her own.

Ann's Responses to "An Episode in the Life of Professor Brooke"

Although Professor Brooke's wife is not the central female character in the story, she was the character Ann
chose to portray as fitting one of her stereotypical female roles: a weak and oppressed woman who was being held back by her husband. I asked Ann whether Brooke was being fair to his wife by keeping his affair with Ruth a secret. She responded:

I think he's being fair not telling her. I think she'll get over the incident as long as he doesn't tell her. For their type of relationship, I think it would destroy her.

The relationship to which she referred, she described in the following manner:

Brooke and his wife have a "safe love." They are both comfortable and secure with each other. They are safe with each other, they had their life and everything was fine, and they got along really well. But they were both safe, and they had each other, and they were really good friends. I think it would destroy her if he told her, if she knew for a fact. I think she'll almost forget it if he doesn't tell her because she'll come up with alternative explanations for it herself, just because she loves him so much.

It appeared that Ann felt that Brooke's wife was so invested in the "safe and happy love" they enjoyed as to refuse to admit to herself what the truth might be. Her dependency on the relationship was so great that she sought an explanation that suited her needs, or she would simply deny that her husband was capable of having an affair. Ann discussed Brooke's wife again during our final interview:

His wife knew something had happened when he went to the convention or whatever it was, but she liked her life the way it was, and she
thought: "Oh no! That wouldn’t happen to me."
I think also one of the reasons she didn’t leave
him was because she didn’t feel it was the right
thing to do. You married one man, you stayed with
him, and she didn’t want to leave him.

Brooke’s wife’s had beliefs about marriage that held
her back from electing a course of action she might have
otherwise chosen. Her belief system, according to Ann
was, "You married one man and you stayed with him." Her
role in a marriage prevented her from responding to the
event as an independent and autonomous individual.

My literature students did not respond in as much
detail as Ann did to the character of Brooke’s wife.
Responses were split: some students felt she made the
right decision staying with him; others thought she was
crazy for not leaving him. Comments on her strength
varied, too. Some students considered her commitment to
the marriage admirable, while others found her weak and
easily manipulated in her role as a dutiful wife.

Ann’s unflattering characterizations of men were in
great abundance in this story. While most of my
literature students characterized Professor Brooke and
Professor Riley as being opposites and generally sided
with one or the other, Ann had little positive to say
about either character.

Brooke has always suppressed his emotions. He’s
been so methodical and mechanical all his life,
he didn’t realize what he was missing. I got
the idea from the story that he was proper; he
didn’t have any feelings, almost. His life is boring.

Brooke’s decision to keep the events of the weekend a secret from his wife confused Ann, and she did not understand his rationalization: that if he told his wife, it would hurt her.

It was really weird that he does something bad and thinks it’s good. I think he did hurt his wife [she smelled perfume on his shirt], and now he’s sitting in the front of the church, all proud of himself. Now he thinks he’s a wonderful person, an example to the rest of the people in the congregation.

She was not much kinder to Professor Riley and assumed, as did Brooke, that Riley was having affairs with his female students:

Riley is promiscuous, immoral, and obnoxious. His female students would come in and out of his office. It gave me the impression he was sleeping with them. And when he was in the bar with Brooke, he would just come out and say whatever he thought, just really abrupt things out of the blue, and stuff you normally wouldn’t ask anyone.

Ann’s responses to Brooke and Riley differed significantly from my literature students. Many thought Brooke was stuffy and proper, a little too "straight" for his own good, but not really a bad person. Most thought Riley was an emotional and sensitive free thinker. A few students thought he was having affairs with his students and said it was immoral, but most felt he was not having affairs and that the entire idea was a product of Brooke’s jealousy or imagination. Ann had little trouble
condemning Riley for his "affairs," and because of this infidelity, had little positive to say about him at all.

Ann paired Brooke's wife with the narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper," and characterized them as women who were held back by their relationships with men. Both characters were married and feared taking action that would jeopardize their security, which was, in both cases, the marriages with which they had grown comfortable and secure. Brooke's wife, in Ann's estimation, was a stereotype; she has sacrificed not only her freedom to respond to her husband's suspected affair but has, as well, refused to think that he was even capable of having an affair. So threatened was she that she came up with what Ann termed, "alternate explanations" to resolve the threat to her security.

Ann's Response to "Mistletoe"

Ann's characterization of male and female roles in "Mistletoe" was particularly strong. She described the narrator in the story as a mother "who sacrifices for her children and puts her children first." Our discussion began with Ann's description of the narrator, whom she tended to like, but for whom she seemed to express little sympathy:

She is just a housewife. She takes care of her two children, and she loves them. I think she really
does. It doesn’t mention much about what she does
day-to-day. I think she just kinda cooked, cleaned,
and took care of the children.

The story takes place over the course of less than an
hour, and author Bradley tells us little of what the
characters actually do with their lives and little about
their relationships. What she has done is simply offer
the reader a stream of consciousness style recounting of a
very short event in the characters’ lives. This story was
especially valuable for that reason; even though her
characterizations are strong, she leaves it to the reader
to build the characters’ past and present relationships.

Ann noted this early in our discussion:

She [the author] doesn’t let you know if [the
narrator] is happy with her life because the
narrator keeps thinking about the past, so you don’t
know if she is happy. Like the author never really
told you if the narrator loved her husband. I think
she feels safe with her husband, and there is
security with him. But I don’t think she is happy.

The conflict in the story concerns the narrator’s
need to live in what Ann termed a "fantasy world" with her
now deceased lover and her day-to-day reality of living
with a man she does not love but cannot leave.

She is kinda hurting herself in a way because she
she is not living her life to the fullest. She
keeps wanting to go back to this other time. She
is not enjoying her life as it is because she keeps
trying to make her present like her past.

I asked Ann why the narrator was doing that.

Cause she thinks that is where she was happy and
that’s how she wants her life to be. She envisions
that as perfection, and I think she saw her relationship with Dean as being perfect.

The narrator, according to Ann, "needs to bring her two worlds together," or, "since she wasn't happy, she should have gotten out of the marriage, but maybe she couldn't." Although the narrator was living in a fantasy world with a man who died five months before the events in the story occur, according to Ann, it was not Dean, "the perfect man" in the narrator's eyes, whom she loved, but the fantasy of a loving and expressive relationship.

It's not Dean; it's just who she's built him up to be. The conflict is in her. She can't accept life for what it is anymore. If it hadn't been Dean, it would have been someone else. It could have been the paperboy, and she would have built him up to be this perfect man. Once she realizes that Prince Charming is not going to come along, then she can start working on her own life. She keeps wanting more, she wants something else, she is never satisfied with what she has.

I asked Ann why, then, did the narrator stay with a man with whom she was not happy. Why didn't she leave and search for the perfect paperboy?

Maybe in the situation she was in, you couldn't be a single mother and raise the children. It seems like the story took place in a Southern town. The narrator did not have the strength to leave what Ann termed a "safe and secure love" to try to be happy on her own. Ann did say that "in those times" (she thought the story took place in the past), she would not have left Mitch either, but in "these times" (the present) she would have. Since the story takes place in a very rural
atmosphere, Ann tended to think of it as taking place in another time. The style of life for the narrator's family, mostly because it was rural, was one of mutual dependence, much like in the past. I felt Ann did not fully understand this lifestyle, and this lack of understanding influenced her thoughts about how the narrator would survive on her own. Nevertheless, according to Ann, the narrator was trapped in a relationship she, at least at this point, could not change, and one in which she felt incapable of escaping.

The narrator in "Mistletoe" is trapped in her role as a mother, but it was not until our final discussion of all the stories that Ann stated very clearly and directly that the narrator was making a sacrifice for her children (I had not told her that we would discuss the stories as a group). At the same time she drew in a character she felt shared the narrator's predicament: "In "Martha's River" and "Mistletoe" both women sacrifice for their children; they put their children first." Perhaps the added perspective offered by reading the following three stories gave Ann a broader perspective on the story, or perhaps she simply had not stated the obvious: Mitch was an inexpressive and mostly non-functional father. The narrator, then, was forced to provide for her children. If single parenthood seemed untenable, she would have to
sacrifice her own freedom and happiness to stay with Mitch so her children would be secure.

Ann's characterization of men was notably strong, and provided a contrast between Mitch, who Ann felt was an example of a "stereotypical man" and Dean, the narrator's conception of "the perfect man." Ann revealed her beliefs about what characteristics a stereotypical man possessed when she was discussing Mitch, and, uncharacteristically, she returned to discuss and describe Mitch on several occasions.

Mitch provides a home; he takes care of her [the narrator] and the kids. I think he loves her in his own way, but he can't express his feelings too well. Like at one point he looked at his daughter, and you could tell he really loved the girl, but he could just never really show it. He just liked to sleep and eat and watch his football games.

Just a few moments later, she resumed her description, and this time, more critically. I asked her what motivated him.

To exist...because he doesn't know anything else. He is one of those people almost like a zombie. He is not really living life; he is just going through the motions. That is just the way he is. He likes his life that way.

Although she portrayed Mitch as a fairly pathetic father and husband, she didn't seem to see him as a bad person. Rather, Ann's characterization was based on factors she considered out of his control: aspects of his upbringing.
These factors were evident when I asked her how Mitch shaped up as a father.

It seems like he thinks she should be the one raising the children. That he is just kinda there. But he does love them; he just doesn't put much into it because maybe that was how he was raised. I don't know, but that is what I would assume.

Ann tended to provide excuses for inexpressive men who did not have much interest in their children. Perhaps her own upbringing has convinced her, as her parents told her, "that kids are a direct result of their parent's beliefs," and her belief in this idea relieved her male characters of the insensitivity she found in most of them. Three times during the interview and once in her written description, she excused Mitch's profound inexpressiveness by stating that he loved his wife and kids "in his own way." Following our discussion of "Mistletoe," she said she believed that Mitch was a "stereotypical male...Yeah, I think you do picture that...the father, the man never cries or anything like that or shows affection."

Again, a woman in a stereotypical role has been forced to give up her individuality; Ann commented on it several times. In her written response she stated:
The conflict in the story arises between the two men and two worlds in the narrator's life. She desires a man/world she knows she cannot have. Oddly enough, in our discussion, Ann argued for the narrator accepting her life with Mitch, instead of urging her to leave the marriage, enjoy her fantasy life (advice Jane offered), or try to change Mitch. She did say: "I think because she loved Dean so much that she isn't putting into her relationship with Mitch." More often, she argued for the narrator making changes to fit her situation. Never once, however, did she suggest that Mitch needed to change. Somehow, she did not condemn Mitch as he was, a characteristic Ann would display again later when describing other male characters.

Ann's Response to "Martha's River"

Martha, in "Martha's River," also made a sacrifice for her children, putting her children first, but her sacrifice was significantly different from the one the narrator in "Mistletoe" made. In this case, the sacrifice was not her own; Martha sacrificed her husband, Alan, in order to protect her son, Jason, from being sent away from her and her unborn child from an abortion. Martha assumed her mother role with a fierceness unlike the narrator in "Mistletoe," the character with whom Ann coupled Martha as exhibiting a stereotypical mother role.
Martha, according to Ann, was in a stereotypical mother's role. Rather, Ann, unlike her views of the narrator in "Mistletoe," saw Martha operating from a position of strength. Ann felt Martha defined her role and defended it, even though she found it necessary to kill her husband to do so.

Ann first described Martha within the context of her relationship with her son.

Martha is loving, caring, selfish, and overprotective. I think she is a very caring person, and she loves people; she likes relating with people, and in a very deep way. I think she loved Jason more than she did Alan, honestly, because he [Jason] was there for her. She needed that, and he loved her back...they spent all their days together.

Shortly after she made this comment, Ann described Martha within the context of her relationship to her husband, Alan.

She didn't even talk to him about having another child. She just decided on her own that she was going to get pregnant, and she did because that's what she wanted. She didn't think about him; she didn't think about anybody else.

Ann saw Martha as needing to be a mother and as determined to define that role herself, despite the needs of her husband and his decisions about the needs of his family.

Jason’s kind of a barrier, I think. Alan sees Jason stealing Martha away from him. But Jason is there everyday; he cares and depends on Martha, and she needs that...she needs the companionship. It's almost like Martha and Jason are the family, and
Alan is an intruder when he comes home. I think she wanted a husband to provide for her, and I think she wanted a family, and that is why she was with him.

Alan had his own design for the family, and, according to Ann, it followed a fairly common masculine stereotype. First, Ann described Alan in the way she described most of the other male characters in the stories:

I don’t think he portrayed any emotions throughout the story. He lived; there were no ups and downs, nothing, he just didn’t show any. He was selfish; he wanted it his way, like I mean he walks in the door and tells Martha to move Jason back to his own bed. He didn’t want a child, so they weren’t going to have a child, and that was it. He just did what he wanted...he just seemed dominant.

Alan was as serious as Martha about imposing upon her and Jason his stereotype of what a marriage, rather than a family, should be, and he made plans to enforce his needs, despite the fact that they conflicted with Martha’s needs. Jason was an annoyance to Alan, according to Ann, and the thought of yet another child was out of the question, so he planned to force Martha to abort the child.

I think he just wanted to have Martha waiting at home for him whenever he decided to come trotting on home. Alan wanted a little wife to come home to. He’s not giving her a choice. I don’t think he was justified in forcing her into an abortion; I think they could have afforded another child, and there was no reason for him...he never really had to take care of Jason. He wouldn’t have had to care for the second child. I didn’t see any reason for the abortion except that it didn’t fit into his little plan: get Jason off to [private] school and have Martha there to himself once again. And if there was another child, she would keep Jason at home with her. That just couldn’t happen, they
would have no privacy, he would just have to have his own way.

Alan was as willing to enforce his version of the ideal marriage as much as Martha was willing to enforce hers. Her sacrifice to protect her children was to murder Alan, an act Ann could not justify:

There’s gotta be some other way around it, and I didn’t really think about the other options she had. I just can’t see it; she was the judge and jury, and she just decided. He no longer fit into her life, and so he was done, gone.

Ann chose stereotypical roles for Martha and Alan that fit their actions well, and our discussion of these characters was fairly short. I found her characterizations of both Martha and Alan similar to those of my former literature students, except she described the tension between them more succinctly:

She didn’t give him a choice, and now he’s not giving her a choice, so no one’s really right—what do you do in that kind of a situation?

Ann remained unfettered by this contest of wills and was less emotional and judgemental about the characters or conflicts than most of my literature students or the other readers in my study. Her attitude was summed up, perhaps, by her explanation of why Alan and Martha might have grown apart in their marriage.

I had a sociology course here last year, and they taught me that people change throughout their life, so that the person they marry at 25 isn’t the same person you’re married to at 40. I think it’s kinda hard to pick somebody you’re going to spend
the rest of your life with. You both change, and everybody needs change, and it's not always the same.

Ann did not portray Martha as being "trapped" in the same way she did the narrator in "Mistletoe" or the other female protagonists. The characters are related, however, since Martha did need to take extraordinary measures in order to free herself from Alan's will. Ann had said of all the female characters that "Society was pulling them away from what they wanted to be." In this case, Alan's traditional view of marriage and women represented a societal norm that was pulling Martha away from who she wanted to be. From Ann's perspective, Martha differed from the narrator in "Mistletoe" since the sacrifice she made was not her own.

Ann's Response to "The Yellow Wallpaper"

Ann's interpretation of "The Yellow Wallpaper" followed closely an established feminist line of criticism (see Chapter Two). She saw the narrator in the story as being "oppressed by her husband" and paired this character with Professor Brooke's wife in "An Episode in the Life of Professor Brooke." Commenting on both characters, Ann said:

You married one man and you stayed with him. She didn't want to leave him. The men were trying to hold them back.
Ann described the narrator as a woman who was aware that women needed to take on new roles in society and to assert their individuality. She felt the narrator had a conflict between what she had been taught about a woman's proper role in society, a role her husband was enforcing, and a more liberated role she wished to assume.

She's sensuous, caring, unsure of herself, and imaginative. I think she's unsure of herself in that she knew exactly what to do because it was a changing time period; women were just coming out, a few of them, and she's not sure because she's been taught these things and doesn't feel them. She doesn't think she should be the straight-forward wife and mother, the stereotypical type. She's just unsure, and then she doesn't get any encouragement. It's like they are going to shove her back, and she doesn't understand.

The narrator was trapped in her role as a mother and wife, even though she had other skills she would like to have developed, according to Ann, but her efforts to do so were stymied by her husband, John, and the family physician, Dr. Mitchell.

She wants to write, and he won't let her, and they won't let her be herself. I don't know, but I think she could have been a great writer. She has a very wild imagination.

Ann characterized John in the same stereotypical manner she did most of the men in the stories.

John's a very practical, methodical type person. I think he's unfeeling, old-fashioned, and selfish. He totally dominates their relationship, and tries to make her and their relationship what he thinks it should be. He's just there, and this is the way it is, and you just go through life, you know; this is
what’s going to happen. He’s one of those people who’s planned out his entire life.

I asked Ann, as I did the other readers, if John had his wife’s best interests in mind. She offered a more judgemental response than usual:

No, I think he had his best interests in mind. He does not want to be embarrassed by his wife who does not fit her role according to him, so he shuts her away from the world. He won’t allow visitors coming out, he locks her up in the nursery, and won’t let her get out ever; he never even let her go to town. He just keeps her up there.... He’d be embarrassed that she wasn’t proper; she can’t fit his little image.

Stereotypes, according to Ann, were the critical issue in this story, and she discussed them several times:

They think just because she doesn’t want to be their stereotypical role that something’s wrong with her, and so she’s got to get better, and she can’t be a functioning part of society until she suits what they think she should be.

Ann felt that the narrator was at least partially aware of her condition and was fighting for autonomy, and Ann, for the first time in our conversation, discussed her interpretation of the theme of the story: "women’s oppression." She felt the narrator was losing her battle against men like John, Dr. Mitchell, and her brother.

They try to make women into that stereotypical role, and they won’t let them get out and be who they can. She could probably have been a great writer, and they won’t let her because they said that’s a role for men.

The narrator was symbolic, Ann stated, for all women of the narrator’s time.
They were boxing her in, here in this little prison. She couldn’t get out and her only release was going crazy. Men have been trying to keep women in this little tiny box and their little tiny idea of what they should be...and at a time when women were just trying to break out of that and get past the superficial.

Ann’s responses to the characters and story corresponded to some of my literature students’ responses. Others, mostly men, felt John was a caring and concerned husband (perhaps, yet another stereotype), and that the narrator was really mentally ill and needed his loving care. For those literature students with whom Ann did agree, I noted one difference. Ann was clear about the oppressive nature of the narrator’s relationship with John from the very beginning and felt that this served the author’s intent. Ann noted:

I think she was trying to get women to see, to get people to realize that this is what was happening to women. I think the story symbolizes women being oppressed, being behind bars.

Ann felt that the narrator was truly trapped, perhaps more than any of the other female protagonists in the stories. She was "unsure of herself," according to Ann, and "believes she is sick," at least to the point that "she’s trying to get out, and she can’t." According to Ann, Professor Brooke’s wife did not seem to want to escape her role, but the narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper" was aware of her oppression and wanted to change her role in the marriage.
Ann's Response to "A Good Man is Hard to Find"

Ann’s responses to this story were very short and mostly superficial. I suspect her misreading of the story, especially her belief that the grandmother's encounter with The Misfit was a happenstance reunion of biological mother and son, was due to a rushed reading, rather than simply having had a unique point of view. In Chapter Two, I discussed the reasons this story did not fit well into the scheme of the other stories. Ann’s responses to the characters in "Good Man" did not follow the pattern of characterization she had established for the characters in the other stories.

At the end of our final interview, in our discussion of the stories as a group, she did couple the grandmother in "Good Man" with Emily in "A Rose for Emily."

Emily and the grandmother in this story definitely reminded me of each other: their values and the old traditions that they follow. They have trouble connecting with society, modern society in that respect.

Despite this connection, when I asked Ann to elaborate, she had little to say about Grandmother, at least in comparison to what she had said about the other female protagonists.

She is a "lady," proper...she thought she was better than everyone else. She talks a lot and imagined things. Basically, I think she was going senile. Her son was taking care of her in her old
age, and she just, I think, she made up a couple of stories she was telling. She was a little wacky, but she just wanted to do this and they did it themselves, I don't know.

Ann's discussion of the story was marked by frequent hesitations, the liberal use of the phrase, "I think," and comments about how she "didn't get much out of the story." These characteristics were further evidence to me that she was relying on the little she knew about the story to get through the interview. It was, after all, the last story, and she had already put over forty hours into the study. She did mention that "rush week" for her sorority was coming, so I assumed those events took precedence.

Ann's characterization of Bailey was similar in depth to her analysis of his mother. Ann noted:

Bailey was average, a father. I didn't get much out of him. He seemed real silent, average, nothing special about him. He was a good person, I mean, he took care of his family and mother. I'm sure that took a lot.

Ann's neutral characterization of Bailey, I feel, was a product of not really knowing him as a literary character. However, despite her superficial characterizations of both him and his mother, Ann did note some interesting qualities in their relationship. These characterizations were additional evidence that Ann was aware, at least at points in the story, that the characters and relationships were as complex and interesting as the ones she'd read in the other stories, but she did not have the close reading
she needed to discuss the story in depth. I asked Ann to comment on the relationship between Bailey and Grandmother.

She talked, and he didn’t listen. That’s how I took it. It kinda like bounced off him or in one ear and out the other. He just, you know, kind of, I think, he lived, he kept trying to live up to her expectations of him, and he was, but she never realized that.

The fact that Ann brought up the idea that Bailey felt he needed to live up to his mother’s expectations made me think Ann had touched on some of the important issues in the story. She was, however, unprepared to discuss her idea in any greater depth.

I was disappointed with Ann’s responses to "A Good Man is Hard to Find" but was pleased to hear how she had connected Grandmother to Emily. Although she was not prepared to elaborate, her responses gave me some valuable information about how she had constructed a framework to connect female characters she considered similar.

FURTHER DISCUSSION

Ann was the only reader to offer me a framework to connect a group of characters. She grouped the female characters into three groups of two, as I discussed earlier in this chapter. Even though she did not offer the same structure to group the male characters, a pattern emerged. With the exception of Dean in "Mistletoe,"
Professor Riley in "An Episode in the Life of Professor Brooke," and Bailey, in "A Good Man is Hard to Find," Ann characterized the other six principal male characters using very similar adjectives, such as "unemotional, inexpressive, insensitive, methodical, and unfeeling."

The way Ann connected the female protagonists in the stories made me think that her perceptions of women's lives were clear. Although she used what may be considered stereotypical roles to group the women, the roles are ones that are prevalent, I feel, in present day American society. The fact that she so easily grouped the characters in our last discussion, and with no advance notice from me that we were going to discuss the stories as a group, gave me reason to think that Ann is perceptive about the role of women in society and how those roles oppress women and prevent them from being, as she said, "what they wanted to be."

I found her one dimensional characterization of men interesting yet disturbing. Although the men in the stories were not, in general, a likeable group, at least some of my former literature students found things to admire in each of them. It was, of course, tempting for me to hypothesize about the nature of Ann's relationship with her father, brother, or male friends, and I found some cause for her negative characterizations in the
comments she made about her father's role in the family. Holland (1977) noted that several of his college-aged readers compared the actions of literary fathers to the experiences they had with their own fathers. Although Ann did not actually exchange the roles between life and literature, she did project her father's characteristics on to most of the male literary characters. The male characters, as Ann perceived them, may have acted in a manner she might have expected of her father. I asked Ann what part her parents might have had in the development of her progressive ideas. She replied:

I think Mom had more to do with the way we were raised than my Dad. He was there, but he just kinda didn't do much.

I found phrases similar to her last sentence above in her descriptions of male characters in the stories. And, although she described most of the male characters as a single character, using such adjectives as "inexpressive and unemotional," her wording in three cases strongly imitated the phrase she used to describe her father: "he just kinda didn't do much," in the above passage. John, in "The Yellow Wallpaper," she described as "He's just there." Alan, in "Martha's River," she described this way: "He just lived; there were no ups and downs." Mitch, in "Mistletoe," she described in the following manner: "He's was just kinda there; he didn't put much
into the kids because that how he was raised." She offered an excuse, "a person’s upbringing," for Mitch’s, inexpressiveness, the same one she may have offered for her father when she discussed how her parents had impressed upon her that children "are a direct result of their parents’ beliefs." She did the same for Professor Brooke, when she said of his "mechanical" nature: "I think that was the way he is. His whole life had been so proper."

Ann’s discussion of her father’s past and his role in her family when she was a child was revealing. I asked her to describe her relationship with her father. She replied:

He never had much of a family life when he was younger, so I guess it’s hard for him to relate to people, but we’re still close. We always joke around, and we’ll do stuff together. I’m not as close to him as I am with my mother and my brother.

Later in the conversation I asked why she felt she was closer to her mother than her father and about his passive role in the family.

I can talk to her more, I think. We have more in common, I guess. She’s always taken more of an interest in whatever we [Ann and her brother] do. She puts forth an effort, like if we’re going out, she’d say: "Where are you going?" "How was it?" and stuff. Dad doesn’t care unless she’s not there, so it’s kinda like that.

Based on her own words, Ann’s father was not as strong an influence on her as her mother, and he seems to fit the
role she portrayed for some of the male characters in the stories. Ann made her father sound rather inexpressive; and, although he was around for her childhood, he did not participate in her childhood in the same nurturing manner as her mother. I sensed that Ann has come to expect a lack of intimacy in men. Perhaps her father's quiet and inexpressive nature did not affect her feeling important or close to him, and that was why she did not often condemn the men in the stories for their lack of expression and emotion—it was something to which she had become accustomed. Perhaps, in Ann's opinion, being quiet and inexpressive is not the worst characteristic a man can have, nor does it always prevent intimacy of one kind or another.

Ann's discussion of her mother's and father's roles in the family reinforced my feelings that they conformed to stereotypical roles, at least when Ann was a child. It may have exclusively been her mother's role to be expressive and to openly care about the children. Ann may also be the product of the way she was raised. Towards the end of the initial interview, I asked her why her political tendencies were so progressive. She replied:

I guess because of the way I was raised. They [her parents] let me form my own values...

Despite the fact that Ann was given the freedom to form her own values, she seems to have adopted a great deal of
her parents' beliefs. She finished the above response with what I have learned may have been a qualification to her sense of freedom:

They had their effect on me, and always say that kids are, you know, a direct result of their parents' beliefs.
CHAPTER SIX
ROBERT

I always looked forward to talking with Robert; he was talkative, quick-witted, and had a dry sense of humour. Our discussions were generally quite long, and much of what we discussed had little to do with the questions I asked. Robert liked to talk, and the conversations often drifted off into matters of relevance only he could explain. Early in the initial interview, I asked him to talk about himself.

Eric: Imagine you are a close friend of yours, and you've been asked to describe you to a person who would like to meet you. How would you describe yourself?

Rob: Casual, very casual. Basically easy-going. I can be stubborn sometimes and have a streak of laziness that is prominent, sometimes, especially when I need to be doing something. I guess, overall, I like to listen, and I'll offer opinions if asked--it may not be right or what you want to hear. I try not to taint it, just offer it as it is. If you don't like it, tough.

Eric: Along the same lines, imagine you are applying for a job. How would a current employer or faculty member who knows you
fairly well describe you to the potential employer?

Rob: I think I could be described as dependable. I have to work at it; it’s not something that just rolls out. I can do it when I apply myself to it. I don’t think it’s that difficult to get me to apply to it.

Eric: You wouldn’t be lazy and hard to motivate?

Rob: No. I’m a different person at work, I think. I tend to be less casual, and when I go to work to do a job, I feel they are investing their time and money into me, so I owe them a certain obligation. It’s not that I don’t feel that for other parts of my life, but for some reason, I respond differently....

Eric: Sort of a professional relationship.

Rob: I guess it happens in the car on the way there or something. Phone booths....

Robert said he thought his mother was the most influential person in his life when he was growing up. His father, a traveling dental supply representative, was often absent. Robert described his relationship with his mother:

I think we’re pretty close; we’ve always been close. She’s always pushed me to be my own person and express my own thoughts and not be influenced by everyone else—not to change who I am or what I believe just because the flow doesn’t seem to agree with it. When I was growing up, I was a typical uncontrollable and irresponsible teenager, and I think she was the most rational of my two parents. I’m sure I put a few years on her and mileage along the way, but to this day, we’re still very close.
Not until Robert was out of high school did he finally get to know his father, and until that time, the man was more of an image, than a reality:

It's strange, I never got to know dad. When I got out of high school, I went into the military. I came back for a time between school and the military, and I worked for my dad. It was, I guess '84 or '85. I think that was the first time I ever really knew my dad or got to know my dad. Up until then he'd always been this distant figure, this person you feared coming home and seeing your report card, and it always seemed he never had the time for us. It seemed like he was always gone, and I guess when you're young, you don't understand, and it's not that he didn't want to be with me; he did make it a point to be at my football games and other important events. That summer when I worked with him, we rode to work together every day. I got talking to him and realized that he wasn't so different from me. Some things that I believe and that are instilled in me did, in fact, come from him, even though it seemed like in an indirect way, especially my stubbornness, physical appearance, and the fact that I am very opinionated.

Since his father was often on the road, Robert's mother had an unusually great responsibility for raising her three sons. When Robert was a teenager, his mother returned to work, leaving him in charge of his youngest brother, John.

I've always been closest to my youngest brother, John. He's 18 now. To me, he's still six or so. I guess I raised him a little bit. My mom started working about the time he started school, and I was the babysitter. I was 13 or 14 at the time. I guess sixth or seventh grade, somewhere in there. My other brother, Jeff, was always off doing his own things...Jeff and I were never close.

Robert expressed some resentment towards his brother, Jeff, who is two years younger.
I came to school here three years ago, and we lived together while he was going here. During that time we grew together, but before then, we knew nothing about each other. There might have been some resentment. I was the baby for almost two years and then tossed into the back seat. Here comes Jeff, and then when John came along, there was someone I could care about, and someone for me, I guess. John and I always played together; he would wake me up in the morning when he was younger and come and get in bed with me, rather than go and get into bed with my parents. That's partially because they would tell him to go back and get in bed. That closeness still is today; I think there's a very special relationship....

I was moved by Robert's unusually mature efforts to analyze his childhood. The questions I asked were generally broad, and he, at all times, took these questions as a cue to move the conversation to deeper levels of understanding. The fact that he rarely hesitated when answering questions about his family led me to believe that he had thought and spoken about these topics many times before. I asked him how his parents went about making decisions that affected the whole family. He responded:

Superficially, it always appeared that my father was the decision-maker, and everything revolved around him, so to speak. I think, as I got older, I began to realize that this really wasn't true, the way we pictured the "wait till your father gets home" kind of attitude. I think my mom has always been the one that held everything together, and that's by default to a certain extent because my father was always away working, so that burden was laid on her. But, I think as we, my brothers and I, got older, we began to realize what had happened: she made most of the real decisions.
Robert suggested that he has been very sensitive to his mother, and he exhibited a great degree of understanding when discussing his parents' recent divorce:

"My parents are getting a divorce now, and that's something that has happened in the last year. Yeah, they both have gone their separate ways and started looking at their lifestyles, too. You can see how it all added up to the sum, what was there before. My mom has felt like, she came straight out of high school and got married, and she just basically has reached a point where she feels like all her life she's had to go along with whatever's happened. She had two kids before she was 20, and so now she wants to be Cathy, by herself, and it shows in everything she does.

I asked him how he felt about his mother being responsible for breaking up the family. He exhibited no animosity and blamed neither his father nor his mother for the event.

"Well, I can't say that I like it. I would much prefer my family were together in that sense. I can tell from my mom that she's ten times as happy as she's ever been in her life, and it shows, the way she talks, everything she does. I think they both still love each other; I don't think it's a case of that. I think it's just personalities...after 25 years it just got to be too much for them. I try to walk the middle ground and side with both of them. I offer what I can and stay 200 miles away; everything's fine.

Robert did not blame his mother for just leaving one day without an explanation while his father was in Hawaii on business. He felt she had to go and with "all the rough spots she had, you would know why."

According to Robert, his girlfriend of two years, Sally, has been a big support during the time Robert's
family was breaking up. I asked him to describe their relationship, and he did, briefly:

We're really close. I think it's a relationship that will last for a long time because we fight every day. I think she matches me very well, and she's also stubborn, which can be a problem at times. Sooner or later she'll realize I'm right, and it will be OK. Chauvinism takes time.

Robert found it easy to joke about masculinity, and I sensed he felt very comfortable about his own masculinity. I asked him to describe a close friendship with a male friend. He said he thought it was similar to the way he related to female friends, and then he launched into a rather long discussion about masculinity.

I've been close to one male friend I've been friends with since the beginning of time. I feel like there's nothing that I can talk to a girl friend about that I can't talk to a guy friend about. In fact, most of my best friends have always been female friends. I think that's because I've never been in line with most of what has been typically male. I played football and all that, but I don't know what you want to call it; the locker room jargon and all that never appealed to me, never interested me. When I was younger, I was mostly interested in music, and most of the guys that I grew up with just liked to listen to it--it was not something you actually made. Somebody else did that, the long haired people with the earrings. But I talk about the same things with my guy friends and have the same type of relationships with them as I do with women in an asexual sense.

I asked Robert what he meant when he used the phrase "typically male." He explained:

Anything that deals with male superiority or the idea of competition is something that's related to males. I don't know, I don't, but I try very
hard not to put down stereotypes, and I have no problem with working for someone who's female. I don't even like to draw negative connections. It's the same way with race; I don't like to speak of black things and white things. I guess typically male things are fighting, physical things, whereas visual things, artistic things are typically female. I personally don't abide by that, but I guess those are things somewhere along the way I made the divisions of...what people consider male or female.

Issues of human justice, such as race and gender, are important to Robert, and he stated his opinion, again, at great length. I asked him how he saw himself, politically.

That's an interesting issue. Growing up I was always very Democratic, very to that side. When I got into the military, I took a swing the other way. Now, I've come back to the Democratic side, the left wing or whatever.

Robert detailed a number of social, political, and economic injustices he would like changed. His comments focused on people's needs and government inefficiency. The time he spent in the Marines had a great effect on him and his sense of identity.

I think the thing that has changed me the most has been the military. I think it changed every aspect of my life. Going to school and then coming back to school, I think, was a result of being in the military. I think during that time I began to come to an understanding that I wasn't ignorant, which growing up I felt I was.

Robert's work in his major, biochemistry, has turned him into an environmentalist, he said; and he was very anxious, as he stated during our discussion of political issues, to get involved and "give back."
I feel I've been very lucky. I would like to have an opportunity to return that. I’ve never been money hungry. I’ve thought recently of joining the Peace Corps with my girlfriend. I’d like to give back what I've learned in the hope of improving life for people in Third World countries. The thing I want most is to help people.

I felt Robert’s responses to my questions in the initial interview gave me a fairly good understanding of him. The openness and honestly he exhibited during this first session continued during the following interviews, and I came to like and admire him, not only for his openness and honesty but for his lively and optimisitic outlook on life.

ROBERT’S RESPONSE THEMES

Determining the connections between Robert’s life and experiences and how he responded to literature has been the most challenging for me of the analyzes of all the readers in my study. His mature approach to the stories might be a result of the experiences he had in the Marines, he told me:

The military taught me to open my eyes and look at each situation from several points of view. The bottom line for me is simple. I try to be objective and consider everyone’s point of view. My opinions are self-serving, I realize, but I try to respect all other ideas.

In general, Robert expressed a great deal of compassion for all characters in the stories, and he thoroughly analyzed most of them. Two response themes emerged:
Robert tended to be objective in his assessments of the female characters and judgemental of the male characters. Why Robert was, then, at times, over-sympathetic with the male characters, at least in comparison to the critics and my former literature students, has been difficult for me to determine. I predicted that, since he had grown up without his father around, he might be somewhat resentful towards men and less sympathetic with the male characters in the stories, if there was an identifiable pattern of response at all. Just the opposite was true, however. Robert tended to sympathize with the male characters who were insensitive and unemotional—as though these characteristics did not render a husband or father incomplete. He viewed these traits as an acceptable part of most of the male characters, even those men he did not like.

Robert’s responses to the relationships in the stories followed no specific pattern; he objectively assessed each relationship in the context in which it was presented, just as he had done for the female characters.

ROBERT’S RESPONSES TO THE STORIES

Robert’s Response to "A Rose for Emily"

Robert’s description of Miss Emily corresponded to the critics’ remarks I noted in Chapter Two, but he never
went so far as to say that Emily was crazy, perhaps because of his interpretation of the relationship between Miss Emily and Homer: he didn’t believe that Emily murdered Homer. He did sympathize with her and understood her plight:

She’s the victim of a lifestyle she’s always had, and I think she’s trying to maintain. I think she’s trying to hold on to all she’s ever had: her father, the house. I think she’s trying to maintain the way it’s always been in her life, and she’s run into problems because her father died on her. I think she was just trying to hang on to what her father was and that lifestyle she had always had. She didn’t want to change and go on with her life. She wanted to freeze the moment right there, the time when her father was alive and keep that forever. I think when she couldn’t keep her father, Homer came along, and he provided that, and in the end, she actually ended up keeping him.

Her relationship with her father also corresponded to the responses of the critics’ and my literature students. According to Robert:

She never really had any life; her life seemed to center around her father. All she ever had was him, and he was somewhat overbearing.

Although Robert did not consider the relationship between Homer and Emily a romantic one, he did mention an issue often discussed by critics: Emily’s attempt to escape from her past.

She had never been subjected to change, and she didn’t see any reason to do so. When her father died, she was left stranded. Homer provided a way to make her life stable again; I don’t think she was against the change, but I don’t think she really perceived what it meant to change.
Emily, according to Robert, when threatened with the possibility of Homer leaving, decided to maintain a lifestyle with which she had been accustomed:

He was going to leave her, and she needed that security in her life. I believe she hung on and wanted things to be the same way. She may have felt he could be more like her father if he [Homer] was dead. Alive he was still Homer; dead, he could be anybody she wanted him to be.

Robert’s responses to Emily’s father and Homer differed little from descriptions given by the critics or my literature students, but he refused to judge the elder Grierson for keeping Emily out of the world of her contemporaries. Robert described Emily’s father:

He was a Southern aristocrat, the type of person who was above the common people. I envisioned a plantation-type of person who had lots of assets and a little tie that comes up to here. He was in control of his whole world and seeing to it that no one interfered with what was rightly his, and that included his daughter. The impression I got is that he was very stubborn, very strong willed, very in control of what was going on in his life.

Robert excused what most of my literature students considered overbearing behavior: the manner in which Emily’s father ran off men who were interested in her. Robert suggested these actions might well have been in Emily’s best interests, that he may have been "protecting her and keeping her from being hurt by these people."

Robert went so far as to say it may have been Emily herself who turned away her suitors:
She might have decided that there wasn’t anyone for her; there wasn’t anyone for her other than her father.

Although Robert at times described Emily’s father using the same terms the critics and my literature students used, the strong and more negative adjectives, such as "controlling, twisted, and severe," were absent from his assessment. Additionally, Robert made no value judgement about the old aristocrat—that he had been responsible for ruining his daughter’s life.

Robert’s description of Homer defied the body of criticism on the story. Rather than describe the man as the critics have, as a callous manipulator who had no respect for Emily, the townspeople, or the South, Robert described him in the following way:

I pictured John Wayne, the coat with a little hat and six-shooter. He was a big person, fairly soft spoken, but the kind of person who always knew where he was going and what he wanted. He was dominant, but he didn’t have to grab your throat and shake you around or something. You just respected him for what he was.

Why Robert softened the male characters in this story is not clear to me. His objective and impartial nature may have been responsible. Perhaps, in order to avoid judging these characters, he made them more acceptable. If he did so, however, he might have done so for the flawed female characters in the other stories, which he did not.
Robert’s Response to "An Episode in the Life of Professor Brooke"

Responses from my literature students to the characters and relationships in "An Episode in the Life of Professor Brooke" have always been varied, but they consistently have fallen within some predictable limits. For the most part, this was true for Robert as well as for the responses of the other readers in my study. Wolff’s characters are cleverly crafted, although they may, at times, seem two dimensional, and the events and interactions among the characters are everyday in nature. The characters are not unique in any way: they are simply everyday characters, much like people one might meet in the course of his or her daily life.

In characterizing the women in the story, Robert assessed both Ruth and Professor Brooke’s wife as he did the other female characters: objectively and without any preconceived notions I could detect. Robert sympathized with the men in the story, as many of my literature students did, but his characterization of Professor Riley, the character my students have most often disliked, was quite favorable.

Robert’s depiction of the men in this story was not unusual, but he did describe both men in a very positive
fashion, something very few of my literature students did. Generally a student would side with one of the male characters and criticize the other, since there was a good deal of rivalry between Brooke and Riley. Robert, however, did not side with either; rather, he found both men mostly without the faults other students noted.

Professor Brooke, according to Robert, was a "goody-goody," and "well respected for his scholarly work and success in life." In his written response, Robert reflected on Brooke's image of himself:

I think Brooke is insecure; he seems to only speak with confidence when he is talking about something that is related to his writing or to writing in general. I think he always felt something was missing from his life.

Most of my literature students and the three other readers in this study concurred on Robert's feeling about the relationship between Brooke and Riley.

Although Professor Riley sees Brooke as someone who has the respect and admiration of his peers and has a successful life, Brooke sees it the other way around. He feels his life is so controlled and so routine.

Riley, on the other hand, Robert characterized as "Eddie Haskell on [the] 'Leave it to Beaver'" television show of the early 1960s. He continued:

I think Riley is really flamboyant and care-free. His life is more under control than Brooke's, and he and his wife are still in love after all these years in their "little house on the prairie."
Robert obviously thought Riley had a perfect television life, but my literature students did not think so. Some of them thought he was crude and forward. Others, including Ann, thought he was having affairs with his female students and that this was "immoral." Robert thought Riley was true to his wife and that Brooke was simply jealous that Riley got on so well with people. Few literature students felt as strongly as Robert that Riley's life was so ideal as to compare it to what I would consider the wholesomeness of the family in the television series "Little House on the Prairie."

The characterizations Robert offered for Ruth and Professor Brooke's wife also fell within what I would term predictably objective in nature. Robert described Ruth:

I think Ruth is lonely and has had a hard time over the past few years. I think her experience with cancer has caused her to really take the time to enjoy life, and I think she is finding that enjoyment from reading. She would read poetry or something like that, that was more than just words or a passing thought, that she really believed that these people had these real strong inner emotions. Ruth believes all writers dream of beautiful things and write them down, and she feels Brooke is like that.

Ruth was a character most of my readers and students have agreed upon. The only dispute among the characterizations has been on the issue of Ruth's strength, and most of my literature students have
characterized her as Robert did, that Ruth simply wanted
to share an evening with Brooke, not to cling to him.

I think they both got something out of it. Ruth
knew Brooke was someone she could communicate with,
but that’s all there was, and I think that
fulfilled what she needed.

Robert’s interpretation of the relationships between
Brooke and Ruth, and Brooke and his wife, again followed
my literature students’ predictable patterns. He
described Brooke’s relationship with Ruth as non-
exploitive.

I don’t think there were any ulterior motives. I
don’t think she came there to meet Brooke. It was
a coincidental meeting, and they happened to end up
talking to each other. I think, in the end, it was
sharing common interests....

Brooke’s wife is a minor character in the story, and
Robert described her as most of my literature students
did.

I think his wife is somewhat naive, and she’s
probably just as happy not knowing what went
on between Brooke and Ruth.

Even though some literature students felt that Brooke’s
wife should be outraged and leave Brooke, most considered
her too insecure and dependent to do so. She is not
described well in the story, but Robert described Brook’s
relationship with her:

It seemed that once again coming back to "Leave
it to Beaver" is how I pictured them. Very
traditional, if you will...a loving relationship
between two people.
Robert dispelled any notion about Brooke's suspected infidelity being premeditated:

I don't think he really has a desire to have an affair on his wife or anything like that. At the same time, he sees this other stuff going on and it's something he's never been a part of.

Another issue I discussed with Robert was whether or not Brooke had an obligation to tell his wife of his meeting with Ruth. While my literature students who thought it had been a sexual relationship thought he did have an obligation to tell his wife, those students who thought it had not been a sexual relationship thought he didn't need to. Robert responded in this way:

I don't think so. I don't feel it was a sexual relationship. There may have been a type of love that developed, but I don't think this is the kind of affair that occupies your time and you end up leaving, you know, becoming unhappy with your life.

Robert's characterizations of the characters in this story followed his response themes, and, contrary to most of my literature students, he tended to sympathize with both male characters. His characterizations of the women were objective, as I had expected.

Robert's Response to "Mistletoe"

The pattern of responses for male characters Robert offered was clearly exhibited in his interpretation of the narrator's husband, Mitch, but his response to the narrator's lover, Dean, was as severe and judgemental as
his portrayal of the narrator, at least in comparison to the sympathy he extended most of the other male characters.

Robert discussed the narrator in the context of her relationship with her family:

I don't feel like she's a part of the family. I think she's living in her own little fantasy of what she wants, and she's on a drive and a mission to do that with no regard as to what's becoming of her family. Obviously, to me anyway, with no regard to what happens to Mitch. He could just walk off and never come back, and I don't think she'd know the difference. She probably cares for the children. There's nothing in there to assume she didn't love the children, but I don't think she's fair to them. She has a selfish attitude, and the affair was ruining their life.

My literature students' responses to the narrator were often negative, as well. They called her "selfish" and "self-centered, and they usually cited her unfulfilling relationship with Mitch as the cause of her self-serving nature. Robert blamed her for ruining the family, whereas nearly all my literature students blamed Mitch's inexpressiveness and insensitivity for the family problems and the narrator's need to have taken a lover.

According to Robert, Mitch was a blameless victim of his wife's selfishness:

To me, he's the father and that's about it. To some extent, he's a victim of her. I really think she's being awful hard on him. I don't think he's as bad as she thinks he is. I think he loves the children, loves her, and is caring about them. I think he's more willing to go on the trip to get the mistletoe than she's saying. I think he's
caring, he loves the family, he’s the one thing holding the family together...he’s the tie to it.

Robert felt strongly about the family dynamics in this story, and he returned to the topic in defense of Mitch, as though he knew he was defending an unpopular character.

I don’t think he was quite that bad. I think she was being hard on him, and I don’t think that she was being very fair to him. I don’t really have anything to go on, but just by judging her character, I feel that she was misjudging him in that way. To me, he was probably more of a typical person, not so much that he wasn’t caring; maybe he did like to watch football in the afternoon, but I think he probably loved his family and provided for them.

An overwhelming number of my literature students thought the narrator was a victim of her husband, who spent most of his time watching television; and, although they agreed with Robert that Mitch loved his wife and children, they pointed to his severe inability to express emotion and love as the reason the family was in such trouble. The author, Jane Bradley, in my discussions with her, expressed a similar sentiment: Mitch was the problem, and the narrator’s struggle for fulfillment was, in large part, a response to having married a man who could not or would not meet her needs for sensitivity.

Robert’s defense of Mitch made me think that perhaps he was defending a father who was similar to his own, one who wasn’t nurturing but who did care for the family and financially provide for them. I feel Robert may have created a standard for what constitutes a good father,
based on his own father, and then defended Mitch with it. To admit that Mitch was an ineffectual father might have been an admission that the fathering his father offered had been somehow incomplete.

Most of my literature students condemned Mitch as a father and husband, and supported Dean as a fine example of a sensitive and caring man. In what may have been a defense of the family as an institution, Robert's description of the narrator's lover, Dean, was entirely unsympathetic and openly critical. Dean's relationship with the narrator, according to Robert, was based on deceit:

Dean was not the great guy she thought he was. He was having an affair, and I don't think the relationship meant as much to him as it did to her. I get the feeling from the story that he was just out after an affair on his wife. When the narrator started talking about Dean's plans to leave his wife to be with her, I thought it would just be one thing or another for him. I doubt he ever intended to leave his wife. This was an affair, something fulfilling whatever of his needs. I don't think he loved her in the same sense she loved him. I think he was just going to go on with it for as long as he could, but I don't think he was going to leave his wife.

Robert's response to "Mistletoe" was more emphatic than to the other stories, and he, at some point, had decided that Bradley had meant the story as an attack on men. I sensed he felt he needed to defend men, here represented by Mitch, from the injustice.
One thing struck me in this story. It struck me as a kind of story that guys and girls may have entirely different points of view about. It would be easy to take sides on it and look at Mitch being worse than she even says. You could say: "No wonder she had an affair." You could say Mitch was this way, especially if you were sympathetic towards feminine issues...that’s not really fair, I shouldn’t have said that...but I guess judging from my own experience, people are often interested in advancing somebody’s issue, be it race or gender...whatever. Then you have people who are fanatical, extreme, not being practical in what they are doing. I don’t think every man in the world is out to get every woman in the world, but there are some people who feel that way, and that men are no good, just as there are men who feel that no women are good.

Whether Robert’s reaction to the story constituted a defense of his perceptions of a good marriage relationship, a defense of inexpressive fathers, or both, is probably not as important as the fact that he transformed the male characters. He defended a character my literature students considered an unemotional and inexpressive partner and father, and criticized a male character my students overwhelmingly felt was an excellent example of an expressive and sensitive man. Whether Robert was simply defending a character whose actions in some ways resembled those of his father is not clear to me.

Robert’s Response to "Martha’s River"

Robert’s written response to this story and the discussion that followed were fairly short. Although he
admitted it was an interesting story, he said he "didn't get much out of it." It was difficult at times for me to keep the discussion on topic. Robert's habit of taking the discussion into unrelated areas was especially evident in our discussion of the story.

I do not think Robert defended Alan, the only adult male character in the story, in the same manner he did Mitch in "Mistletoe," but he was considerably less judgemental about Alan's treatment of his wife and son than were my literature students. Again, as in "A Rose for Emily" and "An Episode in the Life of Professor Brooke," Robert had a tendency to soften his judgements of characters about which my literature students had felt strong negative feelings. Robert's response to Martha was similar to his assessment of the other female protagonists, and he did not judge her harshly for murdering her husband. He did point out several alternatives Martha could have chosen, but, as with his reaction to Alan, his response to Martha was not as emotional as the responses of many of my literature students.

Robert's description of Martha was quite similar to that of many of my literature students:

I guess she wanted to be totally free, so she had a very romantic attitude about all of the outdoors and life. I pictured everything was so beautiful and natural. She didn't want to send
her child to school; she wanted to teach him at home. She seems very independent. She’s interested in life and not just life in actually living. She wants to fulfill every minute, make every minute like an eternity, and she seems really interested in the river and totally absorbed in the outdoors. I think she wants her son to be raised with the same idea. That’s why she doesn’t want him to go to school. She wants him to learn, forget the books and pencils and the way everyone else should be, and grow up the way she thinks it should be.

Although many of my literature students described Martha in a similar manner, some went further to criticize her for being an extremist and for being unfair for isolating her son from other children and the influences of what they called "the real world."

Robert first commented on the relationship between Alan and Martha in a non-judgemental fashion. I had asked him what kind of relationship he thought Martha and Alan had.

Superficial, it seems. It may have been real loving at one time, but I think they want completely different things out of life.

This response was strikingly similar to my students’ responses: that Alan and Martha might have had some "bad times" that had alienated them from each other. Only a few students thought Martha was justified for killing Alan. Robert thought it was totally unjustified.

I don’t think you can ever justify killing someone. It wasn’t exactly with her own hands; he was getting ready to jump off the cliff anyway, and she just made sure he was jumping off in the right place. I don’t guess it was premeditated, but at least as far as the story is concerned, it wasn’t something she had
thought of ahead of time. It was the spur of the moment. I think she’s justified in wanting to get rid of him and get away from him, but I don’t think you can justify murder.

Alan was uniformly disliked by my literature students, and the author admitted to me that she was trying to create a despicable but believable character when she created Alan. She wanted him to have an abundance of negative masculine characteristics. Nevertheless, Robert depicted him in a less negative fashion than did most of my literature students.

Allen seemed to conform; we didn’t see much of him, but what we did see, he seemed to be more of a traditional person...going to work, coming home, and he’s treated in the story as almost indifferent to what’s really going on around him. He’s happy as long as he has Martha waiting for him when her gets home.

Whereas my literature students considered him "extreme" and "controlling," even "twisted," Robert described Alan’s needs in a much more natural way:

I think he really wants to spend time with his wife, but it seems to be a relationship that he expects her to be there when he’s ready for her. He expects her to be there, waiting, and the rest of the time she’s supposed to be on hold, I guess, until he comes home. I don’t know if he’s unloving or uncaring; it just strikes me as just the way he is. It’s just not a good match for her.

Robert refused to judge Alan, even though he clearly expressed the injustices Alan expected Martha to bear.
When he discussed Alan’s relationship with his son, Jason, Robert indicated that, although Alan was not a warm and
loving father, he still cared for Jason and was still willing to meet his obligations to his child.

I think he wants a very structured life when he’s away risking his neck. He wants things predictable, and he didn’t want her wandering off in the bushes and just doing whatever it was she was doing with her son. I guess he felt that, in some way, she might be poisoning their son against him, so rather than allow her to do that, he was going to send Jason off to school like everybody else’s children went to school.

Robert later made his feelings about the father/son relationship clearer:

Alan referred to Jason as a "millstone," but I got the feeling there was a little more obligation. He was Jason’s father, whether he liked it or not, and he’d own up to that. I’m sure he loved Jason, he cared for him, but he also viewed him as an obstacle between him and Martha, so I guess this might have been part of the reason he wanted to send Jason off to school, to get rid of him.

The sentiment Robert expressed here was the most convincing evidence that he did not condemn Alan, despite the fact he knew that Alan was selfish. Most of my literature students thought Alan cared little for his son and merely wanted him out of the way so he could have Martha entirely to himself. The author, too, felt Alan was entirely unconcerned about his son’s well-being, and she used the term "millstone" to describe the enormous burden Jason represented to Alan.

Robert’s responses to "Martha’s River" may again have been a defense of a style of fathering to which he had become accustomed. Alan, like Robert’s own father, was
absent much of the time; and, although Robert did not seem to particularly like Alan, he may have sympathized with the plight of a father who loved his family but who was not often home. Robert’s father may well have been a committed father, despite the fact he was often absent, and Robert may have simply assumed that absentee fathers are still committed to their children. Thus, he may have found it easy to interpret Alan’s selfish motivations and actions in a less negative fashion than my literature students have.

Robert’s Response to "The Yellow Wallpaper"

The interpretation Robert offered for John, the principal male character in this story, followed the pattern I found in his responses to the other stories: he expressed sympathy for the male character and tended to soften whatever negative characteristics he perceived. My literature students’ responses to the characters in the story were more varied than their responses to "Mistletoe" and "Martha’s River," however. There were a good number of students, mostly male, who found little to criticize in John. The narrator of the story, as well, was subject to a disparity of interpretations, many of which, again, followed gender divisions (I address this topic more thoroughly in Chapter Eight).
Robert's description of the narrator was similar to that of many of my male literature students:

She seems intelligent, but I think she's definitely paranoid. I think she has true fears and feelings, and she really feels that there's a lady behind the wallpaper, and she talks to her.

Although the critics uniformly cite the narrator's husband, John, as the principal source of her sickness, Robert never mentioned what the critics note: that John has locked up his wife because she wants to have a mind and life of her own and her doing so would conflict with his perceptions of a woman's proper role. Robert was, however, sympathetic with the narrator and thought that her sickness was not simply emotional but physical as well.

I think she's really sick. I think her case is a physical problem of some sort, not just emotional trauma. It's hard to judge because you don't have any real history on her, so you don't know if something's happened to her that might cause her to have some kind of mental problem, something that could be fixed by therapy. I guess if it's a physical problem, the treatment has to be more in depth than just locking her in a room or something like that.

The recognition that something physiological might have caused her problem was the closest Robert came to thinking that the narrator's relationship with her husband might be part of her problem. According to Robert, she did have some awareness of her condition, but it was of little consequence to her:
She seems to have an understanding of her condition, but it's almost like a superficial belief. It's like she's reciting what she's been told her condition is, but she really doesn't feel this way. She views it a little different apparently, and she places the blame on the objects and woman behind the wallpaper.

Robert's comment quoted above may have been the product of a misreading, since the narrator's initial understanding of her condition had nothing to do with the wallpaper but with her lack of stimulation. Most of my literature students noted this fact. Robert was clear, however, about John's understanding of his wife's sickness, and he stated John's perspective five different times during our discussion of the story. Although the critics deemed John condescending and insensitive to his wife's needs, Robert felt he was truly concerned and expressed confidence in him: "Her husband seems somewhat experienced at dealing with her." He believed that John had locked her in her room in order to help her.

I think she's in the room for her protection. I don't think it's so much that this is going to help her, but I think he's hopeful, and I think the way he's trying to help her is more protecting her from herself. He's afraid if she gets out she could cause some real harm, and at least in the room he's got control of where she is and knows where she is.

Robert accepted John patriarchal treatment of his wife and felt that John's concern was real and that, if he really didn't care, he would have institutionalized her elsewhere, simply "done away with her, and put her
somewhere and just forgot her." John's intentions were not entirely selfless, according to Robert, but he seemed to accept John's self-interest as a fact of life:

I think he cares about her. I think for some reason, he's put her up there to keep her out of his way. She always mentions him being a high profile doctor, so, to some extent, maybe he doesn't want her coming down to important dinner parties and talking about wallpaper trapping her upstairs. But, at the same time, I think he cares about her, and he's trying to do what's best for her. I don't know, but she seems to think that he doesn't totally believe that she's sick, and at one point, she talks about it, and he says something like "My little goose is as sick as she wants to be."

My literature students felt that, at one time, the narrator and John had had a good marriage; Robert concurred but offered little explanation:

I think it had been really good at one time; they had been fairly close, and I think they loved each other. You get the feeling that this [the narrator's illness] has been going on for a little while, that this just didn't happen when they moved into the house or whatever.

Robert's portrayal was predictable, considering his responses to the male characters in the other stories. I felt that the sympathy he extended John was the result of the pattern of responses he had established for male characters, even if his responses did not differ significantly from those of my male literature students.
Robert's Response to "A Good Man is Hard to Find"

Robert's responses to Grandmother and Bailey were generally similar to the responses of my literature students and the critics, even though his responses to Bailey were somewhat less judgemental than those of the critics. Because the inclusion of this story was experimental (see Chapter Two), I did not expect Robert to follow the pattern he had established of sympathizing with the male characters, perhaps because Bailey was in a mother-son relationship rather than a marriage relationship. I did find, however, that despite the fact that Robert's feelings about Bailey were similar to those of my literature students, he did assign some positive characteristics that my literature students normally did not to the character and to the relationship between Bailey and Grandmother.

Robert discussed Grandmother first in the context of her relationship with her family. He was not very sympathetic with the old woman.

I think she's an opportunist; she's really overbearing; I guess that would be the right word. She wants to know everything, wants to be involved in everything..."Why this, why that, why does everything have to be?" Nothing can go on without her commenting on it in some way. She seemed like she really wanted the attention, she wanted to be the center of attention, and she wouldn't accept the idea that maybe there was something going on that she didn't know about. So, anything that went on, especially within the family, she had to know every detail, and then she would give them
tidbits, and tell them what she'd do, and tell them to go back to the way things used to be. She may have felt she could help them in some way.

When Grandmother was faced with her own death at the hands of The Misfit, Robert suggested her interest in the family waned:

I just can't imagine why, if she had actually realized they had been shot, why she wouldn't just want to run off and join them. But, at that point, the grandmother seems to show no interest in what's happened to the rest of the family. Going after conversation with The Misfit to me is just trying to save her own skin.

The critics and my literature students felt that Grandmother was a selfish and self-centered old woman interested mostly in being the center of attention. While occasionally a student would express sympathy for her, as Jane did, it was mostly out of pity and not respect.

Robert judged Bailey in a manner very similar to my literature students and the critics, but he did find more strength in the character. In his initial response to Bailey, Robert portrayed him as a strong character:

He seems to be a very practical, no nonsense type of person. His main goal was to get his family to Florida with as little problem as possible.

Moments later, however, Robert filled out his characterization of Bailey, and it was increasingly less flattering as he went on:

He doesn't seem like a very happy person, almost like the opposite of the grandmother, and he doesn't care what's going on or why it's going on.
As Robert continued his characterization, Bailey appeared to be an increasingly weak and pathetic man.

He was one who could live his whole life without caring about anything, like going to the house. He had no interest one way or the other about the house but as a way to shut the kids up. He just wanted to go and get it done, you know, whatever everyone else was doing, his wife or the kids, was fine as long as they were happy.

Keeping his mother happy, according to Robert, was one of Bailey’s primary interests. Once again Robert began by describing Bailey as having some control over the relationship he had with his mother but ended by portraying Bailey as totally subservient to her.

He didn’t seem to have much interest in anything she did. She was rambling on continuously, and he wanted no part of it. I think maybe to some extent he just turned her out. Just figured it was the babblings of an old woman. Bailey and Grandmother didn’t communicate very well. I think he thought ignoring her would shut her up. He probably didn’t really believe that; I think he’d been around her long enough to know that nothing was going to quiet her down. Maybe, because of her being his mother, she had always been very demanding and overbearing to him. He’s done what she’s told him to do and now, even though he’s an adult, he’s still trying to get what he wants done, but as soon as she says no, let’s go do this, it’s: "Yes, Mother."

My literature students and the critics considered Bailey easily manipulated by his mother and unable to take control of his own life.

Robert’s responses to Grandmother and Bailey, and their relationship, did not differ enough from the responses of my literature students or the critics for me
to consider them a product of Robert’s pattern of sympathizing with male characters. He did assign Bailey some strengthening characteristics, but he quickly retracted those comments and portrayed him as weak and easily dominated by his mother.

FURTHER DISCUSSION

At the end of the final interview, in response to my question concerning connections among the stories, Robert replied:

To one extent or another, all the stories, the women in the stories, somehow were victims of the men in the stories. To some extent they are also victims of themselves. In "Martha’s River," the problem appeared to be somewhat of her own origin. She was changing, and her life was no longer fitting Alan’s, and she plays it off like he just didn’t understand and wouldn’t change with her, so she killed him. Even in "Mistletoe," it was the same idea. She was speaking so badly of her husband...he didn’t care or see the beauty in the trees. But the fact she was having an affair with someone else made her be unfair to Mitch.

Despite Robert’s claim that all the stories portrayed women as victims, (he cited the same claim for Emily and Grandmother), he felt they were, perhaps, not only victims of men but also their own victims. At first Robert claimed that Grandmother brought on her own death by talking too much and that, perhaps, was her way of being her own victim, but he retracted the statement.
In "The Yellow Wallpaper," Robert stated that the narrator was a victim of her husband but not of herself:

I think she was a victim of her husband in the sense that, to some extent, he was just getting her out of his way by putting her up in this room without any stimulation other than the inanimate objects in the room. We discussed last time that anyone can sit around and things can take on a life of their own, but if you're already a "brick shy of a full load," things can take on more life than originally. There seems to be a common theme: not only the idea that it seems like, for the most part, the women in the stories are victims of men, but they're all trying to take control of their lives in some way, and each is doing it in different ways, you know. A few of them resort to murder, some involve just a change of mind.

From the written responses to the stories and the discussions that followed, I had no idea that Robert saw such similarities among the stories. These final observations suggest that Robert connected the stories using themes, but these themes were not at first evident to me in his responses to the stories. His interpretation of the male characters suggests that his responses may have been, at least in part, a product of his relationship with his father. At no time, however, did I think Robert portrayed his mother as a victim of his father. She may have had a major influence on Robert, especially in the absence of his father, but I do not think Robert projected her into any of the characters in the stories.

Robert may be a foil to my study. His responses demonstrate that, at least in his case, gender may not be
a critical factor in his responses to the characters. Even though he did tend to defend characters I feel are similar to his father, I am not convinced that his relationship with his father was the force responsible for his answers. Robert’s responses may be a result of his generally sympathetic perceptions and judgements of other individuals. Gender may not be an important factor in Robert’s responses to literary characters, or he may, as I noted earlier in the chapter, simply be a mature and well-balanced individual who possesses a high degree of self-awareness and understanding of the world around him.
CHAPTER SEVEN

ARTHUR

I found Arthur difficult to talk to, especially when the conversation deviated from topics that interested him. He did have much to say about himself, but most of it was superficial and not very revealing about himself or his family. His responses to the characters in the stories, as well, were somewhat short, and he judged the characters on an emotional basis, that is, largely on whether he liked them or not, rather than interpreting their actions and interactions more objectively.

I was able to predict Arthur’s responses to the characters in the stories by the end of the third story. Except for the characters in one story, he assigned strengthening characteristics to male characters while devaluing the activities of all but one female character. Perhaps the most predictable characteristic of Arthur’s responses was his emotional involvement—liking or disliking characters—and his habit of viewing the characters as totally good or totally bad.
In his written autobiography, Arthur offered, I feel, the most revealing picture of himself I would get.

I would probably describe me as quiet and withdrawn around people until I get to know them, and then they realize I am really a little kid, weird, but also very nice to just about everyone.

Much of what I found out about Arthur supported this description, and I feel that working with him demanded greater sensitivity than working with the other readers in the study. Although Arthur was 21, in many ways he seemed younger. He continued his autobiography by looking around his bedroom and discussing the items with which he had furnished his room.

Looking around the room, my eye catches the Star Trek models. I am a real big fan of Trek. I have models of the Enterprise for all three versions, three advisory ships, and an autographed picture of Nichelle Nichols (Uhura). There is also a "Star Wars" and "Return of the Jedi" poster hanging on the wall. Actually, I like Star Wars more, but there hasn't been any new production since 1983; George says he will consider doing the next movie in 1993. Next I come to the poster of Kate Bush; she's a singer. She is my favorite singer; her style is very progressive, and I am conservative. That really does not matter; she sounds great. I also like 10,000 Maniacs, Fleetwood Mac, B-52s, Belinda Carlisle, Katrina and the Waves, and Pink Floyd. As you can tell, I have a wide range of tastes when it comes to music. I just don't like heavy metal.

Arthur played several Kate Bush albums for me when I interviewed him at his apartment. He also showed me his Star Trek models and other science fiction collectables. He continued the visual tour of his room:
I have a bow lying under my bed and a tennis racquet in this disaster somewhere, too. I like archery, but tennis is my favorite sport. I play all right, but I don't win too often. In case you were wondering, my favorite players are Steffi Graf and Boris Becker. I got interested in tennis when I was 16, that just happens to be the year Becker won Wimbledon for the first time. Yes, I’m rambling. Thinking about being 16. I owned a Mustang II, which I can honestly list among the dumbest things I ever did.

Of the many interests Arthur shared with me, he always had favorites and least favorites. I did learn much about Arthur's interests, but during this time, he revealed little personal information. Perhaps his favorite topic, at least in talking with me, was Boy Scouts. He has been, evidently, very successful in the organization, considering his age, and he expressed pride in his achievements. The following conversation was the first of several we would have about the Scouts:

**Eric:** Talk to me some more about your involvement in the Boy Scouts...you mentioned it in class several times.

**Art:** I’ve been involved with the Boy Scouts since I was eight years old. I just wanted something to do, so I joined the Cub Scouts and did all of that on up to when I started Boy Scouts at 12. That was really fun, you accomplished stuff, and you got a sense of achievement from it. You really didn’t know that was the whole purpose of it when you were young, but when I started getting to be one of the older boys involved with it, I became one of the leaders. Eventually, I went to a Junior Leader Training Course.

**Eric:** How old were you?
Art: I was 15. They chose the staff members for the next year by looking at your performance during the course, and then they talk to your scout master. Then they pick the better people. I ended up being on the staff for a few years until I was too old. Went to the national jamboree as assistant patrol leader for the troop and just really stayed active in it. If there's one thing you can do to help you in the future besides graduating from high school, it's gotta be an Eagle Scout. I finished up that test on my 18th birthday.

Eric: Why do you consider it to be so valuable, beyond the fact that it's a good credentials?

Art: It is. Because I don't want to give up at anything that was going as far as you could and doing as much as you could. It was just I wanted to be among the elite, I guess.

Eric: How has this honor affected you, then?

Art: It showed me that, when I set my mind to it, I can do it. It also taught me to set high standards for myself.

Eric: How do you feel it fits into your life now? Why are you still involved?

Art: I do it because it's still fun, and it just so happens that the troop I'm in--all of us do it because it's fun. We have as many adult leaders as we have in scouts because none of us want to quit. I mean, I can only be there about three or four times a year because I'm in Blacksburg all the time, but I'm a part of that troop still.

Eric: You do it only for fun?

Art: It seems to me that if the scouts are in a troop where the leaders do it for fun, they have more fun. It lets them have more fun, and you have more fun with it.
Arthur's involvement with the Boy Scouts was one of the experiences he mentioned as having a significant effect on his life. Two of the others were the Challenger space craft disaster and the Frank Herbert novel, *Dune*.

That was '86? I was a junior in high school, and it was like nothing could go wrong around here, like I'm really into space and science fiction. The shuttle to me was something this country was really good at, and when it blew up, that's when I really decided I wanted to be an engineer because that was one of the things I could do, was make something that wouldn't blow up like that. Another thing that really isn't an event was the book, *Dune*. That one right there really had the desired effect. It really said that this planet really needs to be taken care of. So from there, I read all the books and really got into it.

These two events helped convince Arthur that he could make a contribution to society, and he mentioned he would like to use his political science degree to work in government.

Eric: You talked about the Challenger and *Dune* in the same vein. How do you feel you could make a contribution?

Art: I want to work in government somehow.

Eric: With what effect?

Art: If I did what I wanted to do, I would be in an embassy.

Eric: Why?

Art: Foreign relations and the current events of other countries have always been interesting. I would love to work in Brussels after '92, the EC.

Arthur's parents were not happy with his choice of political science as a major in college; and although,
they have not formally opposed the decision, they have expressed their dissatisfaction:

They think I should have stayed in engineering... that I have absolutely no future in political science.

Our discussion of Arthur's relationship with his parents and friends was short, and he offered little beyond factual information about them:

My father is an engineer; in his spare time, he shoots the bow and arrow and bow hunts, or does something related to archery. My mother doesn't work, and in her spare time, she sometimes works on a quilt which has kept her busy for at least the last ten years.

When I did ask him to describe his relationship with his family he said: "We're close, we get along. Average." I continued with a non-threatening question:

Eric: Do you and your mom spend time together when you're home visiting?

Art: If I need to go to the mall or something, I go there with her if there's some reason for us both to go.

Eric: Does she have an interest in and approve of what you're doing in school?

Art: She doesn't see any future in my major.

Eric: Was she at home or working while you were growing up?

Art: She was at home until I was about 15, and then she started working.

Eric: What about your dad? You mentioned that he was a bow hunter. Have you gone hunting with him?
Art: Yes, I have. In fact, I've got my bow laying underneath my bed.

Eric: Do you feel you're pretty close to your dad?

Art: Um. We get along, but we're so alike that we still argue a lot, too.

Eric: What does he think about the things you're doing in college?

Art: He thinks I should have stayed in engineering.

Eric: Is he an engineer?

Art: Yes.

I was used to the other subjects talking at great length any time I mentioned parents or family. I did not take Arthur's reluctance to discuss his family as a cue that he did not get along with his family, only that he did not feel comfortable discussing his personal relationships. I did ask about his sister and others who might be important in his life and was again met with resistance when discussing his relationship with his sister:

Eric: You have a sister. Tell me about her.

Art: Well, your basic sibling...

Eric: Have you both gotten along well when you were growing up?

Art: Yeah.

Eric: Are you close now? I know she's 16, and that puts some age difference between you.

Art: I'm here now, so it doesn't matter.
I asked Arthur to describe how his family made decisions that affected the entire family. He seemed more open to this question, but then changed his answer a few moments later.

Eric: How does your family make decisions that affect the entire family?

Art: Basically different ways. Usually it's mom and dad say this is what it's going to be, unless it's going to involve me. I'm the one who makes the decisions for that. [pause] My dad was basically--this higher democracy is an authoritarian state.

Eric: So what happened when you switched your major to political science?

Art: I told them I was switching to political science.

Eric: OK. What was his response?

Art: "If you want to, go ahead. I don't see much future in it."

Eric: How did your mom respond?

Art: She knew I was wanting to. She knew it from the day I got to college that I was going to end up a political science major.

Moments later, Arthur changed his answer to the question about how the family makes decisions. In the hopes of trying to get him to talk about his parents at greater length, I asked:

Eric: What about decisions that affect your sister, if they are things that affect her mostly? Is it still this authoritarian decision you talked about?

Art: Yeah.
Eric: So, is that saying that your father's decision is final in matters that concern your sister?

Art: It isn't really his decision. It's my parents' decision.

Eric: OK

My final attempt to discuss relationships with Arthur was partially successful, and he spoke more freely than when we had discussed his family:

Eric: Would you describe the relationship between you and a close female friend? Then I'll ask you to do the same for a male friend.

Art: Close female friend?

Eric: Not necessarily a lover or a girlfriend.

Art: Well, the only thing is that my best friend is female, and it's someone you can rely on. She's the one I tell stuff to, and she tells stuff to me.

Eric: Does she live around here?

Art: Yeah, she's in school here, and for her there's no sex with it. I don't think you need to have sex with a girl to be close friends. For close male friends, probably the brothers from my fraternity, you know. They are good friends, and they are there when you need something, and you are there when they need something.

Arthur's discussion of his close friends seemed more open to me, and it led him into a rather lengthy discussion of his role in high school with friends and social groups. He considered himself a "loner" in high school, since he
had transferred from private to public school. It took him two years "to get popular with anyone," he noted.

Finally, I asked him what was important to him in life. He replied:

One basic thing is I think I want to be happy and that will take care of everything else that people would think of. A lot of people like money; money can help you get the things that might make you happy but isn't going to make the really important things. It's not going to buy real friends; it's not going to buy love. I definitely want to get married, I want to have kids, and a home. I would like to make a good impact at some point...on the world. Call it magalomania if you want.

I told him I thought this all sounded reasonable and asked him what else might contribute to his happiness. He continued:

You couldn't really be happy knowing that what you've done to get your happiness has hurt someone else, so you have to do it in a way as to not tread on anyone else because you might run into them on the way down.

Arthur's initial interview and written autobiography differed significantly from those of the other readers in the study. He was much less willing to share anything but the facts of his upbringing and relationships with family and friends. He was less willing than the other readers to talk about himself, as well, and my efforts to make it easy for him to discuss these topics failed for the most part. Arthur stated that it took him time to get to know people, and, perhaps, he didn't know me well enough to discuss family relationships. On the other hand, since he
was willing to discuss relationships with friends, his reluctance to talk about family may have been a means of guarding an uneasy relationship with them.

ARThur'S RESPONSE THEMES

Two major themes characterized Arthur's responses to the characters and relationships in four of the stories. I have omitted "A Good Man is Hard to Find" since his responses were not his own but those he had read in a book of criticism and "The Yellow Wallpaper" since he discussed the story with Jane before he met and discussed the story with me. In general, Arthur tended to reject offhandedly and harshly to judge characters and relationships he did not approve of or that violated his view of acceptable relationships. He just as easily accentuated the positive characteristics of those characters and relationships he approved of and felt fit his stereotypes. In the same manner, Arthur generally tended to reject complex adult relationships; that is, as the study progressed, he tended to simply judge the characters and relationships on emotional terms of "like or dislike," rather than coming to terms with the conflicts presented in the stories. The primary response themes I have addressed in this chapter are as follows:
1) Arthur tended to devalue women's roles in the stories and depicted most of the female characters as powerless, even if he liked them.

2) Arthur favored characters and relationships he considered stereotypical. He tended to reject characters and relationships not fitting his stereotype.

Arthur offered little in the way of information about himself upon which to base my interpretations of his responses. Jane, Ann, and Robert talked about themselves enough for me to find evidence in their discussions of their families and life experiences for their responses to literary characters. With Arthur, however, my interpretation is guided more by educated assumptions. My approach to data analysis had to be reversed in Arthur's case since his responses were the only evidence I had with which to speculate about how his upbringing and relationships with family and friends affected his responses to literary characters.

Each of our interviews was tense, mostly because Arthur always claimed he had so much work to do that "This better be a quick interview; you've got ten minutes." Although he was kidding about the ten minutes, it was obvious he did not like discussing the stories, and he found the entire process an increasing burden. His
responses to the stories and characters became shorter and shorter, and his readings became more superficial. He responded less and less to a character's personality and to the relationships, and more and more to whether he liked the characters or not. His judgements were increasingly emotional and dramatic as his approval or disapproval of a character supplanted his understanding and discussion of that character. He became so disenchanted with reading the stories that the last story, "A Good Man is Hard to Find," took him three weeks to read; and his unusually perceptive written response and my discussion of the story with him, made plain that he had relied on critical work for his responses.

ARThUR'S RESPONSES TO THE STORIES

Arthur's Response to "A Rose for Emily"

The response themes that characterized Arthur's responses to the stories were, to a great degree, evident in his responses to this story. He tended to like the male characters, and he relied on a stereotype to describe Emily's father and his relationship with Emily. Arthur did not like Emily nor did he sympathize with her role in Jefferson.

Arthur began his description of Emily by reflecting upon her role as a member of the Southern aristocracy:
A person like she was, as far as she thought of her family ties, she was one of the founding members of the community and had more privileges than the other members of the community. They were kinda like equal, but what's so special about her? Lack of respect for her elders? Her family had lost respect in the second generation, and were no longer prosperous and well to do. Forget being a respected member of the community...she was now the crazy old woman who never comes outside.

Arthur's responses to Emily rarely went to depths greater than his assessment of her mental health.

She had to be mentally ill; she may have been psycho.

Arthur seemed to have a personal disdain for Emily. He attacked her harshly and personally, with little consideration for how she was affected by the events in her life:

Emily was an old fat lady who was very mentally ill. She's crazy, there's no other way of explaining it. The woman is mentally ill, ask a psychology major.

Flynn (1986) noted that some of her male readers tended to describe many female characters as "crazy" or "insane." I tried several times to get Arthur to explore the motivations for Emily's unusual acts, but his responses were short and superficial: he offered her no sympathy nor did he consider her actions a result of her treatment by her father. About her refusal to pay taxes, he said: "She didn't give a damn about it." He devalued her efforts to sequester her father's body by saying:
Maybe because being a privileged person she is used to having whatever she wanted, and she wants to keep what she’s already gotten and continues from there.

Arthur did not attempt to explore Emily’s personality. I sensed, perhaps, that he did not understand her or her role in life, so he simply considered her totally insane.

In his written and oral responses to the elder Grierson, Arthur demonstrated his affection for the man. Arthur liked the man, perhaps because he felt he could understand him or at least the stereotype he relied upon to describe for the man. In his written response, Arthur described Emily’s father as

a respected member of the community. He helped establish Jefferson. He was probably a strong leader.

During our discussion, Arthur relied heavily on a stereotype I guessed was his version of a "traditional father" to describe the elder Grierson. It took a little time to get a serious response about the character from him.

Eric: How would you describe his role in the family?

Art: A croissant with butter on it, probably.

Eric: Sounds good. Anything you’d like to add?

Art: He was the leader of the family, the bread winner; he was probably the only one who ever got his hands dirty other than in the kitchen—they had servants for that. You have got to go back to the stereotypical eighteenth century father again; the strong
backbone of the family that took care of everyone like a big bird with his wings around the underlings.

Arthur created his own character for Emily’s father. Although the critics and my literature students felt the elder Grierson did provide for Emily, none of them considered him caring. Rather, they thought of him as distant, insensitive, and domineering.

On the other hand, Arthur’s description of the relationship between Emily and her father relied on the same stereotype he had used earlier:

The father that took care of his little baby girl and gave her whatever she wanted, and made sure she was taken care of. He looked after her, your basic eighteenth century stereotypical father towards his little girl. Loving, caring father that would do anything for his little girl... that sort of thing.

When Emily was a child, according to Arthur, she fit the relationship he had described. I asked him what her role was in that relationship.

The reverse of that, where dad comes home, the kid goes "Daddy, Daddy, Daddy, I love you so much." She was the dutiful daughter that did what she was told and admired her father.

The text of the story, however, clearly describes how the elder Grierson chased away Emily’s suitors and tightly controlled her life, essentially keeping her away from her contemporaries. Eventually, these restrictions forced her to Homer Barron for companionship. But, Arthur’s description of Homer was not as strong as his description of Emily’s father. Again, however, he relied on a
stereotype. At the same time, he liked Homer and portrayed him in a positive fashion. In his written response, Arthur described Homer as

a big man from the North, apparently very personable, and everyone liked him. He's a nice guy. He seemed like the funloving type of guy. He was in town for a while; maybe he needed some diversion.

The critics, most often, have described Homer as a despicable character who used Emily and destroyed her hope for joining the contemporary world. My literature students, however, have generally been more sympathetic with Homer but not without being concerned or even suspicious of his motives.

Emily's relationship with Homer, which Arthur described briefly, was one in which he depicted her as powerless. When Homer came to town, according to Arthur,

Emily was the most readily available. She probably threw herself at his feet. She was bored and lonely. The critics and my literature students generally felt that, at least to a certain degree, Emily had some power in the relationship. Arthur considered her simply possessive:

She fell in love with him and got possessive of him. If she couldn't have him, no one else would.

I have not been able to determine whether Arthur approved of the relationship between Homer and Emily. Their relationship did, however, fit the stereotype for
relationships depicting strong men and weak women that Arthur used and approved of in later stories.

Arthur judged the characters in this story based on whether he liked them or not. His judgements were, perhaps, based on whether they fit certain stereotypes he could understand or easily apply to them. His portrayal of Emily's father was rich in description and understanding in comparison to his portrayal of Emily, whom he made little attempt to even try to understand.

Arthur's Response to "An Episode in the Life of Professor Brooke"

Arthur spoke at great length about the characters in this story, perhaps because the story is contemporary and depicts everyday individuals in believable situations (see Chapter Two). Arthur quickly made decisions about whether he liked the three main characters in the story and was very consistent in the way he portrayed their actions and motivations throughout the story. He liked Professor Riley and never criticized the character. Arthur disliked Brooke, and the character seemed to be able to do no good. Ruth, on the other hand, Arthur liked, but depicted her as weak and easily manipulated. These were the richest of his responses, and this was the only story he admitted
liking, mostly because he understood the characters and relationships.

Arthur clearly did not like Professor Brooke, but his response was not as emotional as it was to other characters he did not favor. He conceded to having a negative opinion of Brooke at the beginning of the interview.

In trying to make himself better, he was cutting down others as much as he could. That's what I saw throughout the story.

In his written response, Arthur said that Brooke was "in the middle of his life trying to cover up his failures," that he "saw himself as faultless," and that he was "mean at heart." He was consistent in his negative depiction of Brooke, an attitude I did not find in my literature students. Even those students who disliked Brooke still thought he had some positive intellectual and paternal qualities. Arthur simply judged him.

He's disgusted with the universe, and he wants to end it all right now. I just think that he had this superiority complex thing. He thought: "no one less than I can be right." Brooke was unnecessarily harsh on everyone throughout the story.

Brooke, according to Arthur, was even harsher on himself:

It's because he doesn't like himself. But he doesn't want to admit it so he has to take it out on someone and it's Riley.

I'm not sure why Arthur didn't like Brooke, but perhaps Brooke's tendency to be critical of others sparked
the dislike. Arthur had said in the initial interview that people tend to "dislike people who were like themselves." Arthur's strong tendency to criticize and judge others, at least in these short stories, may have precipitated the lack of affection he felt for Brooke. In other words, he sensed that he was like Brooke and maybe disliked him for that reason.

To Arthur, Professor Riley could do no wrong, and his affection for the character exceeded that of most of my literature students. In his written response, Arthur described Riley as a "hard worker with a heart," a bit "eccentric," but "easy going and likeable." He followed up this description when I asked him why he thought Riley was a "hard worker with a heart."

OK. He seemed to be one of them that has some give with the students, who would work with them, that little extra bit trying to help them with their problems. I thought that he had a heart; he talked to Brooke about the woman who had been turned down for tenure because she didn't come up to Brooke's standards but had serious [family] problems. Riley thought they should help her out. I thought that he cared.

This episode happened early in the story and may have depicted Riley in a role Arthur favored, especially since he mentioned in his autobiography that he wanted a career in which he could help others. The same event may have turned him against Brooke. Whatever the case, Arthur's commitment to Riley was consistent throughout the story;
and, although most of my literature students liked Riley, few assigned him the positive character attributes Arthur had and did not criticize or judge him.

Riley was not the judging type; this is a serious difference in their [Brooke and Riley] personalities which I failed to observe in my written response. Riley was able to accept [the candidate applying for the job] the way she was. However, Brooke, being the judgemental one, could not come down off this little mountain of superiority and be on her level and realize she needed help.

Arthur’s tendency to see characters in black and white became apparent in his responses to this story, except for his opinion of Ruth: he liked her but considered her naive and easily manipulated by Brooke. In his written response, he termed Ruth "honest and trusting, the innocent" in the story, Arthur described Ruth as enamored with writers, and "she fell for Brooke because he was the first available writer in her life," even though he was "trying to get his pants off to get to hers." Arthur did not explore Ruth as a character, as most of my literature students did; and, aside from recounting her part in the story, he mostly described her physically. First he mentioned:

I just found it hard to believe that Brooke would find a woman who only had one-eighth inch of hair all that attractive.

Later, reflecting upon the same issue, he referred to Ruth’s needs in the relationship and how she must have looked before chemotherapy.
She wanted him to want her for what she was, not for the dimpled blonde with long hair, but for the good looking person, who, if she had hair, would be a good looking blonde, but she doesn't have any hair.

Arthur seemed to like Ruth because she was honest and unassuming.

She was an honest person, and I would think that as honest as she was, she would think that other people would be as honest with her as she was with them.

According to Arthur, Brooke took advantage of this honesty when he tried to seduce her. He continued the above comment in this way:

Brooke, in his maneuvers, made it sound like she was great, that she was nice, intelligent, beautiful, exotic, to be desired.

The majority of my literature students felt that the result of the affair between Brooke and Ruth brought out humanistic aspects of Brooke's personality, that he stopped judging everyone and respected other people's opinions more often. Arthur, too, thought the relationship brought out Brooke's true personality but in a less flattering way.

Ruth is the catalyst for it, and it just brings out his true personality, so that he really is what he imagines Riley to be. He's underhanded, egotistical, lots of other things.

The evidence supporting several of Arthur's response themes was strong in his reactions to "An Episode in the Life of Professor Brooke." He devalued Ruth's role and depicted her as powerless, accentuating her physical
description and ignoring her psyche. Although he did seem to like her as a character, he did not take her very seriously. She may have fit a stereotype for women with which Arthur was comfortable. Arthur did judge characters as all good or all bad, and he did seem to be moving in the direction of relying on stereotypes to describe them, even if he did not admit doing so. He certainly depicted Brooke as a shameless character, devoid of values, compassion, and respect for others, at the same time he portrayed Riley as faultless, sensitive, and compassionate.

Arthur's Response to "Mistletoe"

Starting with "Mistletoe," Arthur became less serious, more impatient, and, at times, dramatic. He hated this story and two of the three main characters and expressed his dislike numerous times during the interview. Despite these characteristics, Arthur judged the characters emotionally and summarily rejected the narrator and her lover. Although he did not depict the narrator as powerless as he did some of the other female protagonists, he disapproved of virtually everything she did, did not trust her, and considered her antagonistic to her husband. Arthur judged the complex relationship depicted here without much thought: the narrator and Dean were cheating
on their spouses, so what they were doing, despite their needs, was wrong in Arthur’s opinion.

Arthur’s approach to this story might be best summed up by his dramatic display during the interview. Waving his hands, he yelled:

I liked the last story, and I hated this one. Get that straight, I HATED this story: it sucked.

I asked him how this might have affected his answers. He continued his dramatic display:

If I don’t like a story, I don’t get into it. I don’t pay as much attention to the characters. If I don’t like the story, I’m not going to do as well with the questions. I didn’t get too far in this story because I hated it so much. That’s why my answers are so....

A close reading probably was not critical to Arthur’s responses to the story since I suspected he made decisions about whether he liked or disliked the characters early in the story; and, regardless of what they did, he didn’t appear to change his mind.

In his written response, Arthur described the narrator:

The narrator is a self-centered bitch (for lack of a better word) who will do anything to displease Mitch. (She hoped to have a girl when he wants a boy and takes him to the place where she went with her lover.)

He continued his description later in a slightly less judgemental manner:
She stays at home, cooks, cleans, and takes care of the kids when she’s not running around with her lover.

Arthur was very unhappy with the power the narrator exhibited in her family. He felt the abortions she had were unfair to Mitch, and that, perhaps, she should have had the boy he wanted. According to Arthur, the narrator was

wanting a girl and being very happy about the girl just because he wants a boy. Having two abortions when he probably wanted the kids because she just didn’t want them and he did... the babies might have been boys, and she didn’t want that. For some strange reason, she probably insisted on having him go to this little lake where she and Dean always went to get the stupid mistletoe.

Although Arthur did not depict the narrator as powerless, he was angry at the power she did have.

Most of my literature students, even those who did not approve of the affair the narrator had with Dean, suggested that the narrator’s dissatisfaction with life was at least partly due to Mitch, whom they described as insensitive and inexpressive. The author, Jane Bradley, as well, suggested that Mitch was unable to meet the narrator’s needs for sensitivity. Arthur, on the other hand, placed the blame on the narrator, ignoring her emotional life entirely, despite the fact that Bradley thought it was obvious to even the casual reader that the narrator’s emotional life was central to the story.
Arthur discounted it. He thought her dissatisfaction with life and her husband stemmed from being bored and, perhaps, just plain mean.

I think she's probably bored; as a matter of fact, I know she's bored. She's a thorn in the side of Mitch. She does everything possible to piss him off. I know she had nothing to do with the baby being a girl when he wanted a boy, but she sure was happy about it, and taking him up there to the little lake in the woods wasn't a very nice thing to do either. I don't know what she's in life for.

Arthur's characterization of Mitch differed from his more positive characterizations of most of the other principal male characters in the stories. His description of the man was, however, significantly more positive than that of my literature students.

Mitch appears to be tense. He probably knows about Dean and his wife having an affair. Maybe he is too proud to admit the marriage is wasted. Mitch "probably doesn't love his wife, either," admitted Arthur, but felt he was still interested in the family. Arthur described him in the context of his relationship with the narrator. In his written response he said that Mitch "supports the family and tolerates an unloving wife." Later in our discussion he continued his description:

He probably comes home to dinner, says "I'm home," sits down and watches TV till dinner is served, eats dinner, goes back in, watches TV. He just doesn't have too much to do with her. He's there for the girls. He isn't the worst; he does pay some attention to them. Probably plays with them 15-20
minutes a night, then goes into watch the nightly news.

Arthur tried to fit Mitch into a stereotype. I sensed he knew Mitch was not a particularly good father or husband, but he assigned him stereotypical father and husband characteristics in an effort to make him look better.

Since Arthur did not like Dean, he had nothing good to say about him. In his written response, he described Dean in the following manner:

Dean was the scum of the earth who liked to live life to the fullest. He wanted to keep the carefree affair with the narrator and his steady relationship with his wife.

Arthur admitted not liking Dean from the beginning because he had an affair with someone he probably didn’t love because he never intended to leave his wife.

I asked him why he felt this way. He explained in the context of Dean’s relationship with the narrator:

Nine times out of ten a married man doesn’t leave his wife for the other woman, and the fact that in the story he always had a reason to stay with her. If he hadn’t had a stroke, he would have kept coming up with reasons to stay with his wife, so I get the idea that he would never have left her.

Very few of my literature students agreed with Arthur; most thought Dean and the narrator were very much in love.

I asked Arthur what the narrator and Dean’s motivations were for having an affair. His response was superficial:

She wanted an escape from a boring marriage, something to spice up her life. She wanted something to have fun with. She didn’t love Dean either. Dean was in the affair for fun.
Arthur's response to my final question summed up his feelings about the story.

Eric: Do you have any further comments?
Art: Yeah. The story sucked.

Arthur was a continually difficult subject. He often threw the interview off by offering non-related and often nonsensical answers. I felt doing so was his way of not having to confront some of the serious issues in the story. His official excuse for responding superficially to my questions was that he "didn't get into the story."

He did, however, know the events of the story quite well; so I concluded his reply had been an excuse. I pursued the topic, and he admitted he had spent time reading and trying to understand the story.

Yeah. I spent as much time reading; as a matter of fact, I spent more time because I went back and read some paragraphs again. And I read the first part of it twice.

At this point, I didn't know what to believe, and I assumed he simply didn't like the characters in the story or that he did not have enough experience with relationships to explore the characters in greater depth. Rather than admit his inexperience with complex relationships, he may have simply kept the characters and relationships at a distance.

I was surprised Arthur never described Mitch as insensitive or unemotional, since virtually all my
literature students and the other readers in the study used these words to describe him, even those whose responses were as superficial as Arthur's. He harshly judged the narrator and Dean, mostly on emotional terms, because of their relationship. I felt one of the reasons he disliked the narrator so vehemently (more so than he disliked any other female character) was that she was powerful, and his judgements were, perhaps, attempts to undermine her strength. He assigned favorable characteristics, in this case what he might have felt were positive stereotypical husband and father traits, to Mitch. Arthur sympathized with Mitch, perhaps because he was a victim, and because he was the most stereotypical character in the story, and hence, the easiest to understand.

Arthur's Response to "Martha's River"

Arthur's responses to "Martha's River" corresponded, for the most part, to the responses of my literature students and the author, Anne Goette. However, the judgemental and emotional tone that marked his responses to the other stories was present in his responses to this story as well. Contrary to his depictions of characters in the other stories, Arthur sided with the woman in this story and denounced the man. I am convinced that part of
his reaction to the story had to do with the fact that Martha, the female protagonist, represented a traditional "family" that Alan, her husband, was trying to destroy. Her love for family and the fact that her actions were more masculine in character than Alan's might have swayed Arthur's sympathy in Martha's favor. Early in the interview he remarked:

I liked Martha more than Alan because she's there with the family more than he is, although he could be on the farm and still work with the family. The first time you see her in the story, she is being the nice mother, taking care of the kid, playing around and things with the kid.

I asked Arthur to describe Martha:

OK. She was self-centered, the outdoorsy one, airy, strong drive for motherhood, apparently, and a touch of viciousness in her. That's always nice.

I asked him why he admired her viciousness.

It takes someone vicious enough to tell someone, "Jump off here." Actually, they were a pretty good match; it's just that she outwitted Alan. She didn't want anything to do with society, it seemed: she was pretty unconventional.

I concluded that the part of Martha he liked most was the part that was masculine: her ability to take control of a situation, fight for what she wanted, and even carry out an unthinkable act. Arthur admitted admiring her ability to fight:

I like her more [than Alan] because she's fighting having the abortion when he says "you're having an abortion whether you like it or not."
The competition between Martha and Alan enticed Arthur, and twice during the interview he reminded me that the characters had "used each other to try to get what they wanted, and she won."

Arthur was open about liking Martha and the fact she was unconventional. This reading might have been a result of the fact that her actions in the story were aggressively and violently masculine. As he had done in the previous three stories, he embraced one character and totally rejected the other. He was not easy on Alan and took every chance he could to demean him, and, as in the other stories, his likes and dislikes were expressed in personal terms.

Yeah, he was the scum of the Earth. I didn't like him. I found him self-centered; he probably thought he was king of the castle. He looked at Martha as property; everything was what he wanted it to be, and that's the only thing he was going to think about.

He continued discussing Alan later in the interview. I asked him if Martha was justified in murdering Alan.

In a way. Because Alan's already proven what type of person he is, and it comes down to him or the baby.... He's proving he isn't really the nicest guy in the world; like I said, I really didn't like him. I wanted her to kill him...I don't know why I wanted it, she was just the one I was rooting for.

My literature students tended to be equally judgemental. Goette, as well, said to me that she created Alan to have no redeeming qualities.
Arthur and I discussed Alan and Martha's relationship; he thought they were perfectly suited to each other. For the first time, and for reasons I have not been able to determine, Arthur criticized Martha:

Yeah. They used each other. They are both manipulating, conniving, egomaniacs. They must have been a perfect match back in high school. I don't know why they are with each other.

Martha and her son, Jason, according to Arthur,

had a nice little mother-son relationship. It seemed normal to me, other than the fact they lived off by themselves with no neighbors.

He felt differently about Alan's relationship with Jason, since Alan did not have the "normal" relationship Martha enjoyed with her son. It was not the kind of relationship of which Arthur approved.

He doesn't really have much of a relationship with his son because he's never there, and he probably thinks the kid's going to be a little pansy because he's always got his mother around.

Once, Arthur seemed to sympathize with Alan, the only time he did so in the entire interview.

He probably wanted to take care of the family, but just the way he was doing it was like what he thought was best for the family.

The fact that Martha murdered Alan didn't seem to bother Arthur; in fact, he defended her.

Eric: Why did she kill Alan?

Art: Abortion is a way of murder, too. So it was either he was going to murder the baby, or she was going to murder him. Because when
it came right down to the end, she would rather kill her husband than have an abortion.

Eric: Did she have any alternatives?

Art: She could have left him.

Eric: Why didn’t she?

Art: Because she wanted to live out there on the farm.

Eric: You said she wanted to be out there on the farm?

Art: Yeah, she didn’t want the big city or anything, so she couldn’t leave. She couldn’t leave her husband without leaving there, so, in order to have everything she wanted, she’d rather have the kid, the new baby, the farm, the outdoors and freedom than the overbearing chain of a husband. So... off he goes.

Eric: Do you feel like that’s ok?

Art: I wouldn’t do it, but in the story it’s acceptable, it’s only a story.

As much as Arthur’s responses were similar to those he had offered for the other stories, neither of his response themes was plainly evident here. He applauded Martha’s masculine persona and actions, perhaps, because he said in a later interview that he preferred male characters, and, rather than devalue her role as he did for other female protagonists, he accepted it, because to him it represented the traditional family values in which he expressed belief.

Arthur didn’t criticize Alan and Martha’s relationship as he had the other relationships in the stories, even though he approved of Alan’s murder. It is
tempting to suggest that Alan and Martha represented a traditional family and, since Martha may have represented the masculine persona, Alan represented the feminine. If, indeed, Alan represented a feminine character, and Arthur certainly did not like Alan, he did not devalue Alan’s role in the same manner he did the other feminine characters, perhaps only because he was not a woman.

Arthur’s Response to "The Yellow Wallpaper"

Unfortunately, by the time my readers started the fifth story, "The Yellow Wallpaper," Arthur seemed to have grown tired of the entire study. Before the interview, he told me he didn’t have time to meet that week, so I told him we could wait a week, which we did. Towards the end of the interview, which had been going quite well, considering I had sensed during the fourth story that his interest in the study was waning quickly, he admitted to me that his responses were not entirely his own. I believed him; during this interview he had expressed a completely different attitude towards the female character.

Art: I was under a lot of pressure when I read this one. I failed a test because of this thing....

Eric: Did you?

Art: Well, maybe I failed it. I didn’t get a good grade. I just liked this story better; it’s
a better story...they didn't make freaky stories in the 1800s...like "Emily."

Eric: That was written in the twentieth century about nineteenth century fictitious events. Actually, this one was written in 1895. I was just wondering what motivated you to like or dislike the stories. You mentioned something about the male characters.

Art: I was more into the male characters. I talked to [Jane] about the story, and she told me I was looking at it the wrong way. I said, "Yeah, you're right."

I was disappointed to hear that two participants had shared information, especially since I had asked them not to discuss the stories. It seemed logical, however: I had been surprised that, after Arthur's meager written response to "Martha's River," he had turned in such a thorough assessment of "The Yellow Wallpaper," one that expressed respect for the narrator and her role in the family and society. Actually, the response was not, at some points, so different from Jane's.

Arthur's written description of the narrator was different from the way in which he had described the other female protagonists.

Throughout the story the narrator tells John that she is not getting better, and he dismisses her opinion. As a result, she ends up very sick. From this, I get the meaning from the story that we should take women seriously and listen to their opinions, even if we think we know more about something than they do.

Later in his written response, he expressed respect for the narrator, despite the fact that she was mentally ill:
The narrator is an ill, trusting, imaginative, and artistic woman. She is also intelligent and self-knowledgeable.

This description was entirely unlike his portrayals of any of the other women in the stories. I asked him about the theme of the story. He surprised me.

The story was written in the late 1800s, so I get the idea that the meaning of the story was that women have legitimate ideas and opinions, and that we oughta pay attention to them.

We continued, and he told me what he thought the wallpaper symbolized:

A confused world that won't listen to women, relegates them to a lower position in society.

Although Arthur's responses were not, verbatim, the same as Jane's, I sensed the connection when I reread her response to the story. What impressed me the most was the fact that Arthur characterized the narrator and John in the same manner. Jane, like Arthur, had stated that the narrator was "an imaginative type person." They both agreed, as well, that John did love his wife and was sincerely concerned for her welfare but was, according to Arthur, not sensitive to her needs.

He was caring; he tries to take care of his wife, but he doesn't listen to her or spend enough time with her. When she says: "Everything's not right with me: I'm still sick," he doesn't listen to her.

Jane commented on the same situation;

It seems he cares very much about her; he wanted her to get well. But he says: "Don't think about this,
don't think about that"; he listens but doesn’t believe her.

Arthur’s characterization of John was not unusual, since he usually sympathized with the male characters anyway. He described John:

John is a caring, yet somewhat unsympathetic man. He tries to take care of his wife, but he doesn’t listen to her or spend enough time with her. However, I seriously believe he thinks he must take care of everyone—including his wife.

Arthur had not characterized any of the other male protagonists as "unsympathetic." Jane’s description of John was again similar to Arthur’s:

It seems he wanted to ignore the mental problem. He treated only the physical aspect. He refused to talk about her fantasies or let her write about her thoughts and feelings. He’s a comfort to her, but there’s not much more to it than that.

Arthur characterized the relationship between the narrator and John in the following way:

They love each other. He wants what’s best for her (but doesn’t know what that is). She admires him and doesn’t know how to convince him he doesn’t know what’s best for her.

Again, Jane’s characterization was quite similar. I found it somewhat revealing that few of my literature students characterized John as wanting what’s best for the narrator but not knowing what it was.

He’s trying his best to help her with the problem, but I don’t think he’s qualified to help with her problem, that he doesn’t really understand the extent of the problem and that she needs extra help.
Arthur suggested that John treated his wife like a "second-class citizen":

That's the way [women] were treated in that time. It's kinda like: "Go to your room and be quiet, woman!"

Jane had suggested he treated her in a similar manner:

He kinda treated her like a father treats a child. I mean, he listens but doesn't believe her...I mean, parents tend to do that about children.

While Arthur's responses were not uncommon for the story, the fact that the narrator was the only female character Arthur seemed to take seriously, very seriously, convinced me that his responses were not entirely his own. Additionally, Arthur's written response to this story was unusually focused and well-written. Normally, his written responses were short (in one story non-existent): sentence fragments, lists of characteristics, and phrases. Although his written response to this story was not long, the fragmented responses that characterized some of the other stories were absent.

Most of the qualities that characterized Arthur's responses to the other stories were absent here. He did not reject or harshly judge any of the characters, he did not react to the characters on a purely emotional basis, and, most importantly, he did not devalue the woman's role in the story.
"A Good Man is Hard to Find"

Arthur claimed in his response to have read "A Good Man is Hard to Find" before in an English class. I doubted that his claim was true because it took him three weeks to complete a reading and respond in writing to the story and submit written comments. Whatever happened, when I read his written response, I knew he had not responded to the story by simply reading it. I suspected that he had found a book of criticism in the library and taken some notes. His responses to Grandmother, Bailey, and The Misfit were unusually perceptive, unlike anything he had written for me before.

Grandma is the Christ figure. Throughout the story, she says a lot and gets across nothing to Bailey, even though she loves him deeply. Bailey is the clear-headed but unenlightened human race. He sees and hears Grandma but ignores her for the most part. The Misfit is the equal to Satan. He blames all of his problems on Jesus and kills Grandma as soon as she fully assumed the role of the Christ figure at the end of the story.

I asked him about the theme of the story. He replied:

Man is inherently bad and must accept Christ to be good. Jesus gives everyone the benefit of the doubt.

In his written response, he described the symbolic nature of several of the main characters, even though I had not asked for it.

John Wesley—Methodist minister
June Starr—Star of Bethlehem
Grandma's blood is symbolic of the Blood of Christ cleansing humanity
Wherever Arthur found his responses, I was sure they were not his own. Of course, I had told him before the study began the importance of not using critical material or other individuals when responding to the stories. Evidently, he became very tired of the study but still wanted to fulfill his obligation to me. Later in the interview he admitted using outside sources.

The last few paragraphs of the story is where she actually becomes the Christ figure. Remember, I did do stuff on this before, so I've read criticism on the story.

However, whether or not he had actually read the story before is not the critical issue. The fact he used outside sources rendered his responses to the story of little use to my study.

FURTHER DISCUSSION

Earlier in the chapter I discussed the difficulty I had trying to analyze Arthur's responses beyond simply illustrating patterns in his reactions to characters and relationships. For the three other readers in the study, I found some evidence for their responses to the stories in their relationships with family or friends, or in their attitudes towards life that they had expressed to me during the interviews. I have not been able to do the same for Arthur since he told me so little about himself or his family. Consequently, what I have offered here is,
to a great extent, a product of educated conjecture. From my visits to his apartment to do interviews (he said he didn’t have the time to meet me in my office) and our informal discussions during those and other times, I feel I have been able to offer some reflections as to why he responded to the stories the way he did.

Arthur’s responses to the women, I feel, were, at least in part, due to his inexperience with them. He complained often that there were too few male characters in the stories and that "An Episode in the Life of Professor Brooke" was the only story he admitted relating to--since the main characters were men and the story was written by a man.

Art: I noticed something from reading the last story...if you want more answers, give me stories with male main characters because I can understand them better.

Eric: That’s interesting, why?

Art: I don’t know, just look at Professor Brooke. You know, he wasn’t any more developed than the characters in this story ["Martha’s River"] were, but I got more out of it. It must be something I can identify with in a character.

Eric: Well, Alan was a main character in this story.

Art: Yeah, but he was the scum of the Earth. I didn’t like him.

Eric: It’s funny because you weren’t real easy on Brooke either.

Art: I know, but I understand him better.
Eric: Many of the male characters have been fully developed in the stories.

Art: You don’t get to see them as fully. I know I can understand the motivations of a male more deeply than a woman because everyone knows that women are still the mystery of life....

Eric: And men aren’t?

Art: Yeah, we’re not.

Following our discussion of "The Yellow Wallpaper,"

Arthur also discussed male and female characters.

Art: I was more into the male characters. I could understand the male authors better; I can understand their point of view better.

Eric: What do you mean?

Art: It wasn’t that it was the male character because [if it was a female author] that would have a woman’s point of view behind it. The story written by a man that we read—that was probably it.

It was obvious Arthur liked stories written by men. Whether or not he could have distinguished the difference had I not listed the author’s name with each story, I don’t know. It seems clear to me, however, that he believes a male character created by a female author would not be one he could relate to because the female author would be behind the superficial maleness of the character.

During several of our untaped conversations that followed the interviews, he revealed a little of how he felt about women. In our informal discussion following the second interview ("An Episode in the Life of Professor
Brooke"), Arthur talked about some of the controversies affecting his fraternity. He said he strictly opposed allowing women to be full members of fraternities, that the "little sister" arrangement had worked out fine and should be continued. He said he was willing to fight the other members of his fraternity who approved of the change. He strongly criticized the first national fraternity that had admitted women as full members, saying they had corrupted the fraternal system. He admitted he was "old fashioned" about relationships. Later in the same conversation, he rated the sororities by how good looking the members were and characterized one of the organizations as the "fat chick" sorority the fraternities generally ignored.

During the study, I felt that Arthur was perhaps not experienced dealing with women and complex male/female relationships. His judgements of the female characters may have been from a lack of understanding, which he openly admitted, rather than from simply not liking them. The fact he was unwilling to confront the conflicts in the stories was evidence to me that he was unable to understand them and that, perhaps, he had not had enough personal experience with relationships to analyze or interpret them. The fact that he devalued women's roles in the stories may be a result of simply not knowing very
much about women, rather than assigning them a position of lesser importance.
CHAPTER EIGHT
ANALYSIS

It is difficult—perhaps impossible—to make a successful prediction about how an individual reader will respond to a character or an interaction between characters in a work of literature. The purpose of my study has been to observe, record, and attempt to find meaning in the responses of four different people, two men and two women, to gender-related conflicts in six short stories. My study focused on my readers' backgrounds and relationships with family and friends to determine the effect, if any, these influences had on how each of the four individuals responded to the characters and relationships in the six short stories.

RESPONSE THEMES

A response theme is a regularly occurring reaction of a reader to some occurrence or characteristic of a piece of literature. In my study, these themes usually concerned characteristics of a literary character or a
relationship between characters. My analysis of these themes addresses the differences in interpretation that emerged between the responses of the men and the responses of the women in the study. The differences I have noted pertain to my readers' responses to the characters and the relationships between and among these characters in each of the short stories and to the readers' perceptions of the characters' traits. Most of the conclusions I discuss in this chapter, I feel, are tendencies, generalizations that I found to be true for my readers but that may not be true for other similar readers or even for my readers under different circumstances. The ways in which my readers discussed the characters and relationships in the stories suggested to me that each individual reader's relationship with family and friends may influence his or her responses to the literary characters in the six short stories. On the other hand, there are some characters and relationships among characters in the stories that I have not addressed here. In these, I found no significant gender-related differences. Consequently, I have not repeated the individual reader's responses found in Chapters Four through Seven. However, I did find that how each reader construed characters and those characters' motivations, relationships, and roles in the stories was dependent to a great extent on each reader's gender.
In my analysis and comparison of the responses of my four readers, two general response themes emerged. First, the differences in how my readers described male or female characters, their actions and motivations, and sometimes male and female roles (such as father, mother, wife, husband) seemed to be dependent on each reader's gender. In portraying a specific character, there was similarity among the members of a gender as to how to portray a certain literary character or stereotypical male/female role.

A second, and related, theme, concerned how my readers construed such traits as power, strength, sensitivity, autonomy, and weakness in literary characters. These construals were often divided along gender lines, with the two men defining character traits in a way similar to each other, while each of the two women defined the same traits in ways similar to each other but quite different from the men.

THE STORIES
"A Rose for Emily"

Jane and Ann's characterizations of Emily, her father, and their relationship were different from those of Robert and Andrew. The women tended to describe Emily as having more control over her life than did the men. On
the other hand, the men described the elder Grierson's role and motivation as a father in a much more positive manner than did the women.

Emily

The differences in the way the men and women described Emily are divided according to the gender of the reader. Arthur described Emily as being needy and powerless, especially with respect to Homer.

Emily was an old, fat woman who was very ill mentally. She needed someone to love and that loved her. Homer was that person. That's why she started the relationship with him...she was afraid she was going to lose him. So she had to do something to keep him.

Arthur later mentioned that Emily "probably threw herself at Homer" because "she was so bored and lonely."

Robert suggested that "Emily never really had her own life," and that despite the fact that she and Homer were in a relationship, that "she loved him, but I was never really convinced he loved her." In describing Homer, he referred to Emily's many needs.

He probably met some of her needs: someone to talk to, personal touch needs, having somebody around, somebody to care about her, having someone to care about. I think she felt this way. I think he replaced her father a little bit.

Robert later suggested that Emily had "emotional needs" that she wanted Homer to meet. Although Robert did think Emily showed some independence by refusing to pay taxes,
he thought her powerlessness was a product of her "hanging on to the past."

To her it might have been continuing to live the way she always had, but the rest of the world was passing her by.

Homer was a means by which Emily achieved stability, according to Robert.

She was just sort of left stranded, and then Homer, like I said, provided a way to make her life stable again.

The women's reactions to Emily's needs in the relationship with Homer and as an individual were significantly different in Jane's response and subtly different in Ann's. Jane never really considered Emily a needy individual; rather, in our discussion, she described Emily as possessing "a very quiet strength." In her written response, Jane described Emily in the following way:

She has strength. She doesn't take the easy way out by committing suicide. She tries to become self-sufficient by teaching painting.

Emily "enjoyed the relationship" with Homer, according to Jane, rather than approaching it from a standpoint of need. She described Emily's actions after her father's death as efforts to achieve independence. It was, according to Jane,

a new founding of self; now she based herself a little around Homer, but she started to do other things: she invited people to help them paint and stuff like that. So it was a new founding,
and she relied on someone else but more on her sturdy self-foundation.

While most critics and my literature students accepted Emily's necrophilia as fact, Jane thought that Emily was independent enough to forgo sleeping with Homer after a time.

She stayed with Homer in the same room, but during that time, she was also developing herself, so it was possible that she was so secure in herself that she didn't need Homer any more, and she shut the door for years.

Ann's response was less convincing than Jane's, and she described Emily much as the men did.

She was a Southern aristocrat, a recluse and a spinster. She exists because she has to; she has to go on; she just feels like it's her duty to take care of the house.

According to Ann, Emily was still bound by the role her father had instilled in her.

She obeys the old aristocratic ideals that her father instilled in her, and that's how she lives her life now. She can't fit in with modern society.

Although Emily obeyed the old ideals, Ann suggested that her role might change. I asked Ann if Emily's role changed after her father died.

I would assume that it would. I assume she would try to take over the house, and then, I'm not sure.

Ann as unsure of Emily's power but was at least willing to entertain the thought that Emily might be powerful enough to take control of some aspects of her life, as she did in her relationship with Homer. Homer met some of Emily's
needs for companionship but was not her reason for living, according to Jane.

I think Emily needed someone to talk to, companionship; not many people can live in total isolation.

According to Ann, Emily enjoyed the relationship because there was "no pressure" in it. Homer was a commoner, and Emily, an aristocrat, was in control of the relationship.

I mean, she'd never marry him. What difference would it make if they were friends?

**Emily's father**

The differences in my readers' construal of Emily's father was more clear cut. While the men described him using positive stereotypes, the women considered him the reason Emily was troubled.

Arthur considered Emily's father a traditional and stereotypical father: loving, concerned, and caring. He first described the man in his written response.

He probably helped establish Jefferson, was a strong leader of the family, and he was very loved by Emily.

In our discussion of the story, Arthur described the elder Grierson and his relationship with Emily. His first description was the most complete:

He took care of his little baby girl and gave her whatever she wanted and made sure that she was taken care of. He looked after her: your basic eighteenth century stereotypical father towards his little girl. Loving, caring father that would do anything for his little girl...that type of thing.
He later continued his description.

You have to go back to the stereotypical eighteenth century father again: the strong backbone of the family that took care of everyone like a big bird with his wings around everyone.

The stereotype Robert assigned Emily's father and his relationship with her was different than Arthur's, but he still envisioned the man as possessing a kind and protective paternal attitude towards his daughter.

He was a Southern aristocrat and the type of person who was above the common people. I envisioned a plantation-type of person who had lots of assets and a little tie that comes up to here. He was in control of his whole world and seeing to it that no one else interfered with what was rightly his, and that included his daughter. The impression I get from him is that he was very stubborn, very strong-willed, and very in control of what was going on and her life.

Although Robert thought the elder Grierson was responsible for his daughter's dependence on him and was "sort of overbearing," he thought it might well have been the way Emily desired it:

The story talked about relationships that never panned out, that her father had run off guys, and if he had done that, then she may have been told they weren't good enough for her. I think that over a certain period of time you might begin to turn that around and think that it's not these people that aren't good enough, but you're the problem for some reason and that, once again, your father's protecting you and keeping you from being hurt by getting rid of these people before they do it to you, too. So, she might have decided that there wasn't anyone that right for her other than dad.

Both men portrayed Emily's father as a paternal figure: Arthur's figure was kind and sensitive; Robert's
was strong and firm. The women thought Emily’s father was in control as well, but they described a man possessed by much different motives. In describing him, they also described the relationship he had with his daughter. Jane depicted him in the following manner in her written response:

He seems like a domineering man. One feels that none of the town’s boys are good enough for his daughter.

Later in the same response, she continued, reflecting upon his relationship with Emily.

Emily was ruled by this man, and she was not even married by age 30. She must have identified herself through her father alone, for she had little contact with the townspeople.

Ann, in her written response, described him as a Southern aristocrat, over-protective, controlling. He had a high and mighty attitude.

In the interview, she stated:

He’s like a brick wall, stone wall. That’s just how I think of him. He just believed in what he believed in, and no one could get to Emily. He’s like the picture they describe in the book [standing in front of Emily with a whip]. In order to get into their house, you had to get past him.

It is clear that the men and women construed Emily’s father in different ways, that they assigned different motivations to actions they perceived in an almost identical manner. The same is true for their portrayals of his relationship with Emily’ and, although each of the readers understood the facts of the relationship between
Emily and her father, the men described the relationship as being more affectionate and loving than did the women, who considered Emily a victim of her domineering father.

"An Episode in the Life of Professor Brooke"

Differences emerged in my readers' portrayal of Ruth and her relationship with Brooke. When discussing Ruth, the same characteristics women defined as empowering, the men described as a product of her being "innocent." Both men described the purpose of the relationship between Ruth and Brooke as being for fun or sex; the women described the same relationship as spiritually beneficial for both characters. Additionally, the men thought that Brooke was helping Ruth with her needs, whereas the women thought Ruth was helping enrich Brooke's rather dull perspective on life.

Ruth

The women liked Ruth and saw her as a strong and independent woman who was in control of her life. Despite her bout with cancer, she was still open and honest with Brooke, a trait Jane admired:

Ruth is sensitive, deep, caring, and spontaneous. She wore a wig because of the chemotherapy's effect on her hair. She took off the wig at her house and was open with Brooke. She felt no shame or need to hide her bald skull from Brooke.
Later in our discussion, Jane talked about Ruth’s spiritual strength:

It seems she’s more into mysticism, more into the soul, the inner self. She’s trusting towards Brooke, and she seems more of a deep person, an in-depth person.

I asked Jane how Ruth felt about Brooke. She replied:

I think she respected his intelligence, respected his opinion, almost a mentor-type of thing.

Ann described Ruth as "compassionate, a fighter; she survived cancer; sensuous, exciting." I asked her to comment on the above description:

With the way she thought about poetry, she just seemed like a good person. Really nice and she just liked to get to know people. With feeling, she took everything in and just tried to use her senses to the fullest.

She continued a few minutes later.

She just really took everything in, like with the poetry, and saw their real meanings, not just the words, the real meaning.

Both Jane and Ann described Ruth as a stable, mature, and well-adjusted individual. Life had been hard on Ruth, both women commented, but agreed she had grown from her experiences.

There was little dispute among the men and women in the study about Ruth’s actions, but the men construed her personality very differently. I noted that both men tended to describe Ruth in the context of her relationship with Brooke or the poet, Dillon; the women discussed her
as an individual. Arthur did not think Ruth was very independent.

Ruth is the innocent. She credits her life to a writer, so when she meets Brooke, she becomes interested and does what she can to attract him.

Arthur said very little about Ruth as an individual; in this comment, he talked of her relationship with Dillon.

I had asked him why he considered Ruth an "innocent."

Because of the poet, Francis X. Dillon. She credited him with saving her life. She was already predisposed to like writers, and then there was Brooke, who made absolutely no attempt to get away from her. She didn't know he was married, unless she was observant and looked at his left hand. She fell for him because he was the first available writer in her life.

Robert, too, felt that Ruth was a passive and innocent character with little purpose in life. In his written response, he stated:

I think Ruth is lonely and has had a hard time over the past few years. I think her experiences with cancer have caused her to really take the time to enjoy life, and I think she is finding that enjoyment from reading. I feel that Ruth believes all writers dream of beautiful things and write about them. I think she is interested in Brooke because she feels he writes like that.

In our conversation, he discussed Ruth’s relationship with writers again.

She was kind of naive. I think she looked up to these people. I think when she would read the poetry, it was more than just idle words or just a passing thought. She really believed that these people had these real strong inner emotions, and she wanted to identify with them. She believed all writers had this style.
Several critical differences emerged from the manner in which the men and women construed Ruth. Robert and Arthur considered Ruth powerless and dependent on men; both men thought she was dependent on writers for feeling a sense of personal power. Jane and Ann said Ruth "respected" writers; Robert and Arthur stated she "admired" them. Ruth's experiences with poetry, according to the men, made her believe in poetry and poets. The women felt the same experience helped her believe in herself. The women discussed her strength as derived from her experience with cancer. The men, as well, admitted that she had learned something from the illness: simply to admire writers and their work.

According to Robert, her experiences with cancer have caused her to become passive: "liking to read." In Arthur's case, because of her illness, "she falls for the first available writer." The women described her as more active, deep, and caring and looking for the inner meaning in life.

The Relationship between Ruth and Professor Brooke

Some of the same issues emerged again in the readers' portrayal of Ruth and Brooke's relationship. Both men described Ruth as being powerless in her relationship with Brooke, whereas the women described the relationship as
one of equals. Jane described the relationship between them as "one way":

She opened up her soul to him basically; she shared things that were really important to her. She lowered her barriers completely; she took off her wig and admitted she had been in chemotherapy. It was a one-way relationship. She put into it a lot more than he did. He went along with the flow; he let his barriers down, but didn’t put into it any more than humouring her and trying not to destroy her feelings.

Jane thought Ruth was in control of the encounter, and not only had she initiated it, but she knew exactly what she wanted out of it:

She didn’t say she wanted a relationship beyond that night; she was just looking to share, where Brooke wasn’t looking for an affair, necessarily, but he went along with things.

Ann, too, thought Ruth had a great deal of control over the relationship, so much so that Brooke benefitted in ways he might not have thought he would. In her written response, Ann stated:

The relationship between Brooke and Ruth was a very passionate one. Brooke had always suppressed his emotions, and Ruth brought these out. He’s been so mechanical and methodical all his life that he didn’t realize what he was missing until he was with her. They shared this one special moment together, and, even though they may never see each other again, they are bonded for life.

Ann considered the relationship a more passionate one than any of the other readers. Brooke learned from Ruth, according to Ann, and she said that, following the encounter,
he saw his life in a whole new light...that there's more beneath the surface. She taught him a lot about life.

Ann, like Jane, thought Ruth was firmly in control of the affair. She stated:

I don't think she wanted anything else out of it. I think she feels glad he accepted her and that made her feel good.

Both Robert and Arthur shared an opposing opinion of the encounter: they thought Ruth was motivated out of desperation and need, and that Brooke befriending her was a gracious act. As well, both men thought Brooke was interested in seducing Ruth, a subject Jane had mentioned only in passing and that Amy did not discuss at all.

Arthur described the relationship as a "mistake":

The relationship between Brooke and Ruth has two sides. Brooke sees it as a mistake which is to be forgotten and covered up. Ruth loves Brooke and wants to remember it. She is very emotionally tied to Brooke and their affair. She probably even believes that Brooke was deeply attracted to her.

Brooke's interest, according to Arthur, was mostly to "get his pants off to get to hers." Brooke did, however, have other motives. Arthur stated: "I found it hard to believe he would find a woman who had one-eighth inch of hair attractive," but he felt Brooke humoured her:

I just thought he was doing everything possible to make himself sound like what she wanted to hear.

Arthur admitted that Brooke did "get into the poetry" for a while, but ultimately the relationship meant "nothing,
something to hide from his wife." It had "been fun" for Brooke, according to Arthur, but for Ruth it was different.

She had become tied to him, tied to the emotions that had developed, so I think she was in love with him.

Robert, too, felt that Ruth's emotional involvement was deeper than Brooke's.

I don't know if love's the right word, but I think there is an emotional involvement. I guess love's as good a word as any. I don't know that it's so much, not a deep love. I think she's in love with the idea of what she thinks he is more than he actually may be.

Robert suggested that there was "a sharing of common interests" between Ruth and Brooke, and that they "each got out of it what they wanted," but he saw Ruth as needy.

I don't think there were any ulterior motives. I don't think she came there to meet Brooke; it was a coincidental meeting. I think to some extent any of them would have been OK; it didn't necessarily have to be Brooke to fulfill what her needs were. I think she just wanted to get close to one of the writers.

Later in the discussion, he continued on the same topic.

I think that sending him the poems is proof of that [that she got something out of the relationship], that she had touched with someone that she could care for, someone who would think about her and that she could communicate with.

According to Robert, for Brooke, however, the relationship was not so important.

To him, this was the biggest sin, or whatever, he's done, and so he's gotten all that excitement out of it.
The men and women in the study construed the relationship between Ruth and Brooke as addressing notably different needs and desires. While the women depicted a relationship in which Ruth was equally powerful as Brooke, or even more so, the men considered Ruth weak and needy. It was interesting to note that Jane and Ann never termed Brooke weak, only dull, methodical, or mechanical. The women thought Ruth's emotional depth was a sign of power, a balanced personality, whereas the men considered it a weakness that made Ruth needy and dependent on men. This same emotional depth was something Jane and Ann thought Ruth wanted to share with someone as a means of enrichment.

The men thought Ruth got involved emotionally with Brooke and, perhaps, even became dependent on him. Jane portrayed the relationship as friendly, and Ann, who considered the relationship sensuous, also noted how the relationship satisfied needs for both Ruth and Brooke.

"Mistletoe"

The gender-related response themes that characterized the differences in responses between the men and women in the study were strong in "Mistletoe." The readers' conceptions of the three main characters, their motivations, and description of the relationships were
sharply divided along gender lines. In general, the men tended to be sympathetic with Mitch, and the women were sympathetic with the narrator. Although the men did not strongly disapprove of Dean, they did condemn his motivations in his relationship with the narrator. The women liked Dean and tended to trust him in the relationship with the narrator, even if they questioned the moral propriety of the affair.

The narrator/her relationship with Mitch

Arthur and Robert's portrayals of the narrator, her husband, Mitch, and their relationship were similar to each other. Arthur described the narrator in his written response.

The narrator is a self-centered bitch who will do anything to displease Mitch (she hopes to have a girl when he wants a boy and takes him to the place where she met with her lover).

Several times during our discussion of the story he expressed what he thought were her motivations in life and in her marriage.

Eric: What reasons does the narrator have to have an affair?

Art: She hates his guts.

Eric: What reasons does she have to continue the relationship the way it is?

Art: None. She isn't happy there, and all she's doing is making his life miserable and her life miserable.
Eric: Why does she want to be with Dean?

Art: Because she's bored; she wants something other than her husband.

Later I asked Arthur about the narrator's role in the family. He replied:

She's a thorn in the side of Mitch. She does everything possible to piss him off.

Robert had a similar reaction to the narrator and her relationship with Mitch. He described the narrator in his written response a little more sympathetically than Arthur had.

The narrator seems to be longing for a special moment. She seems a little selfish and not interested in her husband.

In our discussion, Robert was harder on her. He spoke of the narrator's reasons for having her family drive into the forest to find mistletoe.

They are driving out in the middle of nowhere, and that's simply for her. It's not the mistletoe she's after but to recreate this feeling and emotion she had [with Dean]. It strikes me as selfish, and here she's taking her family so she can relive a relationship she had with somebody else, and it struck me as being selfish.

Later, he discussed her role in the family:

I don't feel she's a part of the family. I think she's living in her own little fantasy of what she wants, and she's on a drive and a mission to find that. She has no regard to what's becoming of her family. She has no regard to what happens to Mitch. She probably cares for the kids, but I don't think she's fair to them. Like I said, I think she has a selfish attitude; she looks at them and sees "little narrators" and not themselves.
The women in the study had clearly different perceptions of the narrator and her relationship with Mitch. Jane liked the narrator and approved of her attitude towards life:

The narrator is a very deep individual, and sensitive and thoughtful. She is trapped in a relationship she does not enjoy with a man she does not respect. She feels like she's "underwater," drowning and suffocating. Not really living life, just going through the motions.

She continued with a description of the narrator's marriage to Mitch:

She's in a marriage with a man she doesn't respect or love. He makes life difficult for her; she makes life difficult for him. I don't even know why she married him in the first place. Possibly a marriage of convenience.

Although she's placing some of the blame on the narrator here, Jane later makes it clear who has caused the problem:

Mitch seems very content with the way he is, the person he is. He wants a wife, somebody who will fulfill the other part of the role, somebody who will cook and clean and let him be who he is.

According to Jane, the narrator, however, has different ideas about her own life:

She wants to be different; she wants to get out and enjoy life and get more out of life than just being a regular housewife and cooking and cleaning and taking care of the children. That's where her conflict in the relationship comes out. She wants to be different.

Ann's response portrays the narrator as content with her life but still in need of change. In her written
response, Ann described the narrator the way in which Jane did.

She is just a housewife. She takes care of her two kids, and she loves them. I think she really does. She cooked, cleaned and took care of her children. I think she feels safe with Mitch, and there is security, but I don’t think she is happy.

Ann said she thought the narrator and Mitch had an "understanding" and described their relationship this way:

The narrator and Mitch have a safe and happy love. They make ends meet and can provide a happy home for their kids. They need each other for security.

Ann placed the blame for the narrator’s unhappiness on Mitch, who she suggested is "almost like a zombie; he’s not really living life; he’s just going through the motions." The narrator wanted "the perfect man," Ann noted, and Mitch did not meet her needs.

Arthur and Robert placed blame on the narrator’s estranged relationship with Mitch and thought her selfishness and unfair treatment of Mitch were responsible. Jane blamed Mitch for the couple’s problems, whereas Ann tended to blame neither the narrator nor Mitch but expressed the narrator’s frustration with Mitch’s inexpressiveness and lack of emotion. Ann’s later description of Dean led me to believe that she felt Mitch’s emotional shortcomings were responsible for the affair and the sad state of their marriage.
Mitch

How my readers portrayed Mitch was divided along gender lines as well: the men liked and approved of him; the women did not. The men focused their comments on the abuse Mitch had to endure from his wife, whereas the women frequently noted Mitch’s emotional disabilities. In the description of the narrator quoted above, Arthur assigned Mitch victim status and strongly objected to the way the narrator treated him. He suggested that Mitch was a stereotypical husband and father (see Chapter Seven) and never mentioned Mitch being unemotional or inexpressive. Mitch, according to Arthur, had some qualities only he and Robert mentioned:

Eric: What is Mitch’s role in the family?
Art: To support his family and tolerate an unloving wife.
Eric: Anything else?
Art: He’s there for the girls.
Eric: What kind of a father do you think he is?
Art: Probably plays with the kids 15-20 minutes a night, goes in to watch the nightly news.
Eric: Would you consider him a good father?
Art: He isn’t the worst. He does pay some attention to the kids.

Robert agreed with Arthur’s portrayal of Mitch and also described him as the narrator’s victim:
She makes her husband out to be an uncaring, unloving person. I think in many ways she is not being fair to him. She never gives him a chance.

Later in the discussion, Robert again described Mitch in a positive manner. I had asked him to describe Mitch’s role in the family:

To me, he’s the father and that’s about it. To some extent he’s a victim of her. I really think she’s being awfully hard on him. I don’t think he’s as bad as she thinks he is. I think he loves the children, loves her, and cares about them. I think he’s caring, I think he’s part of the family, he loves the family, and that’s the one thing holding it together. He’s the tie to it.

The women in the study described Mitch as what they considered stereotypically male: unemotional and inexpressive. They considered the narrator to be Mitch’s victim. In her written response, Jane stated her feelings clearly:

Mitch is a simple, shallow, self-contained person who just eats, sleeps, and watches football. He is selfish and impatient. He loves Marta [his daughter], but he does not love his wife. Mitch is like a machine.

She continued her description in our discussion.

I don’t think much motivates him. He seems to fall into the stereotypical male husband role that you always hear about. He gets home, he expects his wife to cook and clean for him. He’s the breadwinner, he goes out and hunts, and stuff like that. It seems like he doesn’t want anything more out of life than that.

Ann was more explicit in her description; and, although she did not dislike Mitch, she noted his disability:
Eric: What is Mitch like?

Ann: He can’t express his feelings too well. Like, it said at one point that he looked at Marta, and you could tell he loved the girl. But he just never really showed it.

Eric: What motivates him?

Ann: To exist, because he doesn’t know anything else. He is almost like a zombie. He is not really living life; he is just going through the motions.

Eric: Why do you think so?

Ann: That is just the way he is. He likes his life like that.

Ann, too, resorted to stereotypes to sum up her discussion of Mitch. Ann had said that Mitch fit a "male role":

Eric: Do you think Mitch loved his children?

Ann: In his own way.

Eric: What do you mean "in his own way"?

Ann: He is not one of those people who is going to go around telling them how much he loves them or that he is going to kiss them good night or give them a hug or praise them. He loves them deep down, but he just can’t express it.

Eric: Does this have anything to do with your mentioning him in your written response as having a male role?

Ann: Yeah. I think you do picture that… the father, the man that never cries or anything like that or shows affection.

All four readers had strong feelings about Mitch and his part in the relationship with the narrator. Jane and Ann felt Mitch represented a stereotypical male. Arthur
did, too, but he did not consider his stereotype a negative one. The men defended Mitch and expressed dislike for the narrator, whereas the women empathized with the narrator’s plight but did not seem to dislike Mitch.

Dean

The narrator’s lover, Dean, was another source of disagreement among the readers. The men distrusted Dean. They suggested that he was simply out for a fling with the narrator and that the relationship did not mean anything. In contrast, the women trusted him and his motivations, even though they admitted he was an unfaithful husband.

In his written response, Arthur expressed a dislike for Dean:

Dean was the scum of the earth who liked to live life to the fullest. He wanted to keep the carefree affair with the narrator and his steady relationship with his wife.

Robert, too, thought Dean was an opportunist:

Dean was not the great guy she thought he was. It was just an affair to him, and I don’t think the relationship meant the same to him as it did to her.

He continued later, suggesting that the narrator’s perception of Dean was part fantasy:

I think she really built him up that he was Mr. Right, the person she wanted. But I don’t think he was that; I think she’s remembering it as a distorted [and] extreme point of view.
Jane and Ann had a completely different perception of the character. Jane described Dean early in our discussion.

Dean sees a lot and is different from Mitch. He likes the outdoors, he likes the little details, like hearing the songs of the birds and knowing which birds are which before he even sees them. He seems very intent, and very, I don’t know the word, aware, maybe aware seems a better word for it.

Ann had an even more favorable impression of Dean. In her written response, she stated the following:

Dean never wasted a second of his life. He loved and appreciated all the beautiful things the world had to offer.

The interpretations of the relationship between Dean and the narrator were also divided by the gender of the reader. Arthur and Robert did not trust Dean, considered the relationship a loveless lark for him, and felt he was exploiting the narrator. Jane and Ann considered the relationship meaningful and growth-producing for the narrator.

The Relationship between the Narrator and Dean

Arthur, in his written response, described the relationship this way:

For the narrator, it was an escape from a suffocating marriage. She didn’t love Dean because she dismissed the thought of continuing the relationship with him when he had a stroke. Dean was in the affair for fun and didn’t intend to leave his wife.
According to Arthur, the narrator was in it for fun, too:

She was looking for a little excitement. She seems very bored and cooped up with her current marriage.

Robert agreed with Arthur, although he believed the narrator was in love with Dean.

I got the feeling, based on what they said, that he was just out after an affair on his wife. It was always one thing after another, and I doubt that he ever intended to leave his wife. This was an affair, something fulfilling whatever needs. I don’t think he loved her in the same way she loved him. To her, this was a big moment: her life had changed. I don’t think he felt that way; I think he was just going along to go on with it and hold it for as long as he could, but I don’t think he was going to leave his wife.

Jane and Ann, on the other hand, felt it was a loving, trusting, and passionate relationship. Jane described the relationship this way in her written response:

They interact as people; they care about each other as people. She feels very free when she’s with him, she opens herself up, and she enjoys life.

Ann commented on the relationship several times. In her written response, she referred to the romantic aspects of the affair:

The narrator and Dean had a passionate affair. They would take walks and enjoy life together. They had secret hideaways because they were both married.

During the interview, Ann returned to the topic to expand on her written comments.

She was getting, in her eyes, the perfect man. It was just like a paradise. They were kinda secluded from the rest of the world, and it was everything she wanted. He would notice the birds and all
that kind of stuff. I guess her perfect life was there with him.

The differences that emerged between the men's and women's responses to the characters and relationships in "Mistletoe" led me to conclude that gender was a more significant factor in this than in the other stories, perhaps, because marriage and infidelity are important issues to these four readers and to college students in general. I will discuss this issue at greater length at the conclusion of this chapter.

"Martha's River"

The theme that emerged most strongly from "Martha's River" was the readers' construal of Martha's role. The men discussed Martha as an individual in society attempting to control her own destiny. The women, on the other hand, responded to Martha as a mother focused on a crisis primarily related to the family. A related theme that emerged from the responses involved the readers' perceptions of Martha and Alan's relationship: the women perceived the conflict between Alan and Martha in the context of the family; the men interpreted the story as related to individuals struggling with their own problems.
Martha

The differences in how the men and women in the study perceived Martha was clear, and how they interpreted her actions in the story was related to what they considered her crisis to be: as a mother in a family or as an individual in society. Arthur liked Martha’s masculine energy (see Chapter Seven); and, although he commented that she had a "strong drive for motherhood," he assigned her a role that deemphasized her role in the family and focused on her identity and rights as an individual. I asked Arthur about Martha:

Eric: What motivates Martha?
Art: What?
Eric: What is important to Martha in life?
Art: Oh. To be free.

Arthur liked Martha because "she’s in there with the family more than [Alan]," but he felt the forces motivating her had more to do with her rights and independence than it did with being a good mother.

The first times that you see her in the story she is being the nice mother, taking care of the kid, playing around and things. Then you see Alan. I like her more because she’s fighting having an abortion when he says: "You’re having an abortion."

Toward the end of the interview, Arthur said that the river symbolized "justice," that it might be "the other man in her life."
Robert characterized Martha in a similar manner:

freedom was the critical issue.

I guess she wanted to be totally free. She had a very romantic attitude and viewed all of the outdoors and life in this romantic way.

He continued his description a few minutes later:

She seems very independent, very, very free. She's interested in life and not just the actual living. She wants to make every minute like an eternity.

Martha's decision not to use her diaphragm in order to become pregnant was an act of independence, according to Robert: "When she decided not to use her diaphragm, she was taking charge of her own life."

Jane and Ann considered the issues related to family to be Martha's greatest concern. In her written response, Jane characterized Martha as a somewhat neglectful mother:

She's very selfish. She's not thinking about Jason's future. She desires her world to remain the same. She wants Jason to be solely dependent on her...doesn't want him to go to school...isn't concerned with his future and his ability to survive in the world.

In our discussion, she continued:

She was wrapped up in the world of the farm. I mean, she and the child did things together, and she didn't want him to go off to school. I think that's a little selfish, in that he has no other children to play with. It seems she wanted to keep him there on the farm with her for the rest of his life.

Jane openly characterized Martha as a mother when we were discussing Martha's relationship with Alan:
Eric: You said that neither cares about each other's feelings.

Jane: No, they didn't.

Eric: What are they getting out of this relationship, then?

Jane: It seems to come back to role-playing again. Martha fulfills the role of wife and mother; she's back on the farm waiting for Alan to return.

Ann's characterization of Martha as a mother was as strong as Jane's. In her written response, she described Martha as "loving, caring, selfish, overprotective."

Another question on the questionnaire asked readers to describe what was important to Martha. Ann wrote:

For Martha, the important things in life are the simple things. She appreciates the tranquil woods and the unconditional love of her son.

In our discussions, Ann expanded her description of Martha as a mother:

[Alan and Martha] did need each other for some stability. Alan wanted a little wife to come home to, and she wanted a husband to provide for her. I think she did want a family and that was why she was with him. Because she obviously had managed to get pregnant once before.

Jane and Ann framed Martha's life exclusively around the family and said little else about her, whereas Arthur and Robert considered Martha an autonomous individual struggling with issues beyond the family unit. The men spoke little of Martha's obligations to the family, nor
did they criticize her for what the women considered a dereliction of domestic duties.

"The Yellow Wallpaper"

My readers' construal of the narrator's mental health was the only significant gender-related response to "The Yellow Wallpaper." While Arthur and Robert thought the narrator was mentally disturbed, Ann thought she simply was oppressed by her husband; but Jane thought she had lost touch with reality by being too imaginative and drifting into a fantasy.

The Narrator

As I noted in Chapter Seven, Arthur's responses to "The Yellow Wallpaper" were affected by his conversation with Jane about the story. I do feel, however, that his portrayal of the narrator was his own, for the following reasons: 1) How he described the narrator in his written response was similar to Jane's rather in-depth response, but in his discussion, he portrayed the narrator simply as insane; 2) His written responses that were most like Jane's were not in his writing style, nor did the adjectives he use appear in his descriptions of any other characters; 3) Portraying the narrator as insane fits the pattern of description that Arthur established for
most of the other female characters; that is, he tended to be very critical of them without providing an in-depth analysis. The weight of this evidence led me to believe that in his oral comments he may have offered me his true opinion of the narrator. In his written response, Arthur described her in the following manner:

The narrator is an ill, trusting, imaginative, and artistic woman. She is also intelligent and self-knowledgeable.

At the beginning of our discussion, the following portrayal emerged:

**Eric:** Let's talk about some of the characters. What did you think about the narrator?

**Art:** She was a little touched.

**Eric:** What's wrong with her?

**Art:** Mental problems.

**Eric:** Like?

**Art:** I don't know what, maybe, schizophrenia... they never say. She was just sick... nervous breakdown, that's it!

Robert, too, felt that the narrator had mental problems. In his written response, he offered this analysis.

She is paranoid. She seems superficially aware of her condition, but places her condition on other objects like the wallpaper, the bureau, and the bars.

He described her in a similar way in our discussion of the story.
She seems intelligent but definitely paranoid. She has true fears and feelings and really believes there is someone behind the wallpaper.

Later in the discussion, he continued his description, saying: "I think she's really sick...a 'brick shy of a load,' you know?"

Jane and Ann's portrayal of the narrator differed from that of Arthur and Robert. The critical issue was her mental health: neither woman considered the narrator's condition to be a mental illness. In her written response, Jane suggested the narrator succumbed to her creative fantasies but never discussed it as a mental affliction. Jane even hinted that John may have been a source of her affliction:

The story traces the narrator from a base in reality to a transference into a fantasy. She seems imaginative at the beginning, full of fancy. But she knows there is something wrong with her. She wishes she was allowed to work--she wants excitement and change. She goes behind John's back and writes down her thoughts and feelings, but it tires her.

Jane's discussion of the narrator was similar:

It seems the narrator's very imaginative; she fancies that it's a nice old house [they are renting], possibly haunted. It seems like she's just an imaginative-type person, and she's under the care of her husband for a nervous condition, but it talks about how he's a physician and how he's treating her physical condition. He's more concerned about physical health and stuff like that, and when she mentions her fantasies and imaginations, he firmly represses it, and he asks her to control herself and concentrate, and not to think about it.
Ann's response was different from that of the other readers in the study, and she blamed the narrator's condition on John, the narrator's husband:

The narrator is sensuous, kind, caring, unsure of herself, and imaginative. They [her husband and Dr. Mitchell] think just because she doesn't want to be their stereotypical role that something's wrong with her, and so she's got to get better. They say she can't be a functional part of society until she fulfills what they think she should be. She thinks: "Well, I guess I'm sick." She doesn't understand, and she kinda goes crazy because of their trying to make her into something that she's not, and she's trying to get out, and she can't. She wants to write, and they won't let her be herself.

The gender-related differences in how the men and women discussed the narrator's mental health is important. What the women perceive as artistic, sensitive, and intelligent, the men, to a great extent, simply term insane.

"A Good Man is Hard to Find"

The responses from Robert, Jane, and Ann to this story were similar to each other and to the responses of my literature students (see Chapter Two). Arthur's responses were affected by the fact he used critical work to help him interpret the characters and relationships (see Chapter Seven). I found no significant gender-related differences among my readers' responses and feel that one or more factors may have been responsible.
This story was experimental, as I discussed in Chapter Two: I wanted my readers to interpret the mother/son relationship. While I feel my readers might have been "thrown off" somewhat by being confronted with a non-romantic relationship that was unlike those that appeared in the other stories (except for Emily and her father in "A Rose for Emily"), O'Connor's vivid portrayal of Grandmother may account more for the uniformity of my readers' descriptions of her. Of all the characters in all the stories in my study, my readers had more information about Grandmother than any other character. O'Connor's complete and narrow portrayal of Grandmother may have left a small range of interpretation to which my readers could respond. The fact that my literature students and the critics all portrayed her similarly leads me to conclude that the story was, perhaps, a poor choice for my study.

The readers' responses to Bailey, Grandmother's son, were more varied than the ones they offered for Grandmother. Again, however, no significant gender-related differences emerged from the responses. In this case, I feel the description O'Connor offers was scant and the responses offered by my readers reflected an interpretation, I feel, that critics might have
wished...that Bailey was passive and easily manipulated (see Chapter Two).

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the fact that I could not use Arthur's response to the story left me with the possibility of making only a partial comparison of gender-related responses among readers. If his responses had been his own, a more complete comparison would have been possible, and gender-related differences may have emerged.

CONCLUSIONS

The data I have collected in my study have led me to conclude that two forces helped determine the responses of my readers to the actions and motivations of literary characters and their relationships in the short stories they read.

First, I feel my readers' families and experiences growing up influenced their construal of the motivations, actions, roles, and relationships of characters. They projected characteristics of individuals they know onto literary characters in the stories, and, at times, modeled relationships in the stories after ones with which they were familiar. Each reader in the study transformed (see Chapter One) several characters or relationships, and it was possible in some cases to trace, through the
autobiographical material they had offered me, the person whose characteristics influenced their conception of a literary character (in Arthur's case, however, the reason he transformed characters is not clear).

Second, how my readers defined such human traits as strength, weakness, insensitivity, power, and independence differed according to the gender of the reader. Numerous examples in the stories indicated that the men and women in the study had "genderized" definitions of these traits when displayed by the characters in the stories. My readers' perception and judgement of the characters were strongly influenced by how they defined these traits. In general, several trends emerged:

1) Men generally assigned strengthening characteristics to male characters that the critics and my former literature students had deemed weak, insensitive, unemotional, or overbearing.

2) Women in the study had a strong tendency to portray the male characters as insensitive and unemotional, and, in some cases, overbearing or overprotective.

3) Each reader, in at least one case, used gender-related stereotypes to portray a character or relationship.
4) In general, men tended to admire the following traits in characters: power, control, intellect, order, strength. The women tended to admire the following traits in characters: sensitivity, emotionality, strength, sensuality.

1) Men generally assigned strengthening characteristics to male characters that the critics and my former literature students had deemed weak, insensitive, unemotional, or overbearing.

Arthur and Robert assigned strengthening characteristics to most of the male characters in the stories. My literature students, the critics, and in two cases, the authors, had most often deemed these characters weak and insensitive, or controlling and overbearing. Both men softened the negative characteristics of the male characters or strengthened weak characters. This theme is especially evident in the responses to Alan in "Martha’s River," Mitch in "Mistletoe," John in "The Yellow Wallpaper," and Emily’s father in "A Rose for Emily."

Most of my literature students and the author strongly condemned Alan as a man totally unconcerned with his family’s needs. Anne Goette, the author, had stated that she created Alan to have no redeeming fatherly qualities. Robert disagreed, however; and although he
admitted that Alan considered his son a bother, he still depicted Alan as a concerned parent:

Alan referred to Jason as a "millstone," but I got the feeling there was a little more obligation. He was Jason's father, whether he liked it or not, and he'd own up to that. I'm sure he loved Jason; he cared for him.

Arthur's characterization of Alan was even more positive, and he suggested that:

Alan probably wanted to take care of his family, but just the way he was doing it was like what he thought was best for the family.

In "The Yellow Wallpaper," Robert depicted John as a caring and concerned husband, even though the critics and many of my literature students thought John had imprisoned his wife because she was trying to be an independent woman. Even though Robert thought John did not understand his wife's problems, he still felt John was a good husband. Robert suggested that John had locked up his wife "for her own protection," that he was "trying to help her," and that "he cared for her."

Arthur described Emily's father in a manner that contradicted the critics and most of my literature students, many of whom believed the character was distant, overbearing, and insensitive. Arthur suggested that the elder Grierson was "a strong leader" and that he was "the strong backbone of the family that took care of everyone like a big bird with his wings around the underlings."
This response theme was evident in Arthur and Robert's portrayal of most of the male characters. At times, although they might have acknowledged a male character's insensitivity or lack of emotion, they still found some characteristic to strengthen. For example, Arthur fully acknowledged Mitch's emotional disabilities but still stated: "I don't think he's as bad as he seems" and then continued to create some positive characteristics for him. In other cases, such as Robert's response to John, although he fully admitted John's desire to "put [his wife] up there to keep her out of his way," Robert suggested that "he's doing what's best for her." In general, Robert and Arthur transformed male characters by overemphasizing a minor positive trait or simply ignoring or underemphasizing a negative trait.

2) Women in the study had a strong tendency to portray the male characters as insensitive and unemotional, and, in some cases, overbearing or overprotective.

In sharp contrast to Robert and Arthur's tendency to strengthen male characters, Ann and Jane consistently portrayed the male characters as insensitive, unemotional, and sometimes overbearing. This theme is, perhaps, the most common and pervasive among Ann and Jane's responses. John in "The Yellow Wallpaper," Professor Brooke and
Professor Riley in "An Episode in the Life of Professor Brooke," and Emily's father in "A Rose for Emily" are good examples.

When I asked Ann if John had his wife's best interests in mind, Ann responded:

No, I think he had his best interests in mind. He does not want to be embarrassed by his wife who does not fit her role according to him, so he shuts her away from the world. He totally dominates their relationship and tries to make her and their relationship what he thinks it should be.

Ann also had little positive to say about both Professor Brooke and Professor Riley.

Brooke has always suppressed his emotions. He's been so methodical and mechanical all his life; he didn't realize what he was missing. Riley is promiscuous, immoral, and obnoxious.

Jane depicted Emily's father as "controlling and domineering," claimed John "does not listen to [the narrator]," and characterized Mitch as "simple, self-contained, and machine-like."

Ann and Jane's characterizations of male characters were often similar to the responses of the critics and my literature students. Their negative portrayals were stronger, however; and they often cited the male characters as the cause of the conflicts depicted in the stories.
3) **Each reader, in at least one case, used gender-related stereotypes to portray a character or relationship.**

Both my male and female readers sometimes relied on stereotypes to describe characters in the stories (Rosenblatt, 1983; Beach, 1976). Ann did so most often, and stereotyping was one of the themes describing her responses to the characters and relationships in the stories (see Chapter Five). She assigned each of the female protagonists in the stories one of three stereotypical roles: 1) as women ascribing to outdated Southern female roles (Emily in "A Rose for Emily," Grandmother in "A Good Man is Hard to Find"); 2) as mothers "who sacrifice for their children" (Martha in "Martha's River," the narrator in "Mistletoe"); and 3) as women "held back" by their oppressive relationships with their husbands (the narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper," Brooke's wife in "An Episode in the Life of Professor Brooke"). Ann's characterization of the male characters often relied on stereotypes, as well, and she admitted it: she stated that Mitch was a good example of a "stereotypical man." This is how she described him:

Mitch provides a home; he takes care of her [the narrator] and the kids. I think he loves her in his own way, but he can't express his feelings too well. Like at one point he looked at his daughter, and you could tell he loved the girl, but he couldn't really show it. He just liked to sleep and eat and watch football games.
Jane relied on stereotypes less often than the other readers, but she did describe John's relationship with his wife in "The Yellow Wallpaper" as stereotypical.

It was a stereotypical type of way he was treating her, and he was convincing her that she was sick; therefore, she was dependent on him. He treats her like a child. John takes care of her, listens, but won't believe her.

Robert depicted Emily's father as a Southern aristocrat...a plantation-type person. I pictured John Wayne, the coat with a little hat, and a gun.

Arthur described Emily's father as "your basic eighteenth century stereotypical father," and Ruth ("An Episode in the Life of Professor Brooke") as "the innocent" in the story, "the dimpled blond with long hair."

Each reader, at one time or another, resorted to using positive or negative stereotypes to describe characters in the stories, but why they applied stereotypes to the characters they did, I have not been able to determine.

4) **In general, men tended to admire the following traits in characters:** power, control, intellect, order, strength. **The women tended to admire the following traits in characters:** sensitivity, emotionality, strength, sensuality.
The fact that the traits Robert and Arthur admired in characters in the stories tended to be in male characters, and the traits that Ann and Jane admired in characters tended to be in female characters, leads me to conclude that my readers believe that these characteristics are gender-specific; that is, that Ann and Jane feel female characters are generally sensitive, strong, and emotional, whereas Robert and Arthur feel that male characters are generally powerful, orderly, and smart.

One of Jane’s response themes concerned her description of female protagonists. She used some of the same adjectives to describe Emily, the narrators in "Mistletoe" and "The Yellow Wallpaper," and Ruth: strong, sensitive, deep, daring, and thoughtful. Although Jane did not agree with how Martha resolved her marital conflicts, and called her as "selfish," she still described her in a positive fashion:

Martha desires the simple/happy life she has created for herself. Going to the river, collecting berries, exploring with Jason, and staying naked, if she chooses, in the seclusion of her valley.

Although Ann described the female protagonists as victims of stereotypical roles, she still portrayed most of them as sensitive and loving. Ann described Martha:

Martha is loving, caring, selfish, and over-protective. I think she is a very caring person, and she loves people: she likes relating with people and in a very deep way.
The narrator in "Mistletoe," according to Ann, also possessed some redeeming qualities, despite being involved in a difficult marriage.

She is just a housewife. She takes care of her two kids, and she loves them. I think she really does. She wants her life to be happy. She envisions that as perfection.

Even though she is imprisoned by her husband, the narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper," according to Jane, was still very sensitive.

She's sensuous, caring, unsure of herself. She wants to write, and he won't let her, and they won't let her be herself. I don't know, but I think she could have been a great writer. She has a very wild imagination.

Robert and Arthur described, as Beyard and Sullivan (1986) noted in their study of high school readers, most of the male protagonists using positive characteristics, and they tended to strengthen the weaker male characters (described in #1 above).

I found continuity among the gender-related positive descriptions of the characters in the stories. Most often, my readers tended to "side" with characters of the same sex as them. Bleich (1986) concluded that women in his study "tended to identify with feelings [and] situations, and experience the reading as a variety of social emotions"(p.264). My female readers did, as well, tend to be more concerned with characters' emotional lives and interpersonal motives than with their actions in the
stories. My readers beliefs about literary characters may be the result of the influences of characteristics they perceive in individuals in their lives.

We use our gender identity, as we do other cultural influences, such as economic and social class, religion, and political beliefs, to help define ourselves and understand the world around us. Gender, however, may have a greater influence than these other factors on how readers interpret literature since how we feel about ourselves as men and women, in large part, defines us as individuals.

Of the many cultural issues of particular interest to college-aged men and women, gender may be the most significant. Young people are engaging in adult relationships with little worldly experience upon which to base their actions or interpret others' motivations. This lack of experience may have caused them to rely on what they have learned from their parents as gender-role models and from the influences of their upbringing to make decisions that affect their personal lives. I feel some of the same factors may have been at work when my readers interpreted relationships in these stories. Gender-related cultural factors (the experience an individual has growing up male or female in America) and family influences tended to influence their responses, and in
some cases, actually shape them, especially their construal of such characteristics as strength, weakness, and sensitivity. Studies such as this one, I feel, may challenge a young person's beliefs about gender, love, and life. The often strong opinions my readers expressed may well be a way of asserting their individuality as well as demonstrating their knowledge about themselves and relationships. How an individual defines the actions and motivations of a literary character may well be influenced, and in some cases defined, by the same factors that contribute to that individual's identity as a man or woman.
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APPENDICES
Appendix A
"A Rose for Emily" by William Faulkner: story synopsis

Miss Emily Grierson lives quietly with her Negro servant in the house where she grew up. Her late father, a domineering figure of well-bred Southern culture, is pictured as "a spraddled silhouette in the foreground, his back to her [Emily] and clutching a horsewhip" (p.23). Although Emily was slender and attractive as a young woman, her father had consistently driven away her potential suitors. Days after her father dies, local residents have to break into her house to force her to relinquish his rotting corpse nearby neighbors can now smell. For years, she keeps a portrait she painted of him on a gilt easel in front of the fireplace. Over the years, the townspeople see her as an idol, sitting in front of one of the windows in the huge dark house, the light behind her framing her stiff motionless figure.

Not long after her father dies, Emily "takes up" with a Northerner, Homer Barron, who is not only an outsider, but a common laborer. Emily shocks the town by allowing Homer to court her publically, which leads local residents to anticipate their marriage.

Shortly before Homer presumably (and inexplicably) leaves Emily to return to the North, Emily enters the local drug store to purchase some rat poison from the druggist. Although he is required by law to question her about the intended use of her purchase, he does so unsuccessfully and, cowed by her presence, sells it to her anyway.

Years pass, and the now overweight and cane-bearing Emily dies "in a heavy walnut bed with a curtain, her grey head propped on a pillow yellow and moldy with age and lack of sunlight" (p.129). Curious townspeople come to the house to find her body laid out in the parlor. Upstairs, on a pillow beside Homer Barron’s skeleton, they find evidence of Emily’s necrophilia: several strands of her steel grey hair.
"An Episode in the Life of Professor Brooke" by Tobias Wolff.

Professor Brooke finds himself riding several hours to a literary convention with one of his colleagues, Professor Riley. Riley is a family man, but Brooke suspects he has sexual relationships with his students. Although Brooke likes Riley, he is jealous of Riley's flashy style, academic prowess, and well-adjusted personality. Brooke is especially concerned with Riley's marital fidelity and judges him more on this point than any other, although he has no real evidence that Riley ever slept with a student.

At the convention, Brooke meets and talks several times with Ruth, a nurse who is helping with refreshments and belongs to the local "literary society." Ruth is very attractive, but Brooke considers her a literary "lightweight." Following a chance meeting with her in the hotel bar on the last evening of the convention, Brooke offers her a ride home and ends up staying for the night.

The next morning, Riley unexpectedly arrives at Brooke's motel room and notices the unmade bed. The entire ride home, Brooke struggles with the events of the previous night and how it might affect his marriage. Riley tells Brooke: "I don't know what happened last night, but as far as I'm concerned, I've never heard of a Ruth." "It wasn't like that," Brooke states. "It never is," Riley replies.

Brooke decides he will not tell his wife because he feels it would not be fair to hurt her. She does discover perfume all over his shirt and tie, and is for months haunted by the implications. She never mentions it to him, however.

Brooke's relationship with Riley changes dramatically; he seems to understand Riley more and refrains from passing judgements on his suspected sexual infidelities.
"Mistletoe" by Jane Bradley: story synopsis.

The narrator, a young woman, her husband (Mitch), and their two children Marta (6) and Darly (1) go off in the family truck in search of some mistletoe to decorate their house for Christmas. Although it is easily obtained in the vicinity of their own home, the narrator wants to get it from a special place in the woods.

The narrator is in a period of intense introspection, having lost her lover, Dean, to a stroke and subsequent suicide just five months ago. She is not in love with the unromantic, macho, and insensitive Mitch, although she has had two children with him. The place she would like to find the mistletoe is in a spot she and Dean used to meet secretly.

Mitch would rather be watching football on television, and he is openly impatient with a search he finds annoying at best. After a short drive, they find the high hanging mistletoe, and Mitch shoots some down with numerous loud and startling blasts of his shotgun.

During the entire ride and short stay at the place in the woods, the narrator emotionally relives her relationship with Dean, who she feels was the true love of her life.
"Martha's River" by Ann Goette: story synopsis.

The story opens with Martha diving off a cliff into a river that crosses the old farm she occupies with her son, Jason, and her husband, Alan, the few times a year he is not on the road dealing drugs. Martha is very aware that she must remember to dive to the left of a very dangerous, submerged outcropping of rock that lies just to the right.

Martha and the four year old Jason live quietly and contentedly except when Alan is home. They love the land, the river, and the out of doors. Alan considers Jason a "mistake" and a burden on his lifestyle, as well as an intruder into his very demanding and possessive relationship with Martha. Jason is afraid of his father.

Alan returns from a trip and demands sex from Martha. When she neglects to use her diaphragm, he rudely accuses her of purposely trying to get pregnant. She goes to the bathroom to put in her diaphragm but decides not to do so after all.

Several months later, Alan, while home briefly from another deal, notices Martha's enlarged breasts and lack of appetite, and demands she get an abortion within the next few days. Martha considers it her right to have another baby, even if she did become pregnant through deception. She considers leaving Alan but worries how she will be able to survive with two children.

The next day, she suggests that the family go to the river to swim. Alan knows very little about the land and river, and trusts Martha when she warns him he must dive to the right in order to avoid the submerged rock.
"The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins-Gilman: story synopsis.

The "hysterical" narrator is taken by her overprotective and loving husband to a summer house to recover from nervousness. She is told to use her will and self-control to overcome her illness. The room in which she is held nearly captive by her physician husband, John, is covered with a revolting and unclean yellow wallpaper.

She is told that rest and sleep will dispel the "silly fantasies" from which she suffers: her desire to read, write, and paint. John will not believe that she is really sick and depressed, and he showers her with stern and reproachful looks and sends her back to her bed in shame any time she tries to discuss the real nature of her illness: insanity.

John offers her tender, condescending love and enforces her total inactivity. She is told she is forbidden to do any sort of activity until he deems her well again. The story the narrator tells is written surreptitiously when John is out of the room.

The first stage of her final breakdown is self-blame. She believes a high standing physician's diagnosis that there is really nothing wrong with her but temporary nervousness...a slight hysterical tendency.

Gradually, the narrator begins to see things in the wallpaper, fantasies that soon overcome what sanity remains. She begins to trust the fantasies and starts acting wildly, tearing wallpaper off the wall to help a woman she sees behind it. In the final scene of the story, the narrator is crawling about the room. She separates herself from the perceptions of others, and when her husband faints at the sight of her, she exclaims, crawling over his body, "I've got out at last...in spite of you."
"A Good Man is Hard to Find" by Flannery O’Connor: story synopsis.

A young father takes his wife, mother, and two children on a trip from their home in Georgia to visit Florida. His mother, Grandma, displays an emptiness of character and soul to such a degree that her endless chatter must seem meaningless even to her. She is a smug, strong-willed, and pompous woman who believes she has "good Southern blood" and the "right" view of religion. In an effort to manipulate the family into travelling east to see relatives she would like to visit in Tennessee, she fabricates a story about an old Tennessee mansion where treasure is hidden. This excites the already poorly behaved children, and their father, Bailey, grumblingly acquiesces.

Suddenly Grandma realizes that the mansion is actually in Georgia, and the family is travelling in the wrong direction. Now confused and disoriented, she kicks over a basket in which she had surreptitiously hidden the family cat...it springs onto Bailey’s shoulder, and he rolls the car into a ditch on a deserted road.

As the family assesses the damage to their car, another car arrives; three escaped convicts emerge. Grandma is quick to point out the identity of the group’s leader from a picture she has seen in the newspaper; he is a murderer called The Misfit.

An accident turns into catastrophe: first Bailey and his son, and then his wife and daughter, are taken into the woods and shot. Grandma, now insane with fear and struggling to save her own life, tries to convince The Misfit that he has "good blood." Following her unconvincing plea that he is a good man and was, perhaps, mistakenly sent to prison, he explains, with few illusions, that he is not a good man, and that it was Jesus who had "thrown off balance" the nature of good and evil. Faced with imminent death, Grandma resorts to her faith in good breeding and asks the murderer to pray with her. The Misfit turns his back on the possibility of redemption and, following an explanation of his own twisted version of nature of the human state, shoots her.
Appendix B
Questions for "A Rose for Emily" by William Faulkner

At the break in the story, please answer the following questions using a tape recorder:

1) What has happened so far in the story?

2) What do you think will happen next?

3) How do you think the story will end?

After you finish reading the story, please answer the following questions in writing:

1) Describe: Emily, Homer, Emily's father

2) Describe the following relationships: Emily/her father, Emily/Homer

3) What is Emily's role in the family? Her father's role?

4) What is Emily trying to accomplish in the story?

5) What is the meaning of the story?

6) What is the theme(s) of the story?

7) Further comments?
Questions for "An Episode in the Life of Professor Brooke"
by Tobias Wolff.

At the break in the story, please respond to the following questions using a tape recorder:

1) What has happened so far in the story?
2) What do you think will happen next?
3) How do you think the story will end?

After you finish the story, answer the follow questions in writing:

1) Describe: a) Brooke, b) Riley, c) Ruth.

2) Describe the relationship between:
a) Brooke/Ruth, d) Brooke/Riley, c) Brooke/his wife.

3) Is Brooke being fair to his wife not telling her about Ruth? Why or why not?

4) What is the theme of the story?

5) Is there any part of the story that describes the whole?

6) What is the meaning of the story?

7) Further comments?
Questions for "Mistletoe" by Jane Bradley.

At the place marked in your copy of the story, stop and answer the following questions (using the tape recorder):

1) What has happened so far in the story?
2) What will happen next?
3) How do you think the story will end?

After you finish the story, please answer the following question in writing:

1) Describe: a) the narrator; b) her husband, Mitch; c) Dean.

2) Describe the relationship between: a) narrator/Mitch, b) narrator/Dean.

3) What do you think the narrator wants from life? Do you think she is likely to get it (if you feel she does not already have it)?

4) What is the conflict in the story?

5) Does the mistletoe symbolize anything? If so, what?

6) What is the narrator's role in her family? What is Mitch's role in the family?

7) Is there any part of the story that explains the whole?

8) What is the theme of the story?

9) Further comments?
Questions for "Martha’s River" by Ann Goette.

At the the break marked in the story, please stop and respond to the following questions using the tape recorder:

1) What has happened so far in the story?
2) What do you think will happen next?
3) How do you think the story will end?

After you finish the story, please answer the following questions in writing:

1) What is the theme of the story?
2) What, if anything, does the river symbolize?
3) Do you think Martha’s actions at the end of the story are justified? Why or why not?
4) Describe Alan. Describe Martha. Describe their relationship.
5) What is the meaning of the story?
6) Is there any part of the story that explains the whole?
7) What is important in life for Martha? For Mitch?
8) Further comments?
Questions for "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins-Gilman.

At the break in the story, please answer the following questions using a tape recorder:

1) What has happened in the story so far?
2) What do you think will happen next?
3) How do you think the story will end?

After you finish the story, please answer the following questions in writing:

1) What is the meaning of this story?
2) What is the theme of the story?
3) Do you think John has his wife’s best interests in mind? Why or why not?
4) Describe John. Describe the narrator. Describe their relationship.
5) Is there any part of the story that explains the whole?
6) Further comments?
Questions for "A Good Man is Hard to Find" by Flannery O'Connor.

At the break in the story, please answer the following questions using a tape recorder.

1) What has happened in the story so far?
2) What do you think will happen next?
3) How do you think the story will end?

After you finish the story, please answer the following questions in writing:


2) Describe the following relationships:
   a) Grandma/Bailey, b) Grandma/ Misfit.

3) What is the theme of the story?

4) Does Grandma experience a transformation at the end of the story? If so, what makes you think so?

5) Is there any part of the story that explains the whole?

6) What is the meaning of the story?

7) Further comments?
Appendix C
PARTICIPANT QUESTIONNAIRE

Name: __________________________________________

Local address and phone: _________________________
________________________________________________

Home address and phone: _________________________
________________________________________________

Dear Participants:

Please respond to the following questions. Please be complete, and either write or type your responses. Simply number your responses according to the questions below. Thanks.

1) What is your major? Why have you chosen it?

2) Describe your family: family members, age, sex.

3) Describe any other important individuals in your life as you did in question #2.

4) What are your parents’ occupations? What do they do with their spare time?

5) What are some of your interests outside of academic work?

6) Imagine you are a close friend of yours. You have been asked to describe you to a person who would like to meet you. How would you describe yourself to a person who would like to meet you?

7) Imagine you are applying for a job. How might a current employer (or faculty member who knows you fairly well) describe you to a prospective employer?

8) Is there anything else about yourself, your family, your interests, etc. you would like to add?

9) Do you like to read? How often do you read? What kinds of things do you read (books, plays, short stories, etc.)?

10) Any further comments?
QUESTIONS FOR INITIAL PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW

1) Describe your relationship with your: mother, father, siblings, any other important person in your life.

2) How does your family make decisions that affect the entire family?

3) What important event or events in your life do you feel have significantly helped shape your personality or contributed to your sense of identity?

4) Describe your relationship with a close female friend. Do the same for a close male friend.

5) What is important to you in life?

6) Is there anything else about yourself, your family, your interests, etc. you would like to add?
Appendix D
March 1990

ERIC C. PAPPAS  
P.O. Box 793  
Blacksburg, Virginia 24063

EDUCATION:

B.S.  Wagner College  Economic Theory  1972
M.A.  Virginia Tech  English  1987
      Phi Kappa Phi  
Ed.D.  Virginia Tech  English Education  1990

ACADEMIC EMPLOYMENT:

1987-  Instructor, English Department  Virginia Tech
1986-87  Graduate Teaching Assistant  Virginia Tech
1979-81  Director and Head Teacher, Reading and Writing (ABE Program)  Floyd County, VA. School System
1975-77  Elementary Reading Teacher  Farm School  Enfield, N.Y.
1973-75  High School English Teacher  Clearwater School  Trumansburg, N.Y.

PUBLICATIONS: (selected)

Articles

(accepted) "Towards a New Philosophy of Education: Extending the Conversational Metaphor for Thinking," co-authored with James Garrison. Studies in Philosophy and Education.


Recording

All Your Heart (LP) Blacksburg: Little River Records, August, 1983. (original compositions)
TECHNICAL EDITING: (selected)


Quality and Productivity Management. (Technical Editor). Quarterly publication of the Virginia Productivity Center at Virginia Tech, an internationally recognized center for quality and productivity; circulation 5,000.

PRESENTATIONS: (Recent)


WORKSHOPS: (selected)

"Creative Thinking" (3 hrs.)
"Writing & Dramatic Action" (6 hrs.)
"Creative College Preparation" (6 hrs.)
"Faculty Workshop on Creative Teaching" (6 hrs.)

I have developed and facilitated the above workshops for "gifted and talented" students and faculty in public and private high schools, and have presented them more than 30 times in the past 2 years. Public institutions include schools in Bedford, Allegheny, Amelia, Rockingham, Giles, Floyd, and Patrick Counties, the City and County of Roanoke, as well as the Governor's School and the Upward Bound Program at Virginia Tech.

"Lyric and Songwriting Workshops," State University of New York (Binghamton, Syracuse), Cornell University, Old Dominion University, Virginia Commonwealth University, University of Virginia, Virginia Tech, 1977-84.

LECTURES: (selected)


"Rethinking the Masculine Philosophy," Virginia Tech, Radford University, Old Dominion University, 1985-86.

"Human Empowerment and Interpersonal Communication." Radford University, 1986.
OTHER TEACHING ACHIEVEMENTS:

Nominated for 1990 departmental award for teaching excellence.

I designed and implemented an Adult Basic Education (ABE) program in writing and reading for the Floyd County, Va. Public School System. The program, implemented at State Prison Camp #5 in Willis, Va. featured classroom instruction and peer tutoring. In 1981, under my direction, the program had the highest percentage student enrollment of any of the over thirty state correctional facilities.

At the request of the Cornell University Art Department, I designed a semester-long program of instruction for using wood as an artistic medium. I was selected to teach the course.

UNIVERSITY SERVICE:

Undergraduate Advisor, English Department, 1987-present.

Executive Committee (Vice President), The Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi, 1989-present.

Advisor, Virginia Tech Gymnastics Club, 1988-present.


August 6, 1990