

## Language Arts Journal of Michigan

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Volume 8

Issue 1 *Historical Perspectives*

Article 4

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1-1-1992

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#### Recommended Citation

Greco, Norma (1992) "Reading and Writing Against the Text," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 8: Iss. 1, Article 4.  
Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1620>

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## READING AND WRITING AGAINST THE TEXT

**Norma Greco**

More than ten years ago, as a new Ph.D. with a concentration in Renaissance poetry, I found myself by some unexpected circumstances teaching literature to a class of seventh-grade girls. Putting sonnets, pastoral elegies, and other more elevated literary constructs behind me, I wanted these kids to relate with immediacy to the readings, and having read some reader-response theories, I thought I would put them to the test. While we were reading an adolescent novel about mothers and daughters, I asked my students to write a journal entry about their relationships with their own mothers. Suddenly, one little girl started to cry and left the room; several others followed in tears so that, as it turned out, within minutes most members of my class were in the bathroom. Obviously, the story, the journal assignment, the recent separation of one girl's parents, and the death of another's mother had combined to trigger a more immediate response than I could have imagined or wanted.

However unique this experience was, I did learn from it—quickly and under fire—what I have since found to be an axiom of teaching students of any age: from seventh graders to seniors, students respond authentically to literature when they are allowed to enter a text and engage with it personally in ways that are accessible and real.

With the emergence of the reader over the past several years and various transactional theories of reading, many other teachers as well have encouraged such “subjective” responses to reading. These approaches have allowed students to become participants in the unmasking of meaning; they have fostered involvement and investment. But during the past few years, as I have taught high school students, I have felt the need to move students beyond the private, emotional exchange with the literary text that my reader-response assignments invariably elicited. I have also wanted students to

achieve a critical distance so that they could read, think, and write with a questioning mind about language and their responses to it. I have wanted them as well to discover the "pleasure and power" of narrative play (Scholes 111), rather than passively allowing the text to act upon them. Most of all, I have sought ways of empowering students with a thoughtful awareness that language and culture construct who we are and what we think. I have done this so that my students can become more independent and self-determining readers.<sup>1</sup>

Through much reading and thinking about what it is to "teach" literature at the secondary level, I have come to believe that the most compelling task facing English teachers is maintaining students' personal engagement with the text—a sense of their participation in meaning—while at the same time enabling them to be reflective readers of the text, the self, and the real world. McCormick has recognized a similar goal in teaching university students: to explore through response statements the "historical, cultural, and linguistic forces influencing interpretation" ("Theory of the Reader" 847) in order to make students "stronger, more informed and self-conscious readers" but "without sacrificing the spontaneity of students' initial responses" ("Theory of the Reader" 837).<sup>2</sup> High school students as well must be directed beyond the self and their private, affective responses to a *confrontation* with the text, an opposition between the self and "other," through which they engage personally and culturally with the literary work and free themselves from the authority of the text, the author, and our own authorized, "teacherly" interpretations.<sup>3</sup> I believe that certain post-structuralist theories about reading as well as directed writing assignments influenced by them can enable students to become, in Ira Shor's words, "curious," "critical," and "creative" (8) readers, writers, and thinkers. Before sharing my assignments and students' responses I'd like to summarize briefly some recent notions of language and reading which provide the theoretical foundations for the assignments that follow.<sup>4</sup>

Recently, studies of narrative have articulated the processes by which readers construct what Wolfgang Iser calls the "unwritten part of the text" ("Reading Process" 57). Among others, Iser and Umberto Eco have explained ways in which readers work through "indeterminacies" such as those created by gaps in information, conflicts and unexpected turns, and ambiguous wording (see Culler 31-83). These indeterminacies frustrate the reading process, and in so doing, provoke the reader to "synthesize" the text into an

"ever-expanding network of connections" (116); reading is creative, a "dynamic *interaction* between text and reader" (*Act of Reading* 107).

As the reader becomes a vital and responsible agent in the production of meaning, authorial control diminishes. With their own individual and cultural histories, readers compose interpretations independent of authorial "intent," and with every reading the text is recreated anew since each reader sees new connections; as Iser says, the text can "never be the same twice over" (*Act of Reading* 150). Discovering and recreating a literary work can be a process of self-formulation as well; in taking us out of ourselves, reading actively encourages a "new and real consciousness," a "heightening of self-awareness," as the reader attempts to "reconcile the as yet unknown experience of the present text with his own store of past experience" (*Act of Reading* 157). Reading thus helps us to "formulate ourselves"; in recreating the text, we "discover an inner world of which we had hitherto not been conscious" (158).

Eco terms recreative moments in which the reader constructs unwritten segments "inferential walks" and "ghost chapters" (214 ), and explains that such gaps render a work "open" to endless possibilities: "The important thing is to prevent a single sense from imposing itself at the very outset of the receptive process " (53). Various types of ambiguity "create a halo of indefiniteness" and "make the text pregnant with infinite suggestive possibilities" (53).

Iser and Eco suggest what I believe most teachers have experienced in the classroom: a literary text has many meanings and, frequently, contradictions which may not be resolvable. The author has lost autonomy to the forces of narrative—gaps, the warring pull between the unconscious and conscious, ambiguities which occlude coherence—as well as to the reader's past experiences. As a result, the reader is liberated, free to produce meaning. As Belsey explains, "The Death of the Author means the liberation of the text from the authority of a presence behind it which gives it meaning. Released from the constraints of a single and univocal reading, the text becomes available for production, plural, contradictory, capable of change" (134).

Bleich, Rosenblatt, and other response theorists have argued that reading involves "subjective" and "aesthetic" responses elicited through an essentially private exchange between reader and text. Recent language and literary theorists, however, view language and reading as "situated in a social

context" (Flynn 200). Belsey, drawing on Saussure's theory, explains that "language is a social fact," and cites the "arbitrariness of the sign which points to the fact that language is a matter of convention. The linguistic community 'agrees' to attach a specific signified to a specific signifier. . ."(41). Language is bound to a society's beliefs and values; as McCormick, Waller, and Flower write, "because language is always used in social contexts, there is no value-free language" (36). Moreover, since language is the symbolic system within which individuals develop, the self is defined through the language and discourse of its culture. Reading, then, as a language activity, is surrounded by "social and cultural contexts" (Crowley 16), and is therefore one means through which we know who we are and what we believe (Belsey, Ch. 2; see also Comley, Silverman 3-53, and Lefkowitz).

These assumptions have provided me with a theoretical foundation for writing assignments that encourage an active, critical, self-conscious reading of literature without discouraging personal interaction with the text. My assignments ask students to explore important relations among literature, culture, and the reader, and to discover through writing their power as readers to engage playfully and, as Scholes urges, even "irreverently" (105) with literary texts, challenging and recreating them. All of these assignments were written for a senior literature class at The Ellis School in Pittsburgh, an independent, college-preparatory school for girls. Almost all call for a finished paper that is organized, developed, and edited, at which students arrive after prewriting, drafting, and conferences with peers and me.

In the first assignment, I asked my senior literature students to take a point-of-view within a literary text by recreating a scene from the vantage of a character other than the narrator. I have found this kind of assignment helpful in inviting more reluctant readers to participate creatively in the narrative—which they invariably enjoy. Other advantages of this assignment are that it encourages students to become more deliberate readers and to learn that texts are not inviolable—that literature is a result of their own imaginative filling in of a work's indeterminacies. Furthermore, this kind of assignment provides a vehicle for exploring how certain roles and values influence reading and how reading participates in the construction of the self. Comley, for example, has shown how point-of-view "role-playing" assignments can explore gender experiences. She suggests that such reading/writing activities may reveal "submerged agendas" (181) as well as develop "critical awareness of how we read—of the positions from which we read" and

"how a text may work to add to or challenge one's experience" (190-191).<sup>5</sup> A writing assignment in which I asked my students to take a point-of-view within Gordimer's *July's People* helped some achieve an understanding of their roles as readers and their actual positions within their culture. At first, before writing, most students viewed themselves as free from the political positioning of Maureen and Bam Smales, South Africans caught in a racially explosive situation and forced to take refuge in the village of their black servant, July. Mostly white and middle class, my students saw their lives as generally untouched by the racial and socio-economic tensions apparent in the novel. But my writing assignment directed them to a confrontation with the ways in which cultural roles determine our perception of ourselves and others and how these same positions affect reading as well:

Gordimer's *July's People* shows relative positions within cultures and how those positions can affect an individual's perception of the self, and her relationship to others—and even the conditions of daily life. For example, Gordimer writes:

Bam tore off a length from one of the toilet rolls she had not forgotten to provide, and went out into the bush. He left the smell of his sweaty sleep behind him; she had not known, back there, what his smell was (the sweat of love-making is different, and mutual). Showers and baths kept away, for both of them, the possibility of knowing in this kind of way. She had not known herself the odors that could be secreted by her own body. There were no windows in the mud walls to open wide and let out the sour smell of this man. The flesh she had caressed with her tongue so many times in bed—all the time it had been a substance that produced this. She made a cooking fire outside and the smoke was sweet, a thorny, perfumed wood cracking to release it. The others—Martha—were wise to keep the little hearth-fire alive always in the middle of the huts. Only those still thinking as if they were living with bathrooms *en suite* would have decided, civilizedly, the custom was unhygienic and too hot.

You might infer from this passage that what we think and feel about ourselves and others is shaped by our culture and the political, economic, gender roles we are ascribed within it.

Choose one or two scenes from the novel and retell the story from the point-of-view of one of the characters. Try to work into your narrative a sense of the character's role-- his or her "position" within the story and how that role affects her thoughts, feelings, actions, relations with others. (The novel is rich in nuances and ambiguities-- much good narrative stuff from which to weave an interesting reading for us!).

Once you have finished your recreation, I would like you to answer the following questions in a page or two:

1. Did you have problems "becoming" the character you chose because of your own biases and beliefs? Or, were you able to understand the character better because of who you are?
2. How did you have to alter your values or experiences in order to play the character's role?

Explain both answers fully.

After prewriting, class discussions, and drafting, some students discovered through their recreations "submerged agendas" and their effects on reading:

I felt that putting myself into the position of Maureen was not as difficult as I expected. When I was reading the novel, I was influenced to see Maureen as oppressive though she was blind to the fact. Maureen, though she saw herself differently, was a part of the white supremacist society of Soweto. I felt that because she was a part of this society, it would be difficult for me to become my character. I see myself as liberal and unprejudiced, but by seeing the misconception of Maureen, I realize that one can be blind to one's own faults. Everyone is prejudiced in some way or another. They

may not see this in themselves, but, under all of the layers, it is there.

This student shows a new understanding of her "roles" as reader and "liberal," a process of self-discovery. Another student more complexly engaged with her "position" within the novel and in society, reaching a somewhat anxious awareness of the power of her culture to shape her attitudes; through her role-playing, she was forced to confront her experiences and who she is. After revealing an incident of real-life prejudice, she continues:

That is the first time, but not the only one by any means, that I can remember seeing someone I know, much less someone close to me, truly be *actively* and *actually* prejudiced. Thinking about this experience, and even others not quite so extreme, made me realize that the part of me that can see through the eyes of a white person who thinks, perhaps without realizing it to the full effect, that she is "better" than a black person (Maureen), has come a lot from the *outside*. This is opposed to another part, my voice of reason and value and integrity, which *knows* that supremacy is *outright wrong*. This is not to say that I claim myself to be totally unprejudiced; it is so very difficult to be that objective with oneself, I do not think I could easily give a truly accurate opinion. In my heart I know what is right and what is wrong, and I can say many things, but with an environment and people around me that sometimes go against what I believe, I realize I don't always resist.

I believe that I know who I am. I could not live the life Maureen did "back there" with a clear conscience. It also wrenches my heart to learn, and now understand more fully, the effects of apartheid in South Africa through the examples of relationships in Gordimer's novel. But at the same time, it would be very hard for me, if I was in Maureen's place, to make the decision to leave a comfortable, familiar house, as well as most all else of what I knew, and go live in a mud hut out in the bush. This was done for the sake of safety—I think that basically the decision was made *for* them, late as it was; they had waited so long.



Rather than alter or change my values to play the role of Maureen, I instead pulled only from that one side of me, the side where I have seen prejudice and experienced it in the light of other people, and I made that frame of mind the dominate [sic] "thought-and-feeling maker" for this paper. I believe that deep within me somewhere are biases that were probably of use, too, much as I hate and don't want to say that, but I think that there are probably few people who can truly say that they are not biased in one way or another. I see those thoughts that I have as faults within myself, and I admire the person, or people, who *must* be out there and would have great difficulty in becoming Maureen Smales simply because they cannot understand how a person can think in the way that she does.

Another assignment invites students to explore creatively the historical contexts of reading. Through such reading-oriented assignments, students become more reflective, critical readers, aware of the effects of ideology on interpretation. For example, I asked students to recreate the experience of an eighteenth-century reader encountering Wordsworth's poetry and prose for the first time:

In this paper, I would like you to create a persona—a character from the eighteenth century who has read Wordsworth's poetry and prose for the first time. This persona will have the ideology of a person of the late eighteenth century (1789), and will be either impressed (excited?) or horrified by the radicalism of Wordsworth's poetry and *Preface*. What you learned last term about the Neoclassical period should provide enough material from which to create a viable persona. As your persona responds to Wordsworth's ideas about life and art and to his specific poems, see that he or she refers *precisely* to the text! (Again, four pages minimum typed.) You will, of course, need to decide upon a rhetorical situation, as well; be creative—e.g., a letter to the editor of *Gentleman's Magazine* (a periodical of the time), a diary entry, etc.

One student's response in the form of a letter demonstrates a willingness on the part of many students to play with the previously forbidding Wordsworth:

I pause here to assure you, Sirs, that my belief that Poetry should contain universal, instructive elements is not based on a mindless adherence to traditional values but on a sincere conviction that man was placed on this earth to strive against the less refined instincts of his nature. If one begins to glorify the common and the course, one is denying one's latent, more sublime talents. It is, of course, terribly easy to give in to these, and this is why our struggle against them must be even more fierce and vigilant. The language, for example, in "We Are Seven" is such that may be heard on any street corner in Stepney. Where, pray tell, is the king's English, used so richly by Milton or Donne? Noble language engenders noble thoughts and deeds; are we to exchange a phrase like Milton's "They also serve who only stand and wait" for the "I take my little porringer, / And eat my supper there" of Wordsworth?

Here, the student's response to the assignment suggests an understanding of historical and political influences on reading responses. Another assignment invites students in a slightly different way to read self-consciously "against" the text.<sup>6</sup> Often, I have found that students think that they should accept the text as a unified truth, the expressed wisdom of a mind judged "great" by more knowledgeable people than they. The following assignment, while encouraging a "personal" response, moves students beyond their "feelings" to an active thinking about the text, the self, and the world:

As a poet and revisionist, Blake invites us to be active readers—both of the text and the world. He asks us to look closely at the values of his culture and how they affect the people he creates in his poetry. I would like you to study two or three poems from Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, and in a paper discuss the ways they ask us to re-read this eighteenth-century world and its dominant institutions such as the family, Christianity, the state. Then I'd like you to respond as a reader today—do you *accept* what Blake is suggesting? Does looking at the world in his terms agree with your own ideology or does he tend to make you uncomfortable? Evaluate why you feel as you do; this means that you will need to examine your own attitudes and beliefs.

Most students in their final papers ultimately justified their own values and quieted any discomfort reading Blake's poetry may have caused them. But they did learn that a literary text is not an inaccessible "verbal icon," but rather a real means of engaging dialogically with another set of beliefs, another ideology, against which to define their own more clearly. One student writes:

Even though I basically understand Blake's criticisms about society, I am still bothered by them, because they make me feel less secure about the institutions of society which I thought were the most stable in society. In "Ecchoing Green," I keep thinking about my family and the fine line between discipline and repression: how can one tell when parents are being repressive or not, and who is to judge? I see Blake's point-of-view about the repression but I do feel that some discipline is necessary for a child to grow up with a good set of values to abide by. Often children don't know how to use their "imagination" to explore their souls in the way Blake wants, and guidance is often needed to help these children's transition from innocence into experience. Once they get into the "real world," their strong memories of their childhood will help them overcome the often unjust world, they can live these values that the parents instill in them, and learn to adjust to this harsh world. Just as productive results hardly ever come out of chaos and anarchy, children cannot live their lives without any order or discipline from their parents. Blake may see it as "repressive" and limiting to a child's development, but I still feel it is important for such "restriction". Children wouldn't know what it means to explore and often don't know what repressive parents are. I still see my childhood as the best time of my life and don't see my parents as repressive at all. While I do disagree with many of my parents' decisions, I know their guidance has helped me mature and develop into a strong person. I know I have a long way to go before I can call myself "a truly self-aware person", but I do believe that my parents' guidance will help me in my search. So as I read the somewhat dark poem "Ecchoing Green", I find I can't truly relate to it because I feel parents are not as repressive as Blake thinks.

Reading-oriented assignments can also foster an understanding that each reading experience is not an isolated activity but rather part of a larger

cultural connection. Asking students to write specifically about how they read can produce such an awareness.<sup>7</sup> One assignment about reading *King Lear* directed students towards a questioning of various influences and again encouraged them to recognize and challenge previous readings of the text:

As you read *King Lear*, note as precisely as possible the process through which you made meaning of the play: how you made sense of particular words, images, characters that at first you couldn't understand. Did your previous knowledge of Shakespeare help? Did your experiences as a daughter and your assumptions about families, fathers, and moral obligations enter into your process? Were there parts of the text you could not ultimately understand? Do you know why? I would like you then to write a formal paper from this material in which you reflect upon and explain your process of reading *Lear*. Engage with the text specifically and with your beliefs or biases that helped you to shape meaning. I'd like this to be a paper in which you explain and discover the text and the self as they meet. I encourage you to work against the meaning of the text we produced in class— evaluate, include it as part of the “baggage” you bring to the text— but use it as something *against* which you can find your own reading.

Students answered the questions about their reading process in their prewriting and then worked through drafts and conferences to a final response. In responding, many students were able to discover the impact of other literary texts on their reading and that “readers or writers are never alone” (Flynn 200). One student writes about reading *King Lear* in the context of her earlier reading of *Twelfth Night*:

Whenever I first start a Shakespearean play, the language is often very difficult to comprehend. The old metaphors and implied meanings make me nervous as I try to find and understand them. Nonetheless, I can always look for some common themes found in other Shakespearean works while reading *King Lear*. In the beginning of Act I Scene IV, I noticed the stage direction for Kent, a noble earl, is to be “in disguise” (page 78). While this detail may seem trivial to some, I noticed it because it was similar to a method Shakespeare used in *Twelfth Night*. Both Kent and Viola (*Twelfth*

*Night*) felt the need to cover their identities in order to help people they care about. Although Viola initially dons a disguise for a means of protection, she comes to use it in order to help her master, the Duke, realize his misconceptions of love. Similarly, Kent wears a disguise to help Lear understand his flaws, even though Lear has banished him from the kingdom. After Lear so cruelly denounced Kent, one would expect him to be bitter toward the king, but he is still fiercely loyal to Lear and wants to help him through the emotional times ahead. In the opening lines of the scene, Kent says,

If but as well I other accents borrow  
That can my speech diffuse, my good intent  
May carry through itself to that full issue  
For which I razed my likeness. (I.IV, lines 1-4)

From this, I know Kent is an admirable character like Viola of *Twelfth Night* in that they both are willing to risk their personal happiness for the sake of others. Thus I know Gonerill who is the master at "that glib and oily art" (I.I, line 225).

Another similar assignment about poetry provoked other intertextual discoveries; one student writes about reading Donne's "Air and Angels" and the other "voice," encountered earlier, which affected the present reading moment:

The speaker reminds me of Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice* when he tells Elizabeth, "In vain have I struggled. It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed. You might allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you." The speaker in "Air and Angels" is still at the point where he is vainly (I hope) struggling to repress his love, rationalizing and trying very hard to help keep control over himself.

In a final type of assignment, I asked students to confront problems, multiplicity, and contradictions within texts and attempted to discourage them from seeking resolution, which students invariably want. Most students, I have found, are reluctant to leave a work unsettled. Frequently, when guided through discussions to an awareness of "openness" within a

text, they will nevertheless cling to the notion of authorial control, attributing ambiguity to an author's intentional though subversive measures to effect a particular reading response. Certain assignments, however, can lead students to be more confident, independent readers despite an eventual reach for conclusiveness. One assignment invites students to pose an authentic problem about *King Lear* and either to resolve or not resolve it:

Literature may not always conclude easily or comfortably for you; there may be problems or contradictions which you cannot resolve or can only after a struggle. In this paper, I'd like you to pose a problem which you particularly find bothersome or vexing. It may be a problem that we have discussed in class and "solved"; if so, I encourage you to produce your own reading against the one we came up with—one you have produced for yourself in your own dialogue with the text, your classmates and me. As you pose, solve, or do not solve your problem, work specifically with the text and include any experiences or beliefs that have helped you to understand and confront this problem.

Although this student resolves her problem, she does so actively within her own value system, realizing in the process how her beliefs influenced her interpretation:

The question of whether Cordelia's death is really necessary is the final one I asked as I read *King Lear*. Reading through the scene for the first time, I felt as Lear does, "Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life, and thou no breath at all?" (p. 182). Why should Cordelia, one of the few genuinely "good" characters in the play, have to die when she has never done anything to hurt anyone? Cordelia's death seems so senseless and unjust—more so than that of any other character. "Edmund, Goneril, and Regan were evil. They deserved to die," I told myself, "And Lear was old, and he had suffered enough already. Death for him was a reward. But why Cordelia? She was young and kind and loving enough to rescue and forgive the father who disowned her. . ."

Although we had discussed in class the concept of good being sacrificed to eradicate evil, I still wanted to search the text for something that would explain to me Shakespeare's reason for Cordelia's death. I found it in a passage spoken by Cordelia herself, "We are not the first who with the best meaning have incurred the worst. For thee, oppressed king, I am cast down; myself could out-frown false Fortune's frown. Shall we not see these daughters and these sisters?" (p.169). In her first sentence, I think that Cordelia is not only trying to comfort her father, she is also reflecting on the whole order of life, and one of the basic struggles it involves. I tend to believe that in the beginning, human beings were created basically good, but somewhere along the way, evil was introduced, possibly from something as harmless as one person's well-intentioned idea of claiming something as his own. Such evil manifests itself today, as it did in Shakespeare's time, in the form of greed, jealousy, selfishness, and the like; people like Edmund, Goneril, and Regan represent the presence of the "evil" in the world, and often it seems that they are the ones who are in control, as it does in this play when their forces win the battle. If the good has any hope of surviving, it must defeat the evil, but evil is not as easy to get rid of as it is to come by. The good must be willing to stay and fight, and Cordelia is willing to face her sisters, and must also be willing to make sacrifices. Cordelia does die in the end, but the evil characters die as well. In fact, the only characters left at the end of the play are good ones—a resolution that would seem overly optimistic if Cordelia was alive as well. Cordelia's death is Shakespeare's reminder that in real life (which is, in a sense, what this play is about), things will not always turn out the way we want them to— to get rid of evil, some good must be sacrificed along with it.

Students more easily entertained notions of multiple and even conflicting meanings when as a class and in conferences we have focused our discussions on our own contradictory responses to a work. Such discussions are enhanced by the introductions in class of simplified theory, such as Barthes' notion of a "writerly" text (3-6) or Eco's "openness." With the support of a larger theoretical framework, students seemed more able and willing in writing assignments to wrestle with plurality, although most still felt the need to justify textual uncertainties as "intentional."<sup>8</sup> One assignment, which

students were not asked to develop into a final paper, provided a theoretical context within which students responded:

Various writers and critics have referred to reading literature as work— an epistemological journey of discovery that demands the reader's full engagement. Roland Barthes, a modern French critic, offers the possibility of reading as creative work. He writes the "goal of literary work/(literature as work) is to make the reader no longer the consumer, but a producer of the text" (S/Z). Much of the pleasure of reading, Barthes and others would argue, is in producing a plurality of meaning from the ambiguities, contradictions, and uncertainties in a text that would allow for more than one interpretation. The play of meaning provides for a reader's "Joy", as she creatively works with possibilities, often finding no unified meaning at all. *July's People*, *King Lear*, and *Gulliver's Travels* are the three works which might fit the description of Barthes' "multivalent texts"— those that allow for multiplicity, created by such elements as uncertain endings, contradictions in characters and themes, gaps in information, or ambiguities in style. Choose one or two of these works and explain what uncertainty or openness of meaning you see and the reasons for it.

Whereas previously students wanted to see conflict narrowly within or between characters, they now understood larger, textual tensions. One student discusses conflict in *Gulliver's Travels*:

In *Gulliver's Travels*, several conflicts are presented. . . . Swift theorizes upon man as both Yahoo and Houyhnhnm. He forces us to ask ourselves "where is man"? by not giving us one conclusive point-of-view. Man is a Yahoo; like a Yahoo, man creates civil war, will die for "shiny stones", will be led by an incompetent, and gets drunk often. Yet, man is a Houyhnhnm; he creates laws, representative assemblies, education, and he has the ability to reason. The conflicts in belief mean that Swift gives us no concrete point-of-view. The reader must decide where man is. . . . It is not that Swift himself is full of contradictions, but that he wants the reader to "work" through her own beliefs.



Another student worked with *King Lear* and, like the first, grasps onto Shakespeare's ultimate control of the situation:

The facts are that both Lear and Cordelia died, the former believing that his daughter has returned to life. This can be viewed from a variety of perspectives. It is tragic that such goodness dies here, but unfortunately this is all too realistic. Lear has just discovered, ironically in his madness, what it truly is to be human. . . . On the other hand, this man *does* die completely happy in the belief that his daughter lives. One may say, "But it's an illusion," and one may also say, "But he is *joyful* instead of sorrowful." Shakespeare allows his reader to play and grapple with these ambiguities, making the play have all the more depth.

My assignments empower students with a critical ability to read and write against the literary text—to question and re-think the text, often in relationship to their own lives and society. Such assignments help to fulfill what I would argue is the goal of teaching English today: to offer students the opportunity and, in Freire's words, the "responsibility" to recreate themselves, freed from the authority of texts as well as teachers (Shor and Freire 77). It is only then that we prepare students for reading the real world and the media's imposing and powerful forms of textuality that surround us and that would shape us—against which an "actively critical mode of reading" (Scholes 99) is their only defense.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> McCormick argues a similar point, saying that reader-response critics "stop short of exploring how readers are influenced . . . by language and society" ("Theory in the Reader" 836). See also Gilbert.

<sup>2</sup> Other teachers besides McCormick have influenced my pedagogy. Gilbert first focused some concerns for me by arguing that teachers and students should engage literature as a "cultural construct" (249). Essays by Lefkowitz, Comley, and Flynn have been very helpful voices in defining what for the past few years I have been doing in the classroom, as has Crowley's *Teacher's Introduction to Deconstruction*.

- <sup>3</sup> See Salvatori's essay in which she discusses the benefits of encouraging a dialogical relationship with the text, with the ideas of Gadamer as a theoretical base.
- <sup>4</sup> The ideas and some assignments in this essay were presented at the University of New Hampshire's Writing Conference, "Reading and Writing in the Academy: Power, Pedagogy, and Politics," in 1990. For me, they represent a development from earlier thoughts and writing assignments discussed in my article "Re-creating the Literary Text: Practice and Theory," in *English Journal* 79.7: 34-40.
- <sup>5</sup> See also Lefkowitz, whose own point-of-view assignments have "liberating" goals similar to Comley's and mine, especially in disclosing that "culture governs much of what we take for granted in our lives and that cultural assumptions are expressed in our use of language" (174).
- <sup>6</sup> The notion of reading and writing "against" the literary text has been advanced by others. McCormick, Waller, and Flower, for instance, designate readings that "self-consciously" go 'against the grain' of a text" as "strong" readings (27-30). Comley argues the importance of encouraging students to respond as "resisting readers" who write "against the text" (185).
- <sup>7</sup> For other helpful discussions of intertextuality, see Scholes (104-106) and Lefkowitz. Like mine, McCormick's "focused" assignments invite students to answer specific questions about historical and cultural influences on their reading, including literary conventions.
- <sup>8</sup> Scholes puts very well the need for theory in the classroom, 99-103. See also Flynn and McCormick.

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