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# ‘Here is my shameful confession. I don’t really “get” poetry’: discerning reader types in responses to Sylvia Plath’s *Ariel* on Goodreads

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## ABSTRACT

This article considers how readers engage with Sylvia Plath’s poetry collection *Ariel* (1965) – deemed as particularly ‘difficult’ – on Goodreads, in the context of online amateur reviewing. George Steiner’s (1978) fourfold typology of difficulty (contingent, modal, tactical and ontological) informs our approach and leads us to explore the ways in which difficulty is talked about and dealt with, especially since the poetry genre faces resistance in educational settings, as Peter Benton (2015) points out. Our discussion stems from a qualitative analysis of 25 positive and 25 negative Goodreads reviews of *Ariel*, from which we derive an inductive typology of readerly attitudes. We find that, across the positive/negative spectrum, three readerly attitudes prevail that can be aligned with particular reader types: The Self-Deprecator, The Re-Reader, and The Senser. The Self-Deprecator emphasises their lack of poetic skills, which makes literary difficulty hard to overcome. The Re-Reader foregrounds their need to engage with *Ariel* further to increase their appreciation of it. The Senser focuses on the feelings and sensations experienced, which means that difficulty is not construed as a barrier to meaningful receptive experiences. We argue the above-mentioned categories enhance our comprehension of the wide array of readers discussing poetry online.

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## Introduction

Engagement with social media continues to proliferate among digital communities. This includes the popular sites Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, but also now encompasses platforms dedicated to aspects of culture. This is especially true with reading, and various sites have emerged providing a space for readers to connect and share thoughts and feelings about what they read. This is in line with van Dijk’s<sup>1</sup> suggestion that cultural products

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are subject to crowd evaluation. Social media is crucial to this in its provision of a channel for the sharing of not only evaluative content, but also overall reading activities and preferences.

Arguably the most popular reading-focused social media platform is the Amazon-owned Goodreads. Sites such as Goodreads have been able to reinforce on a significantly larger scale the notion of reading as a social practice. The social dynamic attached to reading has been discussed previously by David Peplow et al.<sup>2</sup> in terms of reading groups, where it has been termed a form of 'social reading'. While the 'here and now' immediacy of in-person reading groups is absent from Goodreads, there is nevertheless a strong social element as users share views, emotions and interpretations and respond to those of others. As part of this social dimension, there has been a tendency in Goodreads reviews to privilege affect over criticism.<sup>3</sup> This may in part explain why online book reviews are increasingly being used as literary response data by stylisticians and other literary scholars interested in exploring the socio-cultural aspect of reading through naturalistic methods.<sup>4</sup>

These developments in reading as a social practice led Anne-Mette Bech Albrechtslund to link back to what it means to be a reader and the way this has been established over time as part of a negotiation of social meaning and the undertaking of identity performance, particularly in relation to traditional print books.<sup>5</sup> The author goes on to posit that 'as reading culture becomes increasingly embedded in new media practices, these qualities are not necessarily left behind but, it could be argued, rather gain both more visibility and new forms of expression'.<sup>6</sup> It is precisely these new forms of expression that we seek to explore in the current study aiming to understand new conceptualisations of the characteristics different readers possess.

While previous research using Goodreads and Amazon reviews as literary response data has tended to focus on literary fiction,<sup>7</sup> little research has been conducted on readers' responses to poetry. It is also noteworthy that research on reading-related social media platforms has typically focused on commercial and/or critical successes such as the *Twilight* series;<sup>8</sup> the Booker Prize-winning *The Inheritance of Loss*;<sup>9</sup> Orange Prize-winning *We Need to Talk About Kevin*;<sup>10</sup> and Booker Prize-winning *The Sense of an Ending*.<sup>11</sup> All this is not to say that poetry collections do not receive attention on the platform; on the contrary, canonical works experience substantial engagement from Goodreads users. For instance, a quick search for *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* reveals 36,920 ratings from users and 414 reviews; similarly, Seamus Heaney's *Opened Ground: Selected Poems, 1966–1996* displays 5,491 ratings and 170 reviews. Despite this evidence of user engagement, it must be said that it pales in comparison to more 'popular' fiction and non-fiction works. There are numerous possible reasons for this, ranging from the more abstract, non-referential nature of poetic language to the self-contained nature of individual poems, and the high level of subjective

interpretation demanded of readers. In general, it might be said that poetry represents a more 'difficult' genre for the reader, and perhaps it has followed that research into audience reception has also viewed it this way.

In this article, we attempt to remedy this lack of attention given to poetry. We focus on a well-known collection from the canon of twentieth century American poetry: Sylvia Plath's *Ariel*. Early literary criticism of the volume has previously been deemed insubstantial because of its focus on the fact that *Ariel* was published posthumously after Plath's suicide. However, the coming together of themes and tropes in the volume led Lynda Bundstzen to describe the work as 'extremely difficult'.<sup>12</sup> With our focus on Goodreads, however, we are not so much interested in traditional literary reviews as we are in the 'post-critical' review conceptualised by Emmett Stinson and Beth Driscoll,<sup>13</sup> which aligns with layperson reviews. Using a corpus of positive and negative reviews of *Ariel*, we explore the ways in which readers position themselves as readers of poetry in order to establish different reader types, which are ultimately characterised by readerly attitudes. This enables us to better understand how poetry is received by the broader reading public.

## Reader response and difficulty

The experience of reading is not uniform across all texts. Some texts might be considered 'light' reading while others can be deemed 'difficult'. In literature, 'difficulty' pertains either or both to the text (production) and the reading experience (reception). In fact, as Davide Castiglione argues, there is a textual basis of 'difficulty' which is then experientially and (inter-)subjectively dealt with by readers.<sup>14</sup> As Stinson and Driscoll point out, the development of social reading platforms like Goodreads enables ordinary readers to both discuss literary works typically considered difficult and to understand more about exactly what their reading peers find challenging about them.<sup>15</sup> George Steiner opens his influential essay 'On Difficulty' by asking: '[w]hat do we mean when we say: this poem, or this passage in this poem is *difficult*?' (original emphasis).<sup>16</sup> Regarding poetry, Steiner distinguishes four types of difficulty: contingent, modal, tactical, and ontological. Contingent and modal difficulties emerge from readers; tactical difficulty comes from authors; and ontological difficulty is discursively co-constructed by authors and readers. Contingent difficulty refers to the reader's need to rely on extratextual resources (e.g. a dictionary) to facilitate their understanding of a poem. Modal difficulty indicates a reader's inability to engage with the text because of a felt unfamiliarity. Tactical difficulty emanates from the author's peculiar use of language for aesthetic purposes. Finally, ontological difficulty emphasises the constructed nature of the text and leads readers to ponder about wider issues of signification and significance. While 'difficulty' tends to be construed negatively, Stinson and

Driscoll conceptualise literary difficulty – regardless of its type – as an affordance enabling new aesthetic experiences and leading to the emergence of ‘post-critical’ reviews online; our dataset corroborates these findings.<sup>17</sup>

Despite Steiner’s fourfold typology, the difficulty inherent in the poetic genre has not received extensive scholarly attention outside the field of education. Reader-response research on poetry in educational settings emphasises teachers and students’ resistance to the genre.<sup>18</sup> In relation to this, Patrick Dias and Michael Hayhoe suggest that reluctance to engage with poetry on the part of teachers and students comes from the recent emphasis – derived from New Criticism – on poems’ self-contained meanings.<sup>19</sup> In the field of linguistics, David Hanauer’s comparison between the ‘textbook’ and ‘poetry’ genres reveals that poems take longer to read than encyclopaedic items and involve a higher information recall on the part of readers.<sup>20</sup> According to Castiglione, these findings can be understood in light of the narrativity hypothesis.<sup>21</sup> Narrative should here be understood as ‘a perceived sequence of non-randomly connected events’.<sup>22</sup> Since readers tend to privilege novels over poetry collections for the purpose of leisure reading, their narrative schemas (i.e. cognitive representations of the concept of narrative) are more developed than their poetic schemas.<sup>23</sup>

However, as Louise M. Rosenblatt points out, poetry lends itself to ‘aesthetic readings’: the aim is not to extract information (unlike what she terms ‘efferent readings’), but to appreciate the reading event for its intrinsic benefit (i.e. for the sensations it produces). Despite this observation about poetry, Rosenblatt emphasises that the reader’s purpose for reading a text ultimately determines whether their reading stance is ‘aesthetic’ or ‘efferent’.<sup>24</sup> Our dataset certainly confirms the aesthetic-efferent spectrum insofar as reviews broadly fall into the ‘aesthetic’ or ‘efferent’ category. It is worth pointing out that we privilege the term ‘epistemic’ over that of ‘efferent’ to highlight the readers’ willingness to understand the poem and to reach the most plausible interpretation. Rosenblatt’s categories can be enhanced by Steiner’s typology of difficulty. In fact, it is expected that ‘aesthetic’ readings will embrace the tactical, modal and potentially ontological difficulties experienced while ‘epistemic’ readings will struggle to overcome the tactical, contingent, and modal difficulties experienced until a fixed interpretation is reached. Combined with the difficulties and the resistance associated with poetry, these observations partly explain Goodreads’ readers responses to Plath’s *Ariel*.

### Contextualising *Ariel*

The leading twentieth century American author Sylvia Plath, best known for her semi-autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar* (1963) and the poetry collections *The Colossus and Other Poems* (1960) and *Ariel* (1965), tends to be

classified under the label ‘confessional poet’. As a genre, confessional poetry emphasises the poet’s idiosyncratic experiences, especially pertaining to mental health disorders, sexuality, and grief. It is well known that Plath suffered from severe depression throughout her lifetime. When combined with her ‘confessional’ poetry and her death by suicide in 1963, this personal information has led critics to emphasise the biographical aspects of Plath’s work. However, reading Plath’s work exclusively through the confessional and/or biographical lens poses at least one issue, this being that it blends two different ontological levels. Indeed, the real world – with the poet as person – interweaves with the poetic world – with the poet as *persona*.<sup>25</sup> In the Ancient world, ‘persona’ referred to a theatrical mask, thus implying an impersonal quality.<sup>26</sup> As Kathleen Schroeder and Jo Gill both point out, biographical readings offer a reductive view of Plath’s poetry.<sup>27</sup> Schroeder argues that Plath’s poems can be given the credit they deserve if examined through the lens of reader-response criticism, which emphasises the active part played by readers in the interpretative process.<sup>28</sup> Of course, where some readers deem the poems worthy of credit, others do not, and it is our interest in these different types of interpretative processes that drives the current study.

The poems of *Ariel* (published posthumously in 1965) have generated extensive discussion pertaining to poetic devices, which may come as a surprise given Plath’s overall reception. Gill characterises *Ariel* as an ‘experiment with voice and persona’ and as a poetry ‘privileging the regressive, incantatory level of language’.<sup>29</sup> Paul Mitchell goes a step further by considering *Ariel* as a ‘destructive a-textual force’.<sup>30</sup> Of relevance to the current study, Doche notes that Goodreads reviews of *Ariel* suggest that readers privilege perceptual and affective responses to the collection over intellectual responses.<sup>31</sup>

*Ariel* comprises 43 poems, the most famous being her poems ‘Lady Lazarus’ and ‘Daddy’ which foreground visceral language. According to Ted Hughes, the poem which embodies the voice of *Ariel* is ‘Elm’.<sup>32</sup> Doche’s textual analysis of ‘Elm’ demonstrates that three features encourage readers to privilege perceptual-aesthetic over intellectual-epistemic responses: non-referentiality, intersensory-synesthetic and physiognomic-affective language, and the introduction of placelessness as commonplace.<sup>33</sup> Plath’s poetics provides no direct correspondence between the signifier (i.e. the word used in the poetic context) and the signified (i.e. the concept or the idea the word represent in the real-world context). In addition, ‘Elm’ appeals to the readers’ senses (intersensory-synesthetic) and affections (physiognomic-affective) through verbal plays mobilising colours, shapes, sounds and affects and through putting literal and metaphorical meanings against each other. Finally, Plath’s poem features countless encounters between *topos* (commonplace) and *atopia* (placelessness), thus provoking ontological

confusions. In a nutshell, Doche's analysis of 'Elm' shows that how much of Plath's difficulty is tactical (that is, stylistic). The present paper shows that Plath's tactical difficulty paves the way for further contingent and modal difficulties. These findings may be extended to include the other poems comprising *Ariel*. In any case, our dataset corroborates the hypothesis that the *Ariel* poems do not lend themselves to epistemic considerations: Plath's poetics brings about a 'vision' of the poems (or lack thereof) rather than mere 'recognition'.

## Methodology

### *Data and procedure*

As outlined above, the focus of the current study is Plath's volume *Ariel*. This collection has been selected due to its representation of difficulty as referenced in previous literary criticism. While Plath did publish another collection – *The Colossus and Other Poems* – it tends to be deemed less 'difficult' than *Ariel* and has failed to garner as much critical attention. With this in mind – and in keeping with previous online reader-response research privileging critically-acclaimed titles – we have adopted Goodreads responses to *Ariel* as our focus. The data for the study were collected from Goodreads on March 23, 2021, with all data residing in the public domain. At the time of writing, *Ariel* had been rated 59,404 times by users, with 2,177 reviews submitted. The general reception of the volume as shown through ratings (given on a 1–5-star scale) can be described as very positive with an average evaluation of 4.2 / 5 – see [Table 1](#).

Thus, if 'positive' is construed as being 4 and 5-star reviews, this makes up 79% of the total ratings. Conversely, 'negative' ratings make up only 5%. This is perhaps not surprising as online reviews have shown a tendency for a positive bias as compared with the general population.<sup>34</sup> This is premised on the notion that a reader buys or borrows a book based on the assumption that they will enjoy it. However, this of course does not discount the fact that there are indeed those who may perceive the volume positively but still struggle with it, and those who perceive it negatively but perhaps find aspects to like.

**Table 1.** Rating distribution for *Ariel* on Goodreads.

Ratings for <i>Ariel</i> on Goodreads		
Rating	No. of ratings	Percentage
5 ★	28,649	48%
4 ★	18,725	31%
3 ★	8,544	14%
2 ★	2,179	3%
1 ★	1,307	2%

The number of reviews provided on Goodreads tends to be significantly less than the number of ratings due to the ease of clicking a simple rating, as opposed to the effort and thought that goes into composing and posting a review. As the rating system cannot provide any deeper insight into reader reception beyond the rating itself, only the reviews allow us to understand the reading experience of users of the platform. Thus, we targeted the reviews as the focus of our data collection.

In order to gain an understanding of how *Ariel* was perceived and experienced by readers who appraised it both positively and negatively, we collected reviews that would be most likely to reflect this. We classified 4 and 5-star reviews as representing positive evaluation, and 1 and 2-star reviews as representing negative evaluation. To keep the focus manageable, we set some parameters for the reviews to be collected, namely for the reviews to be one or two paragraphs of around 5–15 lines. We deemed this a necessary step as many 4 and 5-star reviews tend to take the form of long essays which was beyond the scope of the analysis. This also helped to keep some consistency across the positive and negative reviews as the 1 and 2-star reviews tended to be much shorter. We collected 25 positive reviews (13 5-star / 12 4-star with a total wordcount of 2,999 words) and 25 negative reviews (13 1-star / 12 2-star with a total wordcount of 2,325 words). This sample size was reached for two key reasons. Firstly, when one looks at the reviews for a particular star-level rating, only the top 30 are shown; these are determined by a Goodreads algorithm designed to indicate reviews that ‘are most likely to interest readers’.<sup>35</sup> Secondly, as we had determined criteria based on length, we found many reviews were much shorter (e.g. one sentence) or significantly longer (e.g. multiple paragraphs, or even essay length). As such, these factors led us to consider the sample of 50 total reviews (25 positive / 25 negative) to be appropriate for the qualitative study we sought to undertake. We looked at the reviews in the order they were presented by the Goodreads algorithm, and the first to meet the criteria were added to our corpus. Our coding of the data was guided by the following research question:

**RQ:** To what extent do positive and negative reviews of Plath’s *Ariel* on Goodreads simultaneously construe different types of readerly attitudes and different types of responses to ‘difficulty’?

Each author independently coded the positive and negative reviews in line with the research question. The coding procedure was carried out on the basis of a holistic assessment of the readerly attitude suggested by the review. While some reviews displayed characteristics of different readerly attitudes, ultimately the reviews were coded based on this holistic assessment of what was being communicated by the reader. Following this, the findings were compared, and a set of reader types were agreed upon. Although there

was a range of different reading experiences, three main types emerged. It should also be noted that in line with ethical considerations inherent in research utilising online data, we have opted to anonymise all reviewers. The data are presented in a similar manner to that adopted by Nuttall and Harrison, with each reviewer given an identifier – these identifiers indicate whether the review is positive or negative and the number from the dataset.<sup>36</sup> For example, PR1 corresponds with ‘Positive Review 1’ or ‘Positive Reviewer 1’ and NR 1 corresponds with ‘Negative Review 1’ or ‘Negative Reviewer 1’. In the following section, these reader types will be presented and discussed using evidence from the perspective of both positive and negative reviews.

## Analysis and discussion

The coding process enabled us to distinguish three primary categories of types of readers as distinguished by particular readerly attitudes across positive and negative reviews. Table 2 below presents each reader-type, along with a description of the type and an example from our dataset. For the sake of space and concision, our table only features examples drawn from positive reviews.

The following analysis examines the ways in which The Self-Deprecator, The Re-Reader, and The Senser manifest in positive and negative reviews respectively. For each reader type, we conclude by considering the salient similarities and differences between positive and negative reviews. We must here clarify that ‘reader type’ should be understood in terms of ‘readerly attitudes’. In other words – since we privileged holistic assessment over strict correspondence between the empirical readers writing the reviews and the

**Table 2.** Overview of reader types.

Reader-type	Description	Examples (from positive reviews)
The Self-Deprecator	These readers state that Plath’s <i>Ariel</i> does not resonate with them because of their own deficiencies as readers. They believe that their lack of abilities prevents them from engaging with the collection.	<b>DISCLAIMER: I’m bad with poetry. I never quite get it.</b> English isn’t my mother tongue. I really wish it was. But it isn’t. <b>Limitations.</b> <b>Did I say I’m bad with poetry already?</b>
The Re-Reader	These readers believe that Plath’s <i>Ariel</i> would benefit from being re-read. They believe that re-reading the work may enhance both its aesthetic value and its reception.	I find with Plath, <b>I understand more on rereading the poems and appreciate them even more.</b>
The Senser	These readers emphasise the rawness of the aesthetic experience. They do not seek to understand the <i>Ariel</i> poems. Rather, they express a perceptual and/or affective response which leads them to privilege resonance over signification.	Reading this book, <b>I entered such a beautiful transe-like state.</b>

attitudes textually represented within the reviews – one review may feature more than one attitude or ‘type’.

### **The Self-Deprecator**

In positive reviews, the Self-Deprecators are construed as highly conscientious: their reviews indicate strong goal-directed assessment. Indeed, the Self-Deprecators demonstrate commitment to providing a fair, objective, and accurate star rating to accompany their evaluations.<sup>37</sup> PR16 writes: ‘I gave it 4 stars [...] because I didn’t think it’d be fair to give it less simply because of my personal lack of understanding of poetry’. Here, the reviewer suggests that *Ariel* deserves at least 4 stars, despite their relatively unsatisfying aesthetic experience. PR16 displays a positive bias towards the collection – perhaps driven by other reviews or by the significance of Plath in the wider poetic landscape – which leads them to believe that their differing opinions on *Ariel* show their own poetic inability. The Self-Deprecator’s high conscientiousness can be understood as an attempt to transpose difficulty from one ontological domain to another: from the reading experience (‘textual world’) to the reviewing practice (‘real world’).

With the exception of one reviewer (PR21), all Self-Deprecators have a synecdochic understanding of *Ariel*, which, they suggest, embodies the poetic genre. For instance, PR14 states: ‘DISCLAIMER: I’m bad with poetry. I never quite get it’. In a similar vein, PR22 acknowledges: ‘Poetry and I have a superficial relationship’. These examples from positive reviews reveal that the reviewers’s construals of the poetic genre may be somehow reductive – to them, all poetry is *Ariel* and *Ariel* is poetry. These readers do not display a strong poetic schemas which would help them differentiating between several poetic ‘sub-genres’ (e.g. narrative, lyric, or biographical). This observation recalls Castiglione’s research: readers’ narrative schemas are more developed than their poetic schemas.<sup>38</sup> Thus, ‘The Self-Deprecator’ believes that the modal difficulty they experience when reading *Ariel* extends to include poetry as a genre, which can partly be because *Ariel* tends to be presented as a ‘classic’.

What particularly strikes us in positive reviews posted by Self-Deprecators is the discrepancy between their self-deprecating attitude and the accuracy of their descriptions and evaluations of *Ariel*. ‘The Self-Deprecators’ are positive about their inability to understand *Ariel*: they use unmodalised assertions (e.g. PR14 ‘I’m bad with poetry’). However, the metaphorical imagery used by some reviewers very much respond to the imagery of *Ariel*: ‘the words took on a new power, waves crashing and breaking against the shore of my mind’ (PR22). As Doche argues, in *Ariel*, natural elements display more agency than human elements.<sup>39</sup> This description is therefore perfectly accurate. Most of the positive reviewers reduce the gap

between their self-deprecating behaviour and their enjoyment of *Ariel* by shifting focus. The positive reviews tend to begin with mental processes, such as ‘I don’t get [it/poetry/]’ in PR14, 20 and 22. These processes emphasise the reviewers’ attempts to reach an ‘epistemic’ understanding of the collection. In contrast, the ends of the reviews foreground the metaphorical and perceptual understanding illustrated above by PR22.

In negative reviews, the Self-Deprecators establish a causal relationship between their lack of understanding of the *Ariel* collection and their lack of engagement towards it: the former is said to generate the latter. In some cases, The Self-Deprecators provide disclaimers which – by explaining what generates their lack of understanding – add an extra element to the causal loop. For instance, NR1 writes: ‘I just... I don’t know, none of these poems made sense to me. It must be partly due to the fact that English is not my first language and tbh poetry has always been difficult for me’. The reader indicates proficiency in English as underpinning their struggle to engage with the poems. However, our data reveals that native speakers experience similar challenges. Thus, we note a discrepancy between cause and effect in NR1’s discourse. Although this Self-Deprecator emphasises the ‘tactical’ difficulty presented by the text, what prevails here is a sense of the ‘modal’ difficulty personally experienced by the reader. It is also noteworthy that, like their ‘positive’ counterparts, all ‘negative’ Self-Deprecators have a synecdochic understanding of *Ariel* which leads them to extend their modal difficulty to the poetry genre.

For other Self-Deprecators, such as NR3, a lack of understanding generates emotional rather than dismissive responses: ‘just as I think I ‘understand’ poetry, I find out I really don’t. I feel bad for not understanding these poems’. The categorisation of *Ariel* as ‘difficult’ literature by critics suggest that the reviewer’s comment may be disproportionate. In any case, the reader’s experience seems to adhere to Andrew Osborn’s perception of difficulty as a ‘resistance to swift and confident interpretation’.<sup>40</sup> Perhaps more significantly, the emotional response triggered by the reviewer’s lack of understanding confirms Leonard Diepeveen’s conception of difficulty as ‘a barrier to what one normally expects to receive from a text, such as its logical meaning, its emotional expression, or its pleasure’.<sup>41</sup> The reviewer misses the emotions contained in the text, which explains their difficulty understanding the poems. In turn, this struggle generates feelings of inferiority which ultimately reinforce the reviewer’s initial self-deprecation.

Difficulty does not preclude Self-Deprecators from trying to build relationships with *Ariel*. NR2 states: ‘I guess I just don’t get poetry, along with Shakespeare, classical music, opera etc. I suspect I may be uncouth, a philistine even. And yet I’d like to be able to appreciate poetry as I like the concept of it’. What is particularly striking here is the reader’s repeated attempts to engage with cultural artefacts which are perceived as having a

high symbolic value. Like classical works, poetry is sometimes deemed 'elitist', hence a general resistance to the genre. Nonetheless, the reviewer seems particularly determined to conquer difficulty, which – in the context of twentieth century modernism – displays a symbiotic relationship with high art. Here, the reviewer's self-deprecating attitude manifests in their self-description as 'uncouth' and 'philistine'. Despite these pejorative terms, The Self-Deprecator suggests that they will persevere in their endeavours because of their appreciation of the genre. It is worth wondering why *Ariel*, which tends to be deemed as 'difficult', appears as a starting point into poetry.

We note significant differences between the positive and negative Self-Deprecators, which warrant explicit discussion. In positive reviews, reviewers are quite certain that they do not understand *Ariel* and/or poetry, hence their use of categorical statements. In negative reviews, the reviewers' statements are nuanced through the introduction of modality: NR25 suggests '[p]erhaps reading poetry is not something [they are] good at' (NR25). In any case, both positive and negative reviews emphasise a synecdochic relationship between *Ariel* and the poetic genre. The reviewers' inability to understand *Ariel* extends to include an inability to master (positive reviews) or engage with (negative reviews) poetry.

Perhaps the most significant difference between positive and negative reviews lies in their treatment of 'difficulty'. While positive reviews construe difficulty as an affordance by both (i) emphasising their duties as reviewers and (ii) shifting the focus of the reviews from mental to physical processes, negative reviews do not seem to be able to deal with difficulty. Hence the description of the reading experience as an obstruction to (i) learning English and (ii) understanding poetry. In both positive and negative reviews, the reviewers state that they would like to remedy their inability to read poetry because 'significant things' can be felt from poetry (PR19). Thus, both types of Self-Deprecators see poetry in a positive light.

### **The Re-Reader**

In positive reviews, the Re-Readers give two reasons for re-reading *Ariel*: achieving greater understanding and experiencing new connections. Thus, the positive Re-Readers distinguish two visions for poetry: one emphasising the 'epistemic' reading noted in relation to the Self-Deprecator and one privileging the 'aesthetic' reading theorised by Rosenblatt.<sup>42</sup>

Among the epistemic Re-Readers, we note two types of practices. Some readers re-read the text in light of extra-textual material; other readers simply re-read the collection. Re-reading the text in light of extra-textual material positions the Re-Reader as a researcher keen to overcome 'contingent difficulty'. PR19 states:

I borrowed *Ariel* from the local library but intend to buy a copy for myself, so I can reread it whenever I want. Obviously, I am not capable of interpreting this kind of complex and dense poem, so I decided to do some research and now the message is clear to me.

By contrast, re-reading the text itself suggests that the reader is keen to overcome ‘modal difficulty’. For instance, PR1 writes: ‘I find with Plath, I understand more on re-reading the poems and appreciate them even more’. It is noteworthy that the epistemic Re-Reader seeks a denotative meaning, thus construing understanding as a cognitive process. Re-reading is here associated with ‘high conscientiousness’ in the sense that readers react pro-actively to difficulty.

Aesthetic Re-Readers emphasise new experiences and connections: ‘When I read *Ariel* and when I still read *Ariel*, the poems constantly change with you’ (PR3). Thus, unlike the epistemic Re-Readers, the aesthetic Re-Readers do not seek to engage in an interpretative process seeking to fixed denotation(s). Rather, they explore the manifold connotations of the poems, which present themselves in different ways over time, with the aim of experiencing new things and developing new insights. What particularly strikes us about aesthetic Re-Readers – as compared with their epistemic counterparts – is the fact that they anchor re-reading in a specific spatio-temporal context. PR4 writes: ‘I am leaving it in my night table so I can revisit it every other day. I’ve read all of the poems two or three times.’ While this comment foregrounds both space and time, most aesthetic Re-Readers focus on one or the other. These Re-Readers make connections between the poems and their immediate socio-material environments. According to Gilles Deleuze, this way of reading, ‘in contact with what’s outside the book, as a flow meeting other flows, [...] is reading with love’.<sup>43</sup>

The Re-Readers – regardless of their epistemic or aesthetic preferences – exercise curiosity. The English poet Gregory Leadbetter argues that active curiosity on the part of the reader should be motivated by the pursuit of a pleasurable experience, with the payoff coming in the form of enjoyment of the poem itself.<sup>44</sup> The positive Re-Readers of our corpus embody this readerly disposition.

In negative reviews, The Re-Readers express a sense of self-deprecation, which suggests that one reader can display more than one readerly attitude. Perhaps the most notable feature in negative reviews is the inherent resilience in readers, who are driven by a desire to understand challenging and critically acclaimed poetry. In one review, NR5 remarks:

I don’t know what to say about this one, only that I want to come back to it once I have read more. Some phrases really connected with me, but mostly it just washed over me without much care. Maybe I need to read bad poetry to really appreciate what she is doing here.

The Re-Reader's perseverance shows that they do not want to be 'defeated' by the poems. In this case, the reader's inability to connect with the poems stems from their unfamiliarity with the poetry genre, which acts as a barrier to overcoming modal difficulty. By emphasising that 'some phrases connected with [them]' while others did not, NR5 illustrates Castiglione's suggestion that a desire for re-reading 'arises only when the perceived difficulty is neither too low [...] nor too high'.<sup>45</sup> The author of this review goes further by saying that reading 'bad poetry' first would help them to gain a greater appreciation of Plath's collection. What is particularly intriguing is that, although *Ariel* did not resonate with the reader, the volume's revered status is not in the least impacted. In other words, the reviewer accepts the perception of *Ariel* as 'good' poetry and believes that that it is their responsibility to re-read the collection until they reach this conclusion for themselves.

Paradoxically, Re-Readers posting negative reviews demonstrate a resigned disinterest in the poems while showing interest in re-reading them. The Re-Reader's disinterest shows through their unwillingness to use extratextual resources (e.g. Google) to overcome the contingent difficulty of the poems: 'I'm probably not reading it right, or not getting it. But I don't really have any desire to google it to get it either' (NR6). However, the reviewer further explains that they will try again some other time. The combination of the willingness to re-read *Ariel* and the refusal to use extra-textual materials which could aid understanding are characteristic of the negative Re-Readers. It seems that the modal difficulty experienced by this reader type needs to be overcome by readers themselves, without outside help. For instance, NR7 states:

This was very difficult to read and it took a while for me to set the mood. I had to re-read each line two or three times to understand the meaning behind it (if at all). Perhaps reading poetry is not something I'm good at.

Like other negative Re-Readers, NR7 seeks to gain an epistemic appreciation of the poems ('understand the meaning behind it') in order to overcome the modal difficulty encountered ('it took a while for me to set the mood') during the initial reading. Despite the reviewer's perseverance, the re-reading does not prove helpful insofar as modal difficulty persists ('if at all'). As a result, the reviewer shows self-deprecating thinking and self-diagnoses that they are not able to engage with poetry as a genre. This attitude aligns with Osborn's construal of difficulty as resisting easy and assured interpretation.<sup>46</sup> It is noteworthy that the self-deprecating tendency, combined with the synecdochic understanding of *Ariel*, is common practice in reviews from negative Re-Readers and Self-Deprecators.

While both types of Re-Readers share such qualities as openness and perseverance, their responses to difficulty greatly differ. The positive Re-

Readers includes two types of readers: readers who engage in re-reading to develop new sensations (i.e. aesthetic Re-Readers) and readers who engage in re-reading to attempt to decipher what the poems mean (i.e. epistemic Re-Readers). Positive Re-Readers transform difficulty as an affordance in two ways. Aesthetic Re-Readers re-read *Ariel* in different spatio-temporal contexts and socio-material environments. As a result, they develop a relational understanding of the collection which leads them to simultaneously – although this may seem paradoxical – develop new sensations and to overcome the modal difficulty initially encountered. Epistemic Re-Readers re-read *Ariel* in light of extratextual materials – the curiosity generated by this activity decreases the contingent difficulty initially encountered. By contrast, negative Re-Readers seem unable to counteract the difficulty first experienced. Negative Re-Readers only feature the ‘epistemic’ subset. For these kinds of readers, any aesthetic experience of the poems is unattainable because of the epistemic challenges inherent in them. While positive reviews tackle both modal and contingent difficulty, negative reviews solely focus on the latter. Negative Re-Readers point out that reading *Ariel* would be more accessible and rewarding should they spend additional time engaging with secondary materials. However, they refuse to do so (‘I don’t really have any desire to google it’ – NR6), which entails that – like their negative Self-Deprecator peers – difficulty remains a major barrier to appreciation.

### **The Senser**

Interpreting a literary artefact exclusively through the intellect is a sickness which bears the name of ‘interpretosis’.<sup>47</sup> Far from suffering from such illness, the Senser dismisses it in favour of ‘a perceptual aesthetic experience that defies cognition’.<sup>48</sup> PR8 states:

I don’t think I want to analyse the poems in *Ariel*. I am far too much in awe. There’s something so unique, morbid and almost terrifying in the way Plath perceives the world. It’s fantastical.

All positive reviews feature a Senser who appreciates the reading event for the sensations it generates (aesthetic reading) rather than for any meaning-making purposes (epistemic reading). The Senser embraces the blurred boundaries between themselves as reader and ‘knower’ and the text, which – perhaps wrongly – tends to be construed as the ‘known’. Positive Senses acknowledge that *Ariel* has altered them in some ways. PR13 writes: ‘Reading this book, I entered such a beautiful transe-like state.’

Relatedly, positive Senses are characterised by their openness to new experiences: they maintain a ‘vigilance that suspends programmed thinking and leaves [them] available to the surrounding world’.<sup>49</sup> As Yves Citton

suggests, sensing requires a to-and-fro movement between active and passive states of consciousness, which the reviews hint at:<sup>50</sup>

**PR7:** The best way, though not the safest, is to let yourself sink into the deep murky waters offered to you by Sylvia Plath, and allow the darkness to enshroud you.

**PR18:** Beautiful, immediate, and haunting. *Ariel* is a collection of poems that demand an emotional response with language that is visceral, evocative, and highly intentioned. The poems resonated chillingly, communicating intense resonance through relatively traditional structure.

In PR7 and PR18 – and in the positive reviews produced by Sensers more generally – Plath and *Ariel* are granted agency: both entities are considered responsible for the sensations experienced by readers (e.g. ‘offered to you by Sylvia Plath’; ‘poems that demand an emotional response’). While the Senser appears less agentive, the prevalence of the structure ‘let yourself [do something]’ and of the verb ‘resonate’ and its derivatives in the reviews suggests that the reader’s ability to experience sensations is contingent upon their active decision to reject an epistemic form of knowing. It is noteworthy that these syntactic and lexical choices recall standard mindfulness discourses.

Not only do the positive Sensers experience *Ariel* through affect, but they also encourage other readers to do the same by providing recipes on ‘how to read *Ariel*’ (see PR7). The Sensers know that the ‘tactical difficulty’ foregrounded in *Ariel* – particularly in the poems’ ‘structure’ (PR18), the ‘rhythm’ (PR22) and the ‘language’ (PR10 and PR18) – call for a personal response. Here, positive Sensers provide a way into *Ariel*, and, by doing so, use difficulty as a community-building tool on Goodreads. Given the pleasure experienced by the positive Senser, one may wonder if reluctance to the poetry genre does not come from an overemphasis on the ‘whatness’ of interpretosis as opposed to the ‘howness’ of sensations and relations.

In negative reviews, Sensers dwell upon their difficulty to overcome the negative emotions evoked by the bleak nature of the *Ariel* poems. NR8 expresses a sense of fear at – what they perceive to be – the workings of Plath’s mind. They indicate that the poems resonate with them, thus allowing for a shared understanding of Plath’s mental state: ‘Sylvia Plath’s mind really scares me. These poems were written right before she committed suicide, and you could feel her disconnection from the world’. While this comment hints at the reviewer’s ontological confusion between *poet-as-person* and *poet-as-persona*, it also corroborates Leadbetter’s argument that, in art, what is often perceived as impersonal by some can ultimately aid it in becoming personal for others.<sup>51</sup> Despite NR8’s strong personal aesthetic engagement with Plath’s *Ariel*, they later reflect on their inability to extract any epistemic understandings from the collection, hence why negative sensing prevails.

Anna Sigvardsson points out that there is a tendency to ‘emphasise feelings and the aesthetic experience of poetry’.<sup>52</sup> Negative Sensers embody this disposition:

**NR9:** I know she is influential and classic and famous. But it’s just too damn dark and morbid and tragic for my taste.

**NR10:** I found it extremely triggering and reading it truly weighed me down. Even after I had finally finished it, I had a hard time trying to move on. I can’t deny that its immense impact on me shows great skill on the part of Plath.

**NR11:** I don’t appreciate the overly negative emotion; I simply felt drawn down into a quagmire of self-pity and self-loathing.

The evaluations carried out by negative Sensers – including star-rating – are greatly guided by their emotional responses to the text. The poet’s perceived skills do not enter the equation. NR9 makes this explicit in suggesting that Plath’s fame and *Ariel*’s longstanding literary reputation do not counter-balance the negative emotions sensed by readers. NR10 praises Plath’s skills insofar as *Ariel* has led them to develop a prolonged negative – and potentially traumatic – emotional response. Such response entails that the reviewer’s engagement with the work does not translate into aesthetic appreciation. The weight of the poems is alluded to by NR11, who seems unable to see beyond the alleged ‘confessional’ nature of *Ariel*. From our perspective, negative Sensers develop a ‘neurotic’ response to Plath’s collection in the sense that (i) they foreground strong negative emotional reactions, (ii) which persist for unusually long periods of time and (iii) perceive *Ariel* as potentially threatening.

Other reviews reinforce the idea that ‘aesthetic judgements signify more for poetry than for other readers of literature’.<sup>53</sup> NR12 writes:

Poetry is pleasurable for me because I can immerse myself in a pool of words, my own private ritual bath, but this book felt like immersing myself in shredded glass – or more like a vacuum – painful and unclear to me why it should be valuable.

The reviewer’s schematic experience of the poetry genre is evocatively described as a pleasant ‘private ritual bath’ while *Ariel* is associated with the void and ‘shredded glass’. NR12’s use of a visceral intersensory-physiognomic language evoking both senses and affect highlight the negative emotions triggered during the reading event. It is noteworthy that the reviewer’s question about *Ariel*’s potential value for readers makes it clear that they expect poetic artefacts to ‘foreground comfort and outside connections’<sup>54</sup> as opposed to internal – and potentially transformative – disruptions.

Both the positive and the negative Sensers neutralise epistemic interpretations by approaching *Ariel* through sensations. Thus, the Sensers believe that the reading experience should be its own purpose. As Doche argues,

Plath's peculiar use of intersensory-physiognomic language – here understood as a 'tactical difficulty' – invites such readerly dispositions.<sup>55</sup> Positive Sensors embrace tactical difficulty; PR8 writes: '[a]s always, the urgency of imagery in Plath's works calls to me'. Negative Sensors, however, draw inescapable links between the aesthetics of the text and the emotional difficulties experienced by Plath, as opposed to her *persona*: '[t]hese poems were written right before she committed suicide, and you could feel her disconnection from the world' (NR5). The ontological confusion between real and fictional entities leads negative Sensors to worry about the poems' potential harm: 'I certainly don't recommend it for anyone at the middle school level' (NR11).

The main difference between positive and negative Sensors lies in their conceptualisation of *Ariel*. Positive Sensors see *Ariel* as a *mediator*, that is to say, as a literary artifice foregrounding an aesthetic which has the potential to transform the ways in which the receiver of the 'message' (i.e. the reader) see the world. Negative Sensors perceive *Ariel* as an *intermediary* – i.e. as the way through which Plath shares her negative emotions, which entails that the 'message', perceived as inherently negative, is not transformed in the literary process. Once again, positive reviewers transform difficulty as a relational affordance while negative reviewers struggle to overcome their initial negative responses.

## Conclusion

Our analysis of positive and negative responses to Sylvia Plath's *Ariel* on Goodreads has enabled a nuanced insight into readerly attitudes in the context of 'difficult' poetry. Our three reader types feature distinct characteristics that are observable precisely because of the social reading context provided by Goodreads and the post-critical reviews displayed there. In traditional literary criticism, published in newspapers and literary journals, reviews offer the opinions of experienced literary critics only, which means that the everyday reader cannot take part in these conversations. New media and the social reading facilitated within participatory culture has changed this.

The reader types to emerge from our data were the Self-Deprecator, the Re-Reader and the Sensor. While our analysis has provided a detailed overview of each type, in concluding it is prudent to discuss some of the key overarching similarities and differences. Firstly, we found that the Self-Deprecator displays two characteristics which tend not to be shared by the Re-Reader or the Sensor. These are that they display a concern with providing an accurate rating (only in positive reviews) and construe a synecdochic relationship between *Ariel* and poetry (both positive and negative reviews). It must be noted that few negative Re-Readers show similar synecdochic

tendencies. There are also instances where overlap occurs both between reader types and between the positive and negative sides of the spectrum. For instance, we found that positive Self-Deprecators give more agency to the text (i.e. *Ariel*) than to themselves. However, this is also the case with negative Re-Readers. This was evident in the reviewers' use of passive sentence structures in evocative and/or metaphorical sentences such as 'the words took on a new power, waves crashing and breaking against the shore of my mind' (PR22).

Both positive Self-Deprecators and negative Re-Readers also show a positive bias towards *Ariel*. In praxis, this means that positive Self-Deprecators may rate the collection higher than they would because of their 'real-world' generic knowledge, which entails that they know that the collection is critically acclaimed. In a similar vein, negative Re-Readers often make a commitment to read the collection again even if they did not enjoy it because they think that *Ariel* is 'good' poetry. This is a perception that has been erected around the reputation *Ariel* has developed over time. The similarities between the positive Self-Deprecator and the negative Re-Reader seem particularly significant. Previous research has demonstrated the link between re-reading and enhanced appreciation of literary narratives.<sup>56</sup> However, to our knowledge, our research is the first to show the intimate connection between re-reading and self-deprecation. We wonder if the introduction of humour in critical discussions about poetry could lead negative Re-Readers to successfully transition to positive Self-Deprecators. In any case, we hope that our findings may enhance discussions about how to approach difficult poetry in pedagogical contexts.

It is also significant that all types of reader focus on their idiosyncratic experiences as evidenced by the frequent mentions of personal anecdotes. This observation recalls Stinson and Driscoll's argument that difficulty is dealt with through shared idiosyncratic experiences on digital platforms.<sup>57</sup>

Across all reader types, perhaps the most significant difference between positive and negative reviewers resides in their ability to treat difficulty as an affordance rather than a hindrance. Positive reviewers achieve this while negative reviewers do not.

This study has provided novel insights into readers' responses to difficult poetry in the online context of Goodreads and has also generated findings that are worthy of more focused investigation in future studies. For instance, evidence suggests that despite initial feelings of reader inadequacy in terms of tackling difficulty, there is a sense of determination that returning to the collection could contribute to an incremental understanding. Further, future research could engage in comparative work where layperson reviewers and more traditional literary critics are compared in terms of how they converge and/or diverge in how they confront and manage difficulty, particularly in poetry.

Ultimately, we suggest that through exploring the discourse of readers in new media platforms such as Goodreads, it becomes possible to gain valuable new insights into the behaviour and characteristics of readers. For every review posted, we have an opportunity to learn more about reading and its social elements in the contemporary context, and since ways of reading and engaging with texts continues to change, this is an invaluable development.

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