English 123—Yanover

Reader-Response Criticism

Preparing to read and write using the lens of Reader-Response Criticism:
Like Deconstruction, Reader-Response Criticism is also a response to New Criticism. Like New Criticism and Deconstruction, Reader-Response Criticism focuses on the close reading/explication and analysis of the text itself and its meaning. (Its key terms/concepts are included below.) Unlike New Criticism, however, it insists on the relevance of the reader’s role in the process of making meaning of the text, and along with the reader comes his or her outside knowledge and life and past reading experience, all of which serve as influences on his or her perception of and response to the text. Reader-Response Criticism assumes that the author, too, is aware of these potential, if not specific, influences and anticipates and even uses them to manipulate the reader.

Therefore, we might understand Reader-Response Criticism as a literary rhetorical analysis, which examines how and why the author manipulates the reader/audience to understand and respond appropriately to the argument of his/her text. Like Deconstruction, we are doing a kind of double-reading. As with New Criticism, we start by looking at how the text makes meaning with the literary devices it uses, focusing especially on the ones we notice. Now, however, we are noticing not just how these patterns make meaning but especially how they are used purposefully—placed or emphasized—so the reader will notice them and how and why they serve to evoke a particular understanding or emotional response in him or her (us): sympathy, empathy, amusement, nostalgia, regret, anger, disgust, etc. So a final step is to ask ourselves why the author wants or needs us to notice, understand, and/or feel this at this moment in the text. How does eliciting this understanding or emotion reveal and fulfill the text’s argument and purpose?

Noticing the point of view is particularly valuable in doing Reader-Response Criticism. Locating ourselves in or in relation to the text forces us to acknowledge and focus on our role in discovering its argument/meaning. So we might ask whose perspective is represented and how it is: directly as s/he is telling the story or describing the scene in first-person or indirectly because the way the situation or characters are described or presented suggests sympathy for this particular character or suggests his or her perception of reality. Are there characters who seem to know more than we do? Does the narrator? Why and so what? What characters, if any, are we made to identify with? How? Why? Note: Identifying with a character or characters is not the same as sympathizing with him/her or them. We don’t necessarily like or approve of characters we (are made to) identify with; we just see the text’s reality from their viewpoint. If, in contrast, we are kept on the outside, how and why is this accomplished? How does the point of view and perspective of the text (and the relative placement of the reader within the text) reveal the text’s argument and fulfill its purpose?

Final note:
The claim in a Reader-Response Criticism essay focuses on the role or significance of the reader in “making” (understanding) the text’s meaning (argument) or an appropriate response to it, thereby fulfilling its purpose. Alternatively, the claim might focus on the author’s awareness of and manipulation of the reader, as evidenced in the text, to communicate his/her argument and fulfill his/her purpose. As with any good claim, it must be specific and unified.

Read over the following pages to gain a better understanding of Reader-Response Criticism and how to apply it to your literary analysis:
Key Terms/Concepts:

Most terms are defined in the “Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms” at the end of Reading and Writing about Literature by Janet E. Gardner and/or in the body of the book itself (see the index at the end of the book). Those that *aren’t defined are defined below, and some that +are defined are given more explanation.

1. Diction: abstract and concrete language, denotation, connotation
   a. *etymology: the history of a word. Detailed information on the history of words can be found in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) which can be useful in determining a word’s specific meaning or meanings at the time it was used.

2. Allusion
3. Literal language
4. Figurative language
5. +Imagery/image conveys sensory experience in essence by creating that sensation or object in the reader’s imagination (often sight but also sound, smell, taste, touch, motion. Images can be literal or figurative. See below.)
7. *A figurative image suggests the essence of a thing by comparing it to the sight, sound, etc., of something else. Figures of speech, such as metaphors and similes, are generally images though not always.
8. Figure of speech: metaphor, simile, metonymy, synecdoche, personification, symbol, synesthesia, allegory, hyperbole, understatement, paradox, oxymoron.
9. *Mimesis means imitation (mimicry) or representation (see Imitation in the glossary), in this case, literature imitating or representing life. Texts reflect or represent—in their form, structure, imagery, etc.—the real, natural, and/or human experience they depict, enabling or compelling readers to share that experience. Often, the reader’s experience of the text or response to it is made to mimic the characters’.
10. Sound: alliteration, cacophony, euphony, consonance, assonance, onomatopoeia
11. *Motifs are the repeated or recurrent patterns—words, phrases, images, objects, sounds, scenes, structures, concepts, themes, etc.,—that unify the text and work together to communicate its meaning, effect, and/or purpose.
12. +Ambiguity in literature is found in words, statements, or situations, etc., that have more than one possible meaning. These possibilities make the text more complex and interesting and more meaningful, and are analyzed to reveal their effect and purpose.
13. Irony: dramatic, situational, verbal
14. +Unity is the oneness or coherence of a text—short story, poem, novel, play—seen in the way its parts or elements work together to create a sense of it as an organic whole.
15. *Tension occurs between seemingly contradictory elements of the text—irony, ambiguity, paradox—contradictions, which the reader/ critic must resolve or reconcile in order to make meaning and to make of the text a unified whole. These elements that resist unity do not detract from a text but rather signal its greater complexity, interest, and significance.
16. Point of View
17. Narrator
18. Voice
19. Speaker
20. Tone
21. Character
22. Protagonist
23. Antagonist
24. Structure/Form
25. *Pace/Pacing is the speed at which a text moves due to its form and content, often
determined by the length, and its variety or monotony, of a line or sentence, stanza or
paragraph, and section, chapter, or scene, and in prose the use of description or exposition
versus dialogue, and in drama the length of characters’ lines in a scene, etc., including
silences and actions, etc. Syntax (sentence structure) and sentence types as well as
rhythm/sound and diction also have an impact on pacing.

26. *Plot: climax, denouement. Short stories according to Alice Adams, typically follow
ABDCE structure: action, background, development (movement of the plot forward,
physically or psychologically), climax (or turning points), ending. Not all stories follow
this order though most have all of these elements. Similarly, while plot in drama
traditionally includes prologue or exposition, rising action, complication, climax, falling
action, and catastrophe or denouement, not all plays follow this order or include all steps
discretely, and modern plays may conform more to the ABDCE structure, again with
some steps rearranged or merged.

27. Conflict
28. Flashback
29. Foreshadowing
30. Juxtaposition
31. Description
32. Exposition
33. Dialogue
34. Setting

35. *Defamiliarization is the way in New Criticism a text makes the familiar seem strange
and thereby makes the reader aware of and open to new understanding of his or her
reality as if he or she is seeing it for the first time.
The Text Acts on the Reader When you examine how a text controls the reader's responses, you acknowledge that the text is a powerful manipulator. As Henry James once commented, "In every novel the work is divided between the writer and the reader; but the writer makes the reader very much as he makes his characters."

To examine a text by looking for how it produces certain effects on a reader means to look at it in much the same way that the group of critics known as the structuralists do (see Chapter 8). Both reader-response critics and the structuralists assume that because readers come to a work with a certain literary competence, or what Jonathan Culler called a set of shared reading conventions, they recognize signals that they are accustomed to finding there. They then use those signals to make the expected interpretation. Both groups know how they are expected to respond, and they react accordingly. They use the familiar cues to make new interpretations. Thus, looking at the text to see how it causes readers to react in certain ways involves asking how the codes, signs, signals, and rules work together to produce meaning. It entails examining the relationships among the parts in an effort to define the system—known as the grammar—that governs them. The able reader recognizes the grammar because of her own life experiences and her reading background.

If the meaning of a text is recognizable because "informed" readers know the accepted conventions that underlie it, then a work cannot be subject to an infinite number of interpretations. This means that it is less important for readers to record their personal responses than it is to make generalizations about how interpretation is governed by the system under which the text was written. Although critics who have a structuralist bent recognize that different readers will produce different interpretations, they focus on the regularities they find in readers' strategies. Such generalizations also extend beyond the text in question, for the text is not autonomous; it exists in the context of other texts, with which it shares common elements and, hence, meanings.

It is important to realize that sometimes an author can use recognizable conventions to "fool" the reader. As Stanley Fish pointed out in Surprised by Sin (1998), a text can use predictable responses, such as the expectations typically evoked by a particular genre, to cause readers to make interpretations that later prove to be wrong. Consequently, readers must be sophisticated enough to make adjustments to their interpretations as needed.

If you are primarily interested in how the text controls your response, you will want to examine how it shows you what you should be thinking and feeling as it unfolds. This may involve considering the author's intention and how it was carried out. Certainly it will entail looking closely at each element of the work for what it implies about the reader's behavior.

In "The Masque of the Red Death," for example, the reader gradually moves from enjoyment of (and vicarious participation in) the lighthearted revelries of the courtiers to "utterable horror" at the final "dominion" of the Red Death. The isolation of the setting, the images of silence and darkness, and the diction ("gaudy," "fantastic," "blood-tinted panes," "ghastly," "grotesque," "delirious fancies," "bizarre") imply a world in which madness is the norm and the supernatural rules. Indeed, every component of the story—plot structure, patterns of expectation and satisfaction or expectation and disappointment, characterization, revelations and reversals, contrasting elements, image, symbol, figurative language, tone—contributes to the mounting uneasiness and final terror experienced by the reader. Consider, for example, the description of the rooms, one small element of the tale. The progress through each of the seven (a magical number) chambers disquiets the reader. The rooms are "irregularly disposed," we are told, with a "sharp turn at every twenty or thirty yards." Their colors, repeated in the stained glass windows to produce a claustrophobic effect, move in a disturbing sequence—from blue to purple, then green, orange, white, violet, and finally black—that is accentuated by windowpanes of "scarlet" and "deep blood color." It is a sequence that begins with suggested innocence (blue) and ends in mystery and death (black and blood color). Or consider the effect of the contrasting sounds in the story. We are told, for example, that "the wild music of the orchestra" and light laughter of the dancers are interrupted when the hour is "stricken" (a word that carries the suggestion of illness) by the ebony clock, which has a sound that is "clear and loud and deep and exceedingly musical, but of so peculiar a note and emphasis that ... the giddiest grew pale." The sound of the clock is made even more ominous by its contrast with the jovial noises of the partygoers and its effect on them. All the information given is disposed to create in the reader a sense of the fantastic that is threatening and dangerous.

To examine how a text controls a reader's response, you will find it helpful to ask questions such as these:

- What did the author intend for you to feel while reading this work, and how did he or she make you feel it?
- What are you dependent on in this work to help you make sense of what you read—descriptive passages, the narrator's voice, contrasting viewpoints of characters?
- Do the events fall into a pattern you have seen before?
- Are there opposites in the text that surprise you? Inform you? Keep you from anticipating what is coming?
- How do your previous experiences with this genre set up your expectations for how this text will operate?
- What images and events in the story are you already conditioned to approve or disapprove?
- How does the point of view affect (or control) your understanding?
- What information has been withheld from you? How does that affect your inferences?
- What similarities do you recognize between this work and other works—for example, in terms of themes, setting, characters?
What kind of reader is implied by this text? For example, does it address you as if you are intelligent and well informed, or as if you are inexperienced and innocent?

- What aspects of the text invite you to respond as the implied reader?
- How do you, as an actual reader, differ from the one that is implied?
- What gaps and vague outlines did you find yourself filling in?
- How did your perceptions and responses change as the work unfolded? What caused them to change?
- What contradictions did you perceive in the text—for example, characters who represent differing viewpoints? How did you resolve them?
- What do you know of the author's intent?
- List the most vivid images you remember from the text. How have you reconstructed them from your own experiences?
- What experiences of your own have you used to visualize and understand those presented in the text?

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**Writing a Reader-Response Analysis**

**Prewriting**

To find a starting point for exploring where your personal experience and the text converge, you will find it helpful to make a few personal observations before, during, and after reading the text. These observations will help you discover interpretive points for discussion. It is easy to begin; simply ask questions such as these before you even pick up the book:

- How do I feel about reading this piece? Am I eager to begin? Curious about what I will find? Reluctant?
- What do I already know about this work or this author?
- What do I already know about the time, place, or characters depicted?
- What does the title suggest to me?
Noting your responses in a journal or log during a first reading can help you make generalizations later. You may still be at the questioning stage when you do this, or your ideas may have reached an advanced degree of development. Regardless of how far along you are in your thinking, here are some suggestions to consider during the initial reading:

- Does the work include quotations that I would like to copy and save? What questions would I like to ask the author?
- What objections can I raise to what I am reading?
- Where do I experience confusion, disagreement, approval, or any other attitude or feeling?
- What experiences does the text bring to mind that I can describe or narrate?

You can also make short responses after the first reading. These responses may be appropriate for a journal entry, or you may write them as separate texts.

- As soon as you finish reading the work, describe how you feel about it.
- Write a brief summary of the plot.
- Freewrite about a single line from a poem or about a sentence from a piece of prose.
- Identify a line or an image that immediately caught your attention or that you remember clearly. Why do you find it to be powerful?
- Think of someone or some experience that a character or situation in this work brings to mind.
- List the things you like about the work. Why do you like them?
- List those aspects of it that bother you. Why do they bother you?
- Identify any passages you do not understand.
- Choose what you would tell someone about this work if you could make only one comment.
- Consider how you might have acted had you been one of the characters.
- What else would you like to know about the characters or events?
- What values, beliefs, or assumptions of your own does this work affirm? Which of your values, beliefs, or assumptions does it challenge?
-Compose a letter (not to be sent) to the author or to one of the characters.
-Speculate on who should play the various roles in a filmed version of the work.

Drafting and Revising

The Introduction Because you are making a reader-response analysis, it is appropriate to involve your audience in the introduction to your essay. In other words, try to provoke a strong response from your own reader. One way of doing so is to begin by recounting an incident from the work that elicits a particularly powerful reaction or quote a passage that holds strong emotion for most readers. For example, Edgar Allan Poe's description of the mysterious stranger who suddenly appears at the ball in "The Masque of the Red Death"—"The figure was tall and gaunt, and shrouded from head to foot in the habiliments of the grave"—is not likely to provoke an insinuative yawn from anyone who reads it. It can send shivers down the spine of even the most passive reader. An essay that begins by quoting such a line will catch a reader's attention; it can also effectively lead into a more detailed examination of how the reader and text are responsible for making the literary work.

The Body The core of your paper will explain how the text controls the reader's understanding and sympathies, identify the personal material you have put into the text, and describe how the two interact to create the text. In other words, it will show how you acquired information about the text and what responses that information created.

Part of your discussion, then, will center on the guidelines embodied in the text. It will note stereotypes, points of view, connotations, patterns, metaphors, foreshadowing, and images that guide your responses. It will question the accuracy of the information that is given and the reliability of the various characters who provide that information. It will remark on those instances in which only partial information is provided and where the reader knows more than the characters know. Even points at which the reader is misled will be significant.

You may want to describe your general impression of the work or how your initial impression of it changed to become your final judgment. You may even want to point out what you have found that was recognizable from your own experiences, both personal and literary. Note any incidents and characters that produced either validation of or challenge to your sense of the world (noticeable because of your own comfort or discomfort on meeting them). It may be helpful to profile the character with whom you most closely identified or the incident that gave you the most pleasure or pain. If you found yourself remembering a personal experience that made the text more credible or moving, you will want to include it here. If you supplied material by imagining events that did not actually take place, you should mention any fantasies or speculations that helped explain a character's motivation or enhance a bit of action. If you made adjustments in how you initially saw the text so that it was more in keeping with your usual way of seeing things, you will have a direct means of discovering your part in making this text. Even the expectations you had before reading it may be significant in explaining how you created the work.

Finally, you should explain what resulted when the text and the reader came together. You may want to note how the text invites responses by predisposing the reader to read in certain ways, and you might examine how the images provided by the text are modified by the reader's personal experience. Although the text is structured by the author's sense of the world and the effect the work has had on a reader and the causes that produced those effects. Finally, the conclusion should include an evaluation of how effectively the text elicited the desired responses, how deeply the reader became involved in constructing the text, and how the work was enriched by the mutual participation of text and reader. In other words, how well did the process work?
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Sample Response Paper: Applying Reader-Response Criticism to Jackson’s “The Lottery”

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Man’s Humanity to Man

Robert Burns claimed in 1784 in his poem “Man Was Made to Mourn: A Dirge” that “Man’s inhumanity to man / Makes countless thousands mourn” (lines 55-6), ironically characterizing cruelty as an inhuman and primitive trait despite the human tendency to be cruel, which his poem so clearly acknowledged and illustrated. Shirley Jackson, author of the short story “The Lottery,” would disagree with the assumption that cruelty is inhuman. She had no such illusions or expectations of humanity’s essential benevolence. Using the lens of Reader-Response Criticism, the reader can’t help but notice and react to Jackson’s implicit cynicism. Indeed, her story “The Lottery” paints a picture of humanity as inherently, naturally cruel and condemns humanity as ultimately irredeemably savage.

However, Shirley Jackson goes to considerable lengths to paint a picture of normal everyday life in “The Lottery.” Looking at what Jackson chooses to present, we must acknowledge that nothing on the surface on first reading suggests the brutality of the end. The title intimates that something is going to happen, but this thing is left unspecified, and the word lottery itself implies something positive, not something ominous. It is, after all, a nice June morning, June 27th to be exact, in this unnamed village (963). It is a friendly village. People greet each other with smiles and warm words. The children are inventive, independent, and industrious. Already three of the boys have “made a great pile of stones in one corner of the
square” (964), and the reader is allowed to believe, for the moment, in the innocence of their purpose. This illusion of normalcy, of innocence is ultimately dispelled as we read at the end: “The children had stones already, and someone gave little Davy Hutchinson a few pebbles” (969). The deception Jackson has perpetrated on us is made all the more poignant because of our realization that our foolishness stems, not from what Jackson omitted—the stones were there all along—but from what we have added to the story: that is, our own assumptions and desires, what we wanted to see. We will not be so gullible upon a second, closer reading. So if we look back to the beginning of the story, we might notice that fine June day no longer seems so innocent. We might note, for example, the urgency that the precision of the date and timing of the lottery lends to the occasion. We might also look again at those friendly villagers and see that the way “[the men] stood together, away from the pile of stones,” along with the fact that “their jokes were quiet and they smiled rather than laughed” (964) suggests their nervousness, and this nervousness, in turn, indicates their awareness that this is no ordinary day. Of course, we cannot be expected to deduce the ending from these few vague clues, and while the clues do become steadily more frequent and explicit, Jackson is, in fact, relying upon our prolonged blindness to make us see what we do not want to see. Throughout the story, we are allowed to remain separate, distant from the characters, safe in the knowledge that we are not they. This, then, is the ultimate horror, that finally, we are forced to see our blindness as parallel to the villagers’ inability or unwillingness to see the true nature and injustice of the lottery. So Jackson compels us to see that her deception is, in fact, accomplished by us, by our tendency—not confined to our response to this one fiction—to accept blindly what is presented, whether by the author or by our society, as normal, and that it is in just this way, in this practice of self-deception, that we are like these villagers. Like them, we protect ourselves from unpleasant truths, thereby allowing
them to continue, and while we may look on in horror, we do look on; we read to the end of the story, in a sense allowing the brutality to happen. Aren’t we, then, just as bloodthirsty and savage as the villagers?

Shirley Jackson’s cynicism, reflected in the story’s unapologetic portrait of humanity as irrevocably savage, is deeply disturbing, and it’s understandable why audiences then and now have been both transfixed and outraged by her story. The horror it confronts us with may be a fiction, but that doesn’t negate its truth, especially the potential to recognize ourselves in the villagers. Haven’t we individually and collectively faced situations when we have been silent in the face of injustice, when we have clung to traditions that allowed the perpetuation of injustice, when we have chosen to protect ourselves and preserve our wellbeing by sacrificing other people and their wellbeing, sometimes without question or hesitation? When it comes down to it, their humanity is ours. If Tessie Hutchinson’s final outcry is an ironic protest against the human tendency to allow and perpetuate brutality, meant for us to hear as Jackson’s appeal to us, there seems to be little expectation that we will, in fact, hear it.