

Ways to See Literature
Reader Response and New Critical
Theory as two Ways of Teaching Literature

A Study

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Introduction

*“Do we teach things because they are ‘true’?
Or do we make things ‘true’ by teaching them?”*

-Mary Alice Delia.

I am to postulate here the translation of two literary theories into two teaching methodologies. New Criticism and Reader Response each proposes a paradigm that clearly distinguishes itself from and even challenges the other, for as the first proclaims the death of the author, the other announces the reader as the sole survivor on the face of the text. My project then selects two literary approaches, two short stories and one community of readers to observe these three parties interact in communal as well as individual processes of making meaning. The two stories I chose to teach (or not really teach but merely introduce into the class) are Faulkner's *A Rose for Emily* and Kate Chopin's *The Story of an Hour*. Four lesson plans are presented throughout this paper. Lesson plans A.¹ and A.² aim at investigating the two stories at hand from a New Critical perspective. B.¹ and B.², on the other hand, engage students in Reader Response activities that pave ways for a personal creation as well as re-creation of textual (or text-personal) meaning[s]. All in all, a two dimensional treatment of each story is to be advanced. A performative aspect, I need say here, was also added to the reader response approach; the responses of the readers were at occasions performed rather than merely stated orally or written in class.

The procedure of the experimentation (allow me to name it so) took place over a period of four weeks at the end of the first semester (January, 2003). The targeted audience of the study were my first year English students at the College of Shari'a and Islam-Teacher Training at Baqa el Garbia (An Arab

City in the north of Israel). I need here say that my students are all young women, Moslems, all coming from conservative religious backgrounds. They are my students (and witnesses of my teaching misbehavior) in the course *Short Story Masterpieces* that I have been teaching for three years now.

During the first two sessions (one session per week) *The Story of an Hour* and *A Rose for Emily* were presented in class according to the New Critical approach. An assemblage of classroom activities and assignments was carried out to enable a close, objective and even scientific (what I mean by scientific is the close following of a certain known set of rules to reach a certain conclusion) reading of the text. The following two sessions handled the same pieces of fiction from a Reader Response perspective. Students then were encouraged to voice their feelings and personal interpretations of textual events, characters but, most importantly, gaps. Through the Reader Response activities, I particularly directed students' attention towards the things left un-said and un-written in the narrative text. These activities of textual gap filling, I claim, stimulate students' creative responses more than the written word accomplishes.

In concluding the four sessions, I and my students dwelt primarily on possible answers to the following questions: Which approach has been more appealing and motivating to my students as learners of English and the short story? What approach has managed to promote self-expression, oral proficiency and the register for expressing opinions? Which one has taught them how to recognize a short story in the professional terms known to the literary community? What kind of meaning-making processes have resulted? And so what definitions of a short story have emerged out of this experimentation? Lastly, which approach enables me to perform better as a teacher or mediator of learning? (Or in which one do I work less, achieve more, and maintain my reputation as a *good* teacher?) Lets see!

A Theoretical Perspective

New Criticism (Critical Formalism)

This approach ponders upon the reality of the written text as the sole source of meaning. Literature is to be scrutinized and even judged as a final product that exists apart from [its] author or the social, political or ideological context from which it has been extracted. Any consideration of the author's intentions, motives or background leads to one delusional fallacy. Effective fallacies of reader-text interrelation are completely thwarted, too. Neither may have any influence upon the other; each exists, in itself, as a separate entity of meaning.

This rejection of all senses of interaction between the written text and the outside world aims at the foregrounding of objectivity as the one criteria through which a work of literature is graded and eventually classified as either not worthy or a masterpiece. Being objective, the New Critic examines a work of literature as a structured, coherent and cohesive unity. 'Good' literature is characterized by the existence of a well-structured plot. Not only this but also that all other features of the text have to contribute to the evolvment and eventual resolution of the plot. Characters, narrative tone of voice, setting, diction, tropes, figures and symbols all take part in building the plot's chain of causes and effects, its achievement of suspense, its sense of fatefulness, its conflicts, its climax, and its denouement. Additionally, all these components, along with the choice of genre, must work at shaping one morally significant theme that will make the reading of the narrative worthwhile as well as rewarding.

Such sense of objectivity is also reflected in the New Critical belief that literature, though original, ought to mirror life. Characters and events are supposed to reflect a complex, sophisticated, not superficial, imitation of human conduct and mentality. So as language is the only source of inference in New Critical readings, it is the language of the text that must be examined so closely to enable a complete understanding of the characters, plot and theme and the other parts of the text that interrelate to eventually create the literary work's universal significance.

Reader Response

Whereas the New Critical approach denies any influence a reader may have on the meaning making process inherent in the text, the Reader Response theory celebrates a sense of meaning as a very personal experience to be revealed through reading. Similar to New Criticism, this approach is not interested in the fallacies attributed to the author's intentions. It, however, contrary to the approach mentioned earlier, generates less interest toward the shaping of meaning as it may solely be exposed through the language of the text. Individual readers or a community of interpretive readers are the ones to create the meaning of the text regardless of what its structure or author may be implying. Reader Response critics believe in the existence of no one right reading for a text, but that we must take into account the multiple readings that various interpretive communities have arrived at. The reader's personal, cultural, and historical background makes a certain text comprehensible to him/her. It may seem that the literary text is presented as a secondary component in the act of reading, it is true, but, it remains as a source of inspiration, not universal as the New Critics would like it to be, but very personal. I believe that Reader Response critics give a new meaning to the term 'close reading.'

Lesson Plans

Lesson plan A.1

The Story of an Hour

A New Critical reading

Duration: 90 minutes

Purpose: The main thrust of this lesson is to sharpen students' recognition of the structure of the short story. By the end of this lesson students will know how the plot is composed and what other structural elements of the story contribute to its final composition. Moreover, students will learn how language functions in relation to the plot and how thematic significance is inferred.

Introduction (15 minutes)

The teacher gives a definition of the short story and defines its basic elements in a short lecturing format.

Activity 1 (15 minutes)

Teacher brings *The Story of an Hour*, which has never been seen before by the students, but not in one piece; she rather brings the text cut into pieces. Teacher scatters the pieces (she must have more than one copy of each piece) around the classroom. Students are then asked to go around the classroom, pick different pieces and read them.

Activity 2 (10 minutes)

Teacher hands out the Five W's Chart-what, who, why, when, where (see appendix 1). Students are required to fill in the chart according to what they understood from the story. They can ask other members of the class in case they have not read all parts of the story.

Activity 3 (15 minutes)

Students sit in groups; each group takes the different pieces of the story and tries to re-structure the story, depending on the information they have gathered from the previous activity. After they finish, they compare their version to the original text to see if they have structured the plot correctly.

Activity 4 (10 minutes)

Now students use the graphic organizer-Story Map 1 (see appendix 2) to recognize the different stages of plot development.

Activity 5 (20 minutes)

Students now examine the story closely following the list of terms and definitions for a short story (see appendix 3).

Activity 6 (10 minutes)

The aim of this activity is to make students recognize what language is used in the story and how it is related to the plot. Students make a “Grammar list;” they go back to the graphic organizer of plot structure and list what kind of language, parts of speech and tense is used in each section and why.

Homework

Students write a short paragraph to answer the following question: “*What is the theme of the story? Bring textual evidence to support your answer. Be as objective as possible.*”

Lesson plan A.2

A Rose for Emily

A New Critical Reading

Duration: 90 minutes

Purpose: The aim of this session is to make students understand how the imagery of portraits in Faulkner's story structures the plot and how such structuring creates the meaning-theme-of the story. Following the narrative line, moreover, students will be able to recognize as well as appreciate the importance of time for Faulkner.

Introduction (10 minutes)

The teacher gives a short lecture about Faulkner's style and the structural elements characteristic of his fiction with no reference to the author's personal life or era during which he has been writing.

Activity 1 (30 minutes)

Students scan the text to look for images or portraits or framed pictures throughout the story. The students then order these images in the chronological order they appear in throughout the story. Students draw a continuum and present the plot on it. They later fill in the graphic organizer-Story Map 2 (see appendix 4) to summarize the plot.

Activity 2 (20 minutes)

Students will go over the story again to underline words that indicate opposition, such as old-new, father-daughter, man-woman. . . and write a statement of the theme as it is understood from the repetitive pattern of oppositions in the story.

Activity 3 (15 minutes)

Students go through the definition of term of a short story (see appendix 3) and closely read the story.

Activity 4 (15 minutes)

Teacher asks the students to imagine, in groups, that they are the publishing company that Faulkner turns to in order to publish his *A Rose for Emily* for the first time. Students are asked to judge and evaluate the story and decide if it a good or bad story; they are asked to be as objective as possible and support their judgment by the evidence they can use from the text itself.

Lesson Plan B.1

The Story of an Hour

A Reader Response reading

Duration: 90 minutes

Purpose: This lesson aims primarily at encouraging students to articulate their intellectual and emotional responses on the work and to gain confidence that their ideas are worth expressing. They are encouraged, to reclaim their active, confident roles as interpreters of meaning, after such roles were denied by the New Critical lessons. The activities offered in this session, aim, at first, at engendering students' genuine responses about the text as they may be expressed in the feelings or images aroused during reading. Second, these activities also offer students varied opportunities for reflection upon the text and extension of it; this is to make it eventually meaningful in terms of the students' personal, social as well as cultural background.

The activities that are chosen to this session dwell particularly upon the things left unsaid and unwritten in the text; that is, students are expected throughout these activities to articulate the gaps that Kate Chopin leaves unfulfilled throughout her narrative.

Activity 1 (20 minutes)

The teacher reads only the story's short opening paragraph: "*Knowing that Mrs. Mallard was afflicted with a heart trouble, great care was taken to break to her as gently as possible the news of her husband's death.*"

After reading this paragraph, with the right tone of voice of course, students are required to decide how they expect Mrs. Mallard to react in the situation depicted at the opening of the story. A representative (the one who likes to perform) of each group, afterwards, will act out the scene as it is visualized by her group.

Activity 2 (30 minutes)

Students are asked to look at the last paragraph in the story: *“Someone was opening the front door with a latchkey. It was Brently Mallard who entered, a little travel stained, composedly carrying his grip-sack and umbrella. He had been far from the scene of the accident, and did not even know there had been one. He stood amazed at Josephine’s piercing cry; at Richrad’s quick motion to screen him from the view of his wife.*

But Richard was too late.

When the doctors came they said she had died of a heart disease-of joy that kills.”

Students are asked to focus on the moments that follow Mr. M.’s entrance and before Mrs. M. dies and they should try to predict what facial expression she might have had and what words/sounds she might have pronounced.

Students are asked afterwards to move on with the story to the days after Mrs. M dies and after the story really ends and act out the private conversation that Mr. Malard and Richard would have. During this conversation Richard will try to tell Mr. M what happened in the house from the moment they heard (or rather suspected) that he died till they found out that he was really alive.

Activity 3

Imagine that after the death of Mrs. M., Mr. M. finds, by accident the diary that his wife had been writing before she died. Divide the class into pairs. Each pair will write one entry at Mr. M. diary. Each pair has the complete freedom to register in the entry that they will write, a moment or moments that exist in the actual story or ones that they think happened before or during the story but are not really written by Chopin. Read all entries to form a picture of Mrs. M.

Activity 4

The assignment is to visualize that Mrs. M. is a Moslem Arab woman. Re-write the story by changing the name of the protagonist first and then make all necessary changes to suit your new character.

Lesson Plan B.2

A Rose for Emily

A Reader Response reading

Duration: 90 minutes

Purpose:

Encourage students to articulate their intellectual and emotional responses on the work in order to gain confidence that their ideas are worth expressing.

The students accept and understand their role as active interpreters of meaning. Thus they need to be able to select among all the ideas, feelings and images engendered as they read and move from their immediate experience with the text to reflect upon it and extend it. The story becomes meaningful in terms of the students' personal, social as well cultural background.

Activity 1

In Faulkner's story, it is only the end of the story and after the death of Miss Emily herself that the town's people discover that she has killed Homer Baron and that he has been laying as a dead corpse in her bed room.

In this activity, the class is asked to imagine that one of the neighbors has revealed to the police that she suspects the existence of a dead body in Emily's house. Act out the policeman's investigation of Miss Emily. Decide in groups what questions the policeperson asks and what answers Emily provides, depending on your understanding of the character.

Activity 2

The assignment now, following the police investigation is to act out Emily's trial (The State of Israel against Emily Grierson). Each student has to decide if she is a prosecutor, a defense attorney, a judge, jury, witness or only an observer in the courtroom. Give students 15 minutes to prepare for their roles and then act out the trial.

Activity 3

The student is a journalist who witnessed Emily's trial and wants now to report it on the front page of his newspaper. Let the class be divided into groups. Each group owns a different newspaper and wants to decide how to present and report the news of Emily G.'s trial on the its front page.

Activity 4

The circumstances of Emily's death are not narrated in the story. Add a paragraph or two to the story describing the death of the protagonist (Some of the students thought that she might have actually committed suicide). Insert your paragraph(s) at any place you think is suitable in the story and justify your choice (This activity may actually be given as homework).

Conclusion

Based on my observation of the students during the four lessons conducted as this experimentation went on, my open investigations of them as individuals and as one class, along with my registration of their immediate spontaneous reactions to the varied activities within class, the discrepancy between the Reader Response theory and the New Critical one as teaching strategies has become transparent.

Moving from lessons A.1 and A.2 –the New Critical approach- into lessons B.1 and B.2.-Reader Response-has highlighted the essential contrast between the two approaches. While the first effaces any meaning that may stem from the reading process, the second celebrates the meaning that is created during the reading.

Students' knowledge of the elements of the short story and its structural composition was enhanced as students were engaged in the New Critical methods of literary reading; yet, they were, at the same time, deprived of opportunities to develop their personal as well as intellectual faculties as EFL (English as a foreign language) students. Yes, thanks to these two lessons the students have learned to recognize the different parts making, conventionally speaking, short stories. They have learned the professional

literary discourse appropriate for short story analysis. The only means available however to accomplish such learning is the rather mechanical behavior of following the narrative's line closely, trying to draw a plot structure, relying on the clues that they are supposed to recognize in the text. Students were requested to fill in charts and judge a text according to a criteria that was proposed by the paradigm of those who have already decided what a *good* narrative ought to look like. The readers themselves were excluded. I imagine them like pathologists who are dissecting a dead body to reveal the reason behind its ailment. The reason is there, the body, nevertheless, is dead and the doctor (the reader) is alive and no relation is to be established between the two.

Not effacing the text, as New Criticism does for the reader, the Reader Response approach utilizes the text as a spring board; the destination is the reader's inner world feeling and thoughts as they may be given expression when reading a literary text. The text here is inspiring for the reader, the reader cherishes the text as if it were a personal diary-it helps her reveal and learn about herself. My students at the College of Shari'a have learned during lessons B.1 and B.2 that these two foreign texts-*The Story of an Hour* and *A Rose for Emily*- could reflect many of the realities they exist in as Arab Moslem and even Israeli women. Emily and Mrs. M's concerns and daily survival are not only American, they can easily be expressed by an Arab woman; This was, actually, the texts' primary appeal to them. "I can see my self sitting in that chair in the Story of an Hour and many other women from my village," told me one student after one of the Reader Response lessons. I agreed, for this same thought have also crossed my mind when I read the story and this is why I chose to teach it to my class of young women. This is also not to ignore that my students' oral expression and language have been encouraged and reinforced. English remains as a foreign language for these students yet these lessons have given them many and diversified opportunities to use language in an authentic manner. All in all, they have learned about the literature, learned English and were extremely and very personally engaged in the process.

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Appendix ١

Five W's Chart

Fill in each row with details that answer the question.

What happened?
Who was there?
Why did it happen?
When did it happen?
Where did it happen

Question Types for Access to Information from Written Texts and the Narrative

Appendix ٢

Story Map ١

Write notes in each section.

Setting:	Time:	Place:
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Characters:



Problem:



Plot/Events:

Resolution:

Question Types for Access to Information from Written Texts and the Narrative

Appendix ٣

Story Map ٢

Write notes in each section.

Setting: Where: When		
↓		
Major Characters: Minor Characters:		
↓		
Pot/Problem:		
↓	↓	↓
Event ١: 	Event ٢: 	Event ٣:
↓	↓	↓
Outcome: 		

Question Types for Access to Information from Written Texts and the Narrative

اختصار

تتطرق هذه الدراسة لإمكانيات تطبيق نظريتين أدبيتين في الصف، وبهذا فإنها تتمحور في إمكانيات ترجمة نظرية النقد الجديدة Criticism New ونظرية رد فعل القارئ Reader Response إلى فعاليات صفية مع التأكيد على تأثير هذه الترجمة على الطلاب أولاً وعلى المادة المدرسية ثانياً.

تקציר

מאמר זה מתמקד באפשרויות יישום שתי תאוריות ספרותיות בתוך כיתת הלימוד.

תאוריות אלה הן- Reader Response , New Criticism ומגוון האפשרויות של תרגום תאוריות אלה לפעילויות לימודיות תוך הכיתה. מטרת המאמר היא לבחון את ההשלכות של תרגום זה על התלמידים ועל חומר הלימוד הספרותי