READER-RESPONSE CRITICISM

IN THE

TEACHING OF POETRY

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By

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this project is on the use of the reader-response orientation in the development of a poetry unit for grade seven. The reader-response orientation is a literary theory which suggests that the meaning of any literary work is the result of the interaction between the text and the reader. In this project, the emphasis is on providing a bridge between this theory and the practice of teaching poetry.

To implement the reader-response orientation into teaching practices, it is important for teachers to understand how theory affects classroom activities. If the theory behind the reader-response orientation is understood, then teachers may be better able to change their teaching approaches. In the classroom, reader-response activities involve students in ways that encourage interest and personal response to poetry. Understanding the reader-response critical theory can help teachers plan their poetry lessons and develop more effective teaching practices.

This project begins with a survey of the literature of the reader-response criticism and provides a summary of the theory. The link between theory and practice is demonstrated with a review of a current curriculum project that uses the reader-response orientation. Chapter Five is a poetry unit, for grade seven, designed to embody the reader-response theory in actual classroom practices. In my conclusion I briefly highlight some concerns and give suggestions for further research direction.

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this project is to develop a poetry unit based on the reader-response theory. This unit is designed to involve students in poetry and to foster in them an enduring capacity for the enjoyment and love of poetry. In this project I suggest that teachers can use the reader-response orientation to change their ways of thinking about poetry. If teachers understand the theory that informs their practice, then they will be able to make effective changes in their pedagogy.

Traditional methods of teaching poetry are partially responsible for the lack of interest in poetry among students. Huck, who surveys the literature on children's interest in poetry, concludes, "... findings suggest that rather than develop enjoyment of poetry, many schools may actually destroy children's natural liking for this form of literature" (Huck 365). Writing about his experiences at the secondary level, Lucey suggests that "negative attitudes seem to grow and prosper with the teaching of poetry" (50). The reasons for these attitudes are not necessarily the fault of traditional teaching methods; however, the reading-response orientation offers teachers an opportunity to rethink the teaching of poetry. Theory should actually relate to classroom practice and the reading-response approach allows teachers and students to be participants in the poetry lessons.

How necessary is it to understand the basis of the reader-response theory in order to organize the English classroom around response based strategies? Do teachers

understand the implications of their practices? Are classroom strategies consistent with the critical theory? How important is it that teachers are aware of the influence of literary theory in their particular circumstances? Can teaching truly be improved or changed without understanding the basis for new classroom practices? It is my contention that new curriculum documents will not truly change classroom practices in any significant ways, unless teachers themselves understand why and how they are changing their practices. A personal example may help to illustrate my point.

At Coldstream Sr. Public School, (a pseudonym), where I teach grade eight, there are two teachers with distinctive styles of teaching. They both teach "core" which means they are responsible for the language arts and mathematics of two separate classes of students, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. Diane calls herself the old-fashioned teacher. In her room, students are always quietly working with very specific, teacher directed activities, as part of the language arts curriculum. She is proud that her students learn to write organized paragraphs about characterization, plot structures and themes. Across the hall, Heather considers herself a modern teacher. She encourages self-expression among students and has a very active and busy classroom, with group activities and independent projects. In her English classes, students make their own poetry booklets or choose the novels they wish to read. The interesting point is their reactions to the new Peel English Curriculum (Chisholm) a reader-response document to be discussed in Chapter Four. Diane accepted the documents and looked through them. When I came to borrow them, she said she had filed them right beside the mathematics

curriculum. "I don't really need to look at them, my English curriculum is all set," she said.

Heather's initial reaction was quite enthusiastic. She read the documents through and said that they were excellent. When I asked how she felt about implementing some of the new curriculum, her answer was, "Well, I really liked them, but I'm already doing all those things." Being familiar with her classroom from sharing the homeroom duties, it had been my observation that although students were often busy with activities, these activities were not based on responding to literature, but on social interests. The point I am making is that the appropriate changes needed to embody the reader-response theory, will not occur, unless there are actual changes in thinking about education or literature. An understanding of the literary theory behind curriculum changes will improve the likelihood that subsequent changes in teaching practices will be consistent with similar changes in philosophical thinking. In the first part of this project I will define and discuss the theoretical basis of the reader-response orientation. I believe that it is important for teachers to know how the theory affects practice. The second part of the project focuses on the curriculum and the actual classroom strategies used to implement the theory. A short summary of each chapter follows.

CHAPTER ONE

The purpose of this chapter is to define the reader-response theory and to survey the literature. This introduction to the reader-response orientation will help teachers understand its place in today's discussions about literature and teaching.

CHAPTER TWO

In this chapter I have narrowed the focus to the work of two significant contributors to the reader-response theory. The work of Louise Rosenblatt and Wolfgang Iser provides a starting point for many of the theorists and educators who have applied the reader-response orientation. Both Rosenblatt and Iser see the reading process as an interaction between the text and the reader.

CHAPTER THREE

This chapter reviews some current perspectives on education. I discuss the aims of the Ontario English Curriculum Guide, 1987, which in turn have been used by the Peel Board of Education. The Peel documents for English are an example of how one school board has used the reader-response theory in developing curriculum.

CHAPTER FOUR

How does the personal context affect the development of a curriculum? I review the influences that led to the writing of a poetry unit. The second half of this chapter describes how the reader-response theory finds expression in my poetry unit.

CHAPTER FIVE

This final chapter is a poetry unit designed for grade seven students. The lessons are planned to embody the reader-response theory in practical classroom situations. In the lessons, the responses of the students take a variety of forms, creating connections between poetry and their lives. I include an evaluation form for students and teachers to help in assessing the extent to which the unit has been successful.

CHAPTER ONE

READER-RESPONSE CRITICISM

> Reading is far too rich and many-faceted an activity to be exhausted by a single theory (Suleiman 31).

In this chapter I first focus on defining the reader-response theory in terms that teachers can understand. Next, the survey of the literature on reader-response provides teachers with further resource suggestions. Finally, I appraise the writings that link the theory to practical implications. This general overview will give teachers an introduction to the literature of the reader-response theory so that they can understand its place in today's theoretical discussions in literature and teaching.

It is not within the scope of this paper to summarize the developments of the past thirty-five years in modern literary theory. It is enough to say that the debates in literary criticism have been intense and have generated vigorous disputes among those who advocate different theories. There are those critics, and probably many teachers also, who hold the view that great literature universally expresses moral truths about life. At the extreme "opposite" philosophy the deconstructionist accepts that no meaning is possible. All systems and claims to the truth are suspect, and the meaning of any text is open to different and indeed contradictory readings.

Regardless of the critical discussions about universal truths, the significance of the reader and reading itself, has started to take on more importance. Difficult questions about the process of reading are being asked. What happens when we read? What does the reader bring to the text? How does the reader understand what the text does? How are different readers influenced by the text? Questions about reading lead to questions about the purpose of reading, and consequently to theories about how we perceive any human activity. To contemplate the meaning of reading is to consider the meaning of human experience.

The reader-response movement is a literary theory in which meaning is understood in the context of the reader. Questions about the process of reading, the interpretation of the text, and literary meaning are all centred around the reader. The reader-response theory, "is not a conceptually unified critical position, but a term that has come to be associated with the work of critics who use the words reader, the reading process, and response to mark out an area for investigation" (Tompkins ix). Although there are disagreements among the various theorists of reader-oriented criticism, they all emphasize that the meaning of a text is dependent on the contribution of the reader.

A survey of the most recent literature on the reader-response criticism indicates several types of writings. In articles and books that depend on the theory for the practical application in the classroom, the writers often provide a general overview of the reader-response movement. Although there are chapters in books that survey literary criticism, such as, Tracing Literary Theory (ed., Natoli), and Contemporary Literary

Theory (ed., Selden), these books do not give an in-depth analysis of the theory. These books contain articles or thumbnail sketches of particular aspects of the reader-response movement. A more comprehensive review of the reader-response movement is found in Elizabeth Freund's The Return of the Reader. She presents a detailed critical review of the work of the important theorists of the reader-response phenomenon beginning with I.A. Richards (Practical Criticism, 1929) whose explorations in the aesthetics of response, are often acknowledged as the starting point for the focus on the reader. Freund, however, omits some important critics; for example Louise Rosenblatt, who will be discussed in Chapter Two, because she bridges the time span between Richards and the contemporary theorists.

In the collection, Readers, Texts, Teachers, edited by Bill Corcoran, there is an attempt to show the instructional implications of the reader-response theory. The overview in the opening chapter by Clem Young, provides a very succinct summary of how the role of the reader has moved from a critic to a reader, as one who is involved in a dialogic relationship with the text. The focus of the classroom oriented chapters suggests that theory and teaching practice can go together. The emphasis placed on readers, means a shift in the activities of a classroom, based on the participation of the reader.

In Readers, Texts, Teachers, the final chapter provides a deconstructive perspective of the reader-response theory. This is interesting in itself, as Pam Gilbert emphasizes that reading is not an innocent activity and that it is the "reading practices

adopted in the reading of a text which designates its function, not the text itself, and certainly not the writer of the text" (245). This perspective criticizes the collection itself and poses questions about reader-response theory. Although its inclusion in a collection of essays "promoting" reader-response theory is somewhat unusual, it does provide the right emphasis, the idea that reader-response theory has not answered all of its critics, nor has it provided a coherent theory that is readily accessible to teachers.

In another volume of essays on the theoretical considerations of the reader-response theory, Susan Suleiman (The Reader in the Text) surveys the reader-response theory. She identifies six main approaches of the reader-oriented criticism: rhetorical critic, structural and semiotic, phenomenological, psychoanalytic, sociological-historical, and hermeneutic. The categories are useful in distinguishing the emphasis of each particular approach. What they all have in common is an audience centred approach which as Suleiman suggests is, "not one field but many, not a single widely trodden path but a multiplicity of crisscrossings, often divergent tracks that cover a vast area of the critical landscape..." (6). Jane P. Tompkins, who also outlines the reader-response criticism with a selection of previously published essays, concludes, "What began as a small shift of emphasis ends by becoming an exchange of world views" (x). I believe that the differences in these various approaches are not as significant as what holds them together - the emphasis on the interaction between the reader and the text.

In other writings or anthologies on literary theory, reader-response criticism is given recognition for its influence on literature today. In the anthology Tracing Literary

Theory, Temma Berg considers the influence that deconstruction has had, and continues to have on the reader-response theory. She calls her essay the "Psychologies of Reading," because the problems of reading all lead to questions about the "self and its relationship to the world it encounters" (248). In Goldstein's The Politics of Literary Theory, the reader-response criticism is considered from a poststructuralist Marxist perspective (6). In this light, the proponents of the reader-oriented theories are divided into political camps, conservatives (Iser and Holland), liberals (Fish and Bleich), and radicals (Tompkins and Bennetts). In spite of their differences all of these theorists assume that reading relies on the reader's response.

The above survey indicates the diverse range of reactions from literary critics regarding the reader-response theory. The pedagogical implications of the reader-response are also considered in several journals and articles. Readers, Texts, Teachers, previously mentioned, specifically focuses on how the reader-response theory translates into teaching practices. The more general anthologies, Teaching Literature: What is Needed Now (Engell and Perkins, eds.) and Literary Theory and English Teaching (Griffith) are collections of essays that stress how modern critical theories are influencing or are being applied by the classroom teachers of English.

Direct applications of the reader-response theories in specific curricula and at various school levels are found in Response and Analysis (Probst) and Teaching Literature-Nine to Fourteen (Benton and Fox). In the former book, Robert Probst suggests an approach to teaching that draws heavily on Louise Rosenblatt's work. The

implications of the reader's response to literary works is the basis of the discussions that focus on actual classroom situations. Benton and Fox also accept the premise that "the reader's response is fundamental to the meaning of the text," (vii) as they try to develop teaching strategies for English at the very specific range of nine to fourteen years of age. There is also evidence that the reader-response theory is shaping curriculum documents. The Ministry of Education English: Curriculum Guideline (1987) is a document that is used by the boards to develop curricula. The Peel Board English writing team has based their new English Curriculum (Chisholm) on the Ministry Guidelines, and in so doing, has followed a response oriented theory. They use the ideas of Rosenblatt and Probst as their guide for their teaching strategies. These documents will be discussed in Chapter Three.

This chapter has provided a general definition and overview of the literature of the reader-response theory without specifically discussing its theoretical basis. Considering that documents like the Peel English Curriculum are using this orientation, I think that it is important for teachers to understand the basis for the reader-response theory. The next chapter will outline the theories of those works that are the basis for advocating changes to classroom practices in the teaching of English.

CHAPTER TWO

THE EMPHASIS OF ROSENBLATT AND ISER

> Reading is never an abstract, purposeless activity, although it is frequently studied in that way by researchers and theorists, and regrettably still taught in that way to many learners. Readers always read something, they read for a purpose, and reading and its recollections always involve feelings as well as knowledge and experience (Smith 53).

As a psycholinguist, Smith emphasizes the interaction between the reader and the text. He could have gone on and cited Rosenblatt's observation that the reading event is "a situation, an event at a particular time and place," (16). This chapter will discuss how two critics, Louise Rosenblatt and Wolfgang Iser, both view reading as an experience that occurs because of the interaction between text and reader. I have chosen to explain the theories of Rosenblatt and Iser because their work provides a starting point for many of the theorists and educators who had a adopted a reader-response orientation.

For teachers, the link between theory and practice may be better understood if the theory itself is related to what actually happens when students are reading. In The Reader, the Text, the Poem, Rosenblatt is always aware of the practical experiences of reading as she develops a transactional approach to describe the dynamics of the reading

process. In his book, The Act of Reading, Iser develops a theory of aesthetic response to describe what happens in the reading process. Understanding how and why students make sense of the poems they read, will help teachers in planning their curricula.

Rosenblatt suggests that the finding of meaning involves both the author's text and what the reader brings to it. A distinction is made between two types of reading, an efferent or an instrumental reading and an aesthetic reading. The distinction between these two kinds of readings becomes more clear, as Rosenblatt shows how a poem is recreated through the reader's mental activities. In an aesthetic reading the reader's attention "is centred directly on what he is living through during his relationship with that particular text" (25). By contrast, in a nonaesthethic, or efferent reading, the reader is concerned only with the information that is given, or what the words may contribute to the results so that a particular action may be taken; e.g., answer questions, follow a recipe, etc. The same passage or text may be read efferently or aesthetically depending on the purpose or intention of the reader.

This same distinction between two types of reading is confirmed by recent studies in psycholinguistics. Frank Smith uses the phrases, "reading for information" and "reading for comprehension." Again, reading for information enables the reader "to do"--it enables a person to make decisions, to choose among alternatives, or to complete a prescribed assignment. Comprehension implies an understanding that cannot be measured quantitatively. It involves trying to make some sense of the text in terms of the reader's expectations. It is the "possibility of relating whatever we are attending to

in the world around us to the knowledge, intentions, and expectations we already have in our heads" (53).

In The Reader, the Text, the Poem, Rosenblatt sketches some of the reader's activities in the "reading-event," suggesting that the reader re-creates the work and reenacts the author's creative role. The text or poem provides the clues or verbal symbols, which are part of a linguistic system commonly accepted by all those sharing the language. But all individuals read with their own personal experiences and life-situations. The significance or meaning of the words, although having a common reference, will always vary from reader to reader. Rosenblatt calls this quality of language, "essentially social yet always individually internalized" (53).

In any reading, there is an interplay between reader and text. The process of reading is an experience in which the reader tries to make sense of the literary work. According to Rosenblatt, a model of this process is helpful in order to describe what happens in the reading process:

> In broadest terms, then, the basic paradigm of the reading process consists in the response to cues; the adoption of an efferent or aesthetic stance; the development of a tentative framework of guiding principle of organization; the arousal of expectations that influence the selection and synthesis of further responses; the fulfilment or reinforcement of expectations, or their frustration, sometimes leading to revision of the framework, and sometimes, if necessary, to rereading; the arousal of further expectations; until, if all goes well, with the completed

decoding of the text, the final synthesis or organization is achieved (54). The assumption for the entire reading of a poem is that the text offers a basis for a coherent experience. The framework, mood or voice of the poem, for example, may only be sensed with a rereading of the poem. With any reading, past literary experiences, personal memories, and the expectations that are brought to the poem, all serve as guides in responding, selecting, and synthesizing the words, or semantic code of the poem. Poems or texts will vary with the intensity of stimuli they provide for the reader, but even with the same text, readers will differ widely in their responses.

The greatest difficulty facing Rosenblatt's ideas about responding to the text is the charge that a poem may mean anything at all. Critics of the reader-response theories often use this idea as their starting point. However, Rosenblatt is very careful, right from the start, to disassociate herself from any suggestions that reading a poem is a simple matter of accepting all ideas the mind can bring to the text. In an aesthetic reading, the reader's main purpose is "to participate as fully as possible in the potentialities of the text" (69). Her idea of transaction is not a train of free associations as the poem is read, but her concept of transaction with the poem "emphasizes the relationship with, and continuing awareness of, the text" (29). The New Critics emphasized the poem itself as a work of art, without considering any biographical or social factors. This led to a reluctance to appreciate the reader's role, and persuaded literary critics that literary objectivity was possible. Again, Rosenblatt's theory strongly challenges the idea that an emphasis on the reader's role implies that any reading is as

valid as any other:

> It is hard to liberate ourselves from the notion that the poem is something either entirely mental or entirely external to readers. "The poem" cannot be equated solely with either the text or the experience of a reader. Something encapsulated in a reader's mind without relevance to text may be a wonderful fantasy, but the term "poem" or "literary work," in transactional terminology, would not be applicable to such a "mental experience" any more than to an entity apart from a reader. As soon as "poem" is understood to refer to the relationship between a reader and a text, the threatened critical anarchy does not follow; this and the following chapter will show that the basis exists for orderly and systematic criticism (105).

In fact, Rosenblatt takes great pains to show that what the reader makes of the text can still provide a basis of an orderly and systematic criticism.

The framework for Rosenblatt's theories is always the interaction between the reader and the text. In trying to understand "the poem itself" she again rejects the either/or dilemma of the New Critics and those like E.D. Hirsch who condemn those critics for the removal of the author:

> Those who seek a unitary criterion of interpretation fear that the alternative is complete subjectivism, the reader "alone." This is a false dilemma: we do not need to accept as the sole criterion either the banishment of the author or the absolutism of the author's intention (113).

To maintain this balanced perspective, Rosenblatt establishes two prime criteria for reading a poem. These are, that the "reader's interpretation not be contradicted by any element of the text, and that nothing be projected for which there is no verbal basis" (115). The author's intention or background, as extrinsic aids to understanding the text, may be helpful in clarifying any confusions from reading the poem. The different attitudes or expectations that readers bring to the text can result in multiple interpretations.

The validity of alternative readings is acceptable in the context of what Rosenblatt calls an "adequacy of reading (or interpretation)" (124). What one reader makes of the text can be compared with another's reading of it; but both readings can be judged to the extent of the limitations expressed in the text itself and an understanding of the author and his age. The first priority for interpreting the poem is still the lived-through relationship with the text, and any other knowledge or insight may enhance an aesthetic reading of the poem. The interaction between reader and text is a dynamic interplay as Rosenblatt concludes:

> The text presents limits or controls; the personality and culture brought by the reader constitute another type of limitation on the resultant synthesis, the lived-through work of art. The reader's attention constantly vibrates between the pole of the text and the pole of his own responses to it. The transactional view of the "mode of existence" of the literary work thus liberates us from absolutist rejection of the reader, preserves the importance of the text, and permits a dynamic view

> of the text as an opportunity for ever new individual readings, yet reading that can be responsibly self-aware and disciplined" (125-126).

The obvious connection between Louise Rosenblatt and Wolfgang Iser, a German critic, is their understanding of the reading process. Probst links them together on the basis that both Rosenblatt and Iser see the "exchange between text and reader as a process yielding knowledge" (244). He summarizes their similarities:

> Rosenblatt and Iser, on the other hand, see the exchange between text and reader as a process yielding knowledge. The potential richness of the literary work thus exceeds its contents, because the work initiates emotional and intellectual responses that cannot be predicted from the text, and cannot be said to reside in the text, but are not purely and simply within the readers. Reading is thus neither a search for the meaning of the work, as in the New Critical approaches, nor a self-contained journey into one's own mind, as in subjective criticism, but an opportunity to explore and create. The task is not finding clues and solving problems, but realizing potential. The question becomes not so much, "What does the work mean?" as "What can we do with the work?" (244).

However, Iser introduces some new terminology and develops a theory called the aesthetics of reception, in order to describe the process of reading. His sources are derived from gestalt psychology and phenomenology, but his approach is not so much empirical, as trying to provide a mentalistic framework for guiding further studies of the reader's response. In the summary that follows it will be seen that Iser sees reading as

a dialectical process in which reader and text interact.

The interaction, which Iser says is "central to the reading of every literary work" (1989, 31) depends on the balance between the author's techniques and the reader's psychology, (note the similarities with Rosenblatt's ideas). To describe the reading process, Iser first depends on R.D. Laing's The Politics of Experience, and his theory of social interaction. The inability of one person to understand another's experience leaves gaps in the communication process. Communication with someone else depends "upon our continually filling in a central gap in our experience" (1989, 32). The difference with reading, since there is no face-to-face interaction, is that the text does not adapt itself to each new reader. The partners in a social interaction can ask each other questions to bridge this gap; however, a reader can never learn from the text how valid the reader's own interpretations are. But, it is this very state of uncertainty that causes the text-reader interaction. In a social experience, the gaps are filled with continuing communication, and similarly, in the reading process these gaps are the stimulus for the reader's creation of what Iser calls an "indeterminacy that increases the variety of communications" (1989, 33).

The whole theory of indeterminacy is built around what Iser calls gaps, or blanks, terms seemingly used interchangeably. The reader's activity is controlled by the text to the extent that what is not in the text stimulates the reader. The gaps or blanks may take on various forms such as unexpected plot directions, new characters, changes denoted by new chapters, shifts in perspective, or even from what is not said. All of these

trigger and control the reader's mental activities:

> Blanks indicate that the different segments and patterns of the text are to be connected even though the text itself does not say so. They are the unseen joints of the text, and as they mark off schemata and textual perspectives from one another, they simultaneously prompt acts of ideation on the reader's part. Consequently, when the schemata and perspectives have been linked together, the blanks "disappear" (1989, 34).

The process of forming ideas in the mind, what Iser calls "ideation," occurs when the reader fills in the blanks. Since these gaps or blanks are filled in differently by each individual reader, the text has a rich potential for the reader's experience.

So far, the blanks and gaps that Iser describes deal with the form of the text. In answering the question of how the literary text "restructures the comprehension of its contents" (1978, 212), Iser uses the term "negation." These negations are caused when the reader considers his own values or "norms" in comparison with what he is reading. The thought systems or perspectives in the text may contain familiar material, but the norms of the reader's own society may be exposed such that he may consciously begin to reevaluate the norms that he has always taken for granted:

> if the norms of his society are exposed in this way, he has the chance to perceive consciously a system in which he had hitherto been unconsciously caught up, and his awareness will be all the greater if the validity of these norms is negated (1978, 212).

The reader incorporates new ideas and moves from his own position, either by re-accepting it or by rejecting the perspectives of the text.

When the negative possibilities assert themselves against the norm, they show up the limitations of the principle involved in the norm and begin to cast doubt on it. The negation of other possibilities leads to an awareness and consciousness of the diversification of human nature, which for the reader opens up new possibilities and thought patterns:

> The process of negation therefore situates the reader halfway between a "no longer" and a "not yet". His attentiveness is heightened by the fact that the expectactions aroused by the presence of the familiar have been stifled by this negation, which causes a differentiation in attitude in so far as he is blocked off from familiar orientations, but cannot yet gain access to unaccustomed attitudes, for the knowledge offered or invoked by the repertoire is to yield something which is as yet not contained in the knowledge itself (1978, 213).

The negations of the text are then a very active force out of which the reader seeks to establish the aesthetic object. The demands on the reader are first of all the experiences of the text. The reader also attempts to fulfil the intentions of the text, whether that is the cancellation of the reader's own projected meaning or the meaning ultimately resolved by the tensions and conflicts brought about by the text.

The criticism of Iser's theories revolves around the extent of the control exercised by the text over the reader. The debate focuses around the question of indeterminacy,

a question central to much of the reader-response criticism. Throughout his discussions on the process of reading, Iser, much like Rosenblatt, emphasizes the interactive process of reading. This suggests that he tries to keep a balance between the interaction of text and reader, a position for which he has been severely criticized by Stanley Fish, for whom the reader's response "is the meaning" (1978, 27). For Iser, literary texts initiate "performances of meaning rather than actually formulating meanings themselves." The indeterminacy of the text, created by the varieties of experiences that readers bring, is counterbalanced by the blanks and negations which are a part of the text. Reading is an activity that includes a whole chain of events in which effects and responses are "properties neither of the text nor of the reader; the text represents a potential effect that is realized in the reading process" (1978, ix). This middle ground, between the extremes of absolute textual meaning and uncontrolled relativism, is one that Iser responds to in his latest book, Prospecting (1989) through the format of a written interview.

The interview seeks to set up a dialogue to address the concerns of other reader-response critics, mainly Norman Holland, and Wayne Booth. I will draw attention to Holland's concerns, whose empirical studies of readers contrast sharply with Iser's abstract theory. The issues that Holland wants Iser to address are those dealing with the limitation of text leading to a certain determinate core of shared meaning. According to Holland, his investigations of "actual readers reading show that commonality comes from expectation in relation to the text rather than a textual determinism" (Prospecting, 45). In other words, the text functions as a release mechanism for readers and when readers

agree on the meaning of the text it is because these readers have a common background. Holland questions Iser's idea that a "text restructures a certain role for the reader" (Prospecting, 52) and that texts actually limit the possible responses.

In his reply to Holland's concerns, Iser reiterates that reading should always be conceived in terms of a text-reader dialogue and that reading is always a "two-way traffic" process. The divergent responses may simply indicate that "each reader translates the text-induced experience into the reader's own frame of reference" (1989, 52). Iser defends his use of the term "consistency-building," not as the determinism of the text, but as a necessary condition of the reading process and the ability to understand a text:

> Consistency-building establishes "good continuation" between textual segments in the time-flow of reading, and is thus an indispensable prerequisite for assembling an overall pattern. This pattern is what I have called the aesthetic object of the text: it is an object, insofar as it assumes a gestalt during the process of consistency-building; it is aesthetic insofar as it is produced by the reader following the instructions--at least up to a point--laid down by the text (1989, 53).

In the concluding statement to the interviews Iser clarifies how the terms determinacy and indeterminacy are used as part of his theory:

> What is given is textual segments; the links and motivations of these segments are indeterminate, but take on an ever increasing degree of determinacy (at least in

> traditional forms of literature) through the process of interpretation. The relation between indeterminacy and determinacy is basic to all kinds of interaction and interpretation (1989, 67).

The emphasis that Iser gives sounds very much like the transaction that Rosenblatt describes. Both theorists see the interaction between the text and reader as crucial to the reading process.

How is this process understood by teachers today? How is the reader-response orientation used in the development of curriculum? What does a poetry unit look like if it is based on this approach to teaching? In the next chapter, I will demonstrate how a current curriculum project uses the reader-response theory as the formative influence for its lesson plans.

CHAPTER THREE

THE ENGLISH CURRICULUM DOCUMENTS

> ... literary pedagogy may need to begin not so much with questions of procedure at the level of practical criticism as with the hermeneutical problem, with the question as to which basic concept of the interpretative act as such will best offer one's students the kind of liberty that, in preparing them for the literary transaction, will also prepare them for the larger cultural transactions to which they will be summoned in the modern polis (Scott in Engell and Perkins, eds., 62).

The consideration of literary theory, written about in Chapters One and Two, was guided by a concern for a context: what actually happens in the classroom? To go from theory to praxis, involves a route that includes a look at schools today, the translation of ideas into documents, and then back to the activities of the classroom. This chapter will review some current perspectives on education in Canada, consider the English: Curriculum Guideline, 1990 from the Ministry of Education, and introduce the Peel English Curriculum, 1990. I will conclude that the Peel documents are an example of how one school board has used the reader-response theory to develop English curriculum at the local level.

In recent years, there has been considerable debate about the performance of Canadian students and educational change. It is easy to use education as the scapegoat for the more general problems in society, but any criticism of education should consider the broader context of Canadian schools. In his book, Mosaic Madness (1990) sociologist Reginald Bibby does this by attacking the four keystone social institutions of Canadian society, among which is education. It is his thesis that individualism and relativism have subverted Canadian life and created a visionless people, who can no longer build the nation together. For Bibby, accountability and mutual responsibility have disappeared, because individualism has become the supreme value, and relativism has eroded any transcendent values for society. On individualism and education, Bibby writes about the contradictory messages students receive:

> Young people at all stages of the educational system in Canada often have been receiving a double message. On the one hand, they have been encouraged to develop as individuals, to tap their potential and be all that they can be. On the other hand, the behavioral and thought expectations continue to be highly confining. A strong case can be made for the argument that, into the 1990's, "the good student" - whether at play school, high school, or grad school - continues to be one who follows the rules, memorizes the material, and makes no waves. Our societal reward is young people who emerge from school with high personal expectations, having mastered minutiae and embraced mass culture, while devaluing imagination, creativity, and risk-taking (130).

He also discusses how the teaching of relativism creates a paradox:

> Our educational system should not assume that ideas and behaviour are relative, but should critically explore the accuracy and efficacy of ideas and behaviour. Education should stimulate people in a pluralistic society not to think less but more. Currently in Canada, the unreflective adoption of the relativistic assumption is leading us to think not more, but less (131-132).

It is easy to dismiss Bibby's attacks on education as simple and unsophisticated, because the complex interactions that constitute the educational systems in our society, do not lend themselves to easy analysis. However, there has been a sense of crisis in the confidence with which the general public views education.

The recent calls for provincial-wide testing are refrains that have been heard repeatedly in the 1980's and are continuing into the 1990's with even more vigour. An article in the Toronto Star is an example of this public cry for standardized testing:

> The issue of standardized testing is crucial to the issue of competence, not only of an individual child's performance but of the whole school system, and ultimately the country's economy. If you do not have outside standards by which to measure performance, then you do not even know what goals to establish. Nor do you know when a child has fallen behind his contemporaries elsewhere or when the school has a duty to find out what is wrong and correct it. In fact, you imply that children and education are not important (Giles, A21).

The criticism against the public school is not as severe as that which schools in the

United States are experiencing; however, there is the feeling that "our schools are not the places of excellence that they should be" (Common, 8). The latest effort of the education ministers has resulted in a newspaper article headed: "First national school tests planned for '93" (Ainsworth, A1). Supposedly these tests will be an attempt by Canada's top educators to find out whether schools are meeting the needs of the students.

Similarly, the Ontario Ministry of Education tries to change and develop in response to the needs and expectations of society. In 1987, the document English: Curriculum Guideline was published. This guideline replaced the 1977 documents for English and stipulates:

> All English programs and courses of study must be based on this new guideline or on other appropriate guidelines and must derive from the provincial goals of education, the aims for Intermediate and Senior Division English and the other policy statements identified in this document. The guideline provides direction in designing appropriate curricula for all levels and grades of the Intermediate and Senior Divisions (4).

In this document, the goals of education are presented in thirteen statements which vary in their concerns, all the way from personal growth and artistic expression, to good citizenship and productive work habits. These goals are very general and from them the more specific aims for the intermediate and senior division English are established:

Through interaction with their peers and the teacher, students shall have opportunities to:

- develop a lifelong love of reading;

- understand and enjoy literature and appreciate its significance in the history of human experience and imagination;

- become aware of themselves as readers and come to realize the worth and uniqueness of their own responses;

- become proficient in the mechanics of written language and in the use of oral and written language to think, learn, and communicate;

- use language to express and achieve personal, social, and career goals;

- understand the role that language, literature, and the media play in the exploration of intellectual issues and in the establishment of personal and societal values;

- develop critical skills and use them to respond to ideas communicated through the various media;

- prepare for productive community membership by taking personal responsibility for their progress towards self-directed learning;

- discuss ideas, attitudes and feelings expressed in literature, language, and media in order to understand the contribution of individuals and communities to Canada's multicultural heritage (8).

These aims cover the elementary years of grades 7 and 8 and the high school years 9 through 12.

This Ministry document forms a basis for curriculum documents which are then

developed by local school boards; in them they try to balance the Ministry guidelines, community expectations, and the professional expertise of teachers. The directions in the English: Curriculum Guideline provide a broad range of theoretical positions on the student as learners, the learning processes, and English as a subject area. On the one hand, language is a process intimately linked with personal growth, formation of positive values, and a major source of power. On the other hand, there is an emphasis that suggests that the students are learning language so that when they leave school they will be competent in writing reports, letters, memoranda, records, critical reviews, essays (18); in short, so that they will be ready to participate in the world of business and industry. The guideline tries to reconcile education as producing the desirable qualities in students (product oriented enterprise), and as developing learning as a life-long process.

The considerable range of possibility for the teaching of English or language arts in grades 7-12 allows for much flexibility and innovation within school boards. Curriculum changes in English are nothing new, and it remains to be seen what changes, if any, will be implemented in actual classrooms based on the English: Curriculum Guideline 1987. In response to these new directions, the Peel Board of Education launched one of the largest curriculum projects in its history, culminating in a series called Peel English Curriculum Grades 7-12 (Chisholm 1990). The series contains: The Teacher/Learner, Co-operative/Independent Learning, Learning Through Writing, Learning Through Fiction, Learning Through Non-Fiction, Learning Through Language,

and Learning Through Media. The first title, The Teacher/Learner, establishes the framework, suggesting that the changes in the English curriculum are a reflection of a changing society. The growing multicultural population, the diversity of religious beliefs, the changing family, the influence of the media, and the impact of technological advances, have all been influencing "our basic assumptions about what students bring to school with them" (6). The other influence in developing the series is increased knowledge about how children learn. With these premises in mind, the authors provide guidelines and lesson plans for the various areas of the language arts/English program in grades 7-12.

The introduction to the series follows the basic directions of the Ministry Guideline. The statements such as "learning is both personal and individual" and "learning is continuous and invisible" (Teacher/Learner, 7) copy those of the Ministry documents. The teaching strategies also give the same orientation as the Ministry, emphasizing collaboration, self-directed learning, and enquiry-based learning. The overview ends with a section called, "Indicators of an effective English program." These indicators are somewhat similar to the aims of the English: Curriculum Guideline, with their emphasis on process rather than on product. They suggest the activity of the students in, "students routinely use the computer in their classrooms in their writing program" or "students, through the literature program will examine such issues as multiculturalism and sex and race equity in order to understand themselves in relationship to others" (Teacher/Learner, 15). That this introduction to the Peel series is directly

modelled from the ideas of the 1987 English: Curriculum Guideline, is not surprising, given the stated directive that from the Ministry that all English programs "must be based" on this new guideline.

When it comes to the specifics of the English program, the document Learning Through Fiction is intended to provide the basis for the classroom experiences and establish a framework for responding to fiction. The terminology of response is evident immediately and the writers establish the intent and direction of the lessons:

> The approaches suggested here are intended to tap the richness of thought and feeling that fiction offers so that students go beyond the study of character, setting and plot into realms where they manipulate knowledge as part of their personal and growing experience of the world, working in ways that involve them in all kinds of writing, reading, talking and listening, viewing and dramatizing (2).

Beginning with a quotation from Rosenblatt, this document relies on a reader-response theory for its basic philosophical and literary orientations. The English: Curriculum Guideline has been interpreted to suggest that, "response is a normal human reaction, and it is the logical starting point for all growth in understanding and critical power" (Learning Through Fiction, 3). The first strategies that are given are those that "foster and refine response to fiction" with recognition given to Robert Probst and his book: Response and Analysis: Teaching Literature in Junior and Senior High School, (1988). The language arts/English classroom is described as a response-based classroom, where the literature connects with the students' personal lives. The titles of the teaching units

all suggest that literature is involvement. The sections are: "Experiencing Poetry, Experiencing Plays/Scripts, Experiencing Short Stories, and Experiencing Novels." The units are not seen as ends in themselves, and English is viewed not so much as a subject in the curriculum, but rather more as a process that students use to perceive the world, to act in it, and to explore the potentialities of communication. A closer analysis of the poetry section will show how "Experiencing Poetry" is an approach that attempts to involve the students.

The unit begins with some general guidelines that discourage teacher-centred lessons. It focuses on helping students gain confidence and enjoyment through "experiencing" poetry. The aims for the unit are:

1. To encourage students' confidence in reading poetry.

2. To help students articulate personal response to poetry both individually and in small groups.

3. To expose students to a wide variety of writers and poetic forms.

4. To make students aware of the differences between prose and poetry; to encourage the students' own personal response to what poetry is as compared to prose.

5. To move the student in a senior English class from personal response to a more objective aesthetic interpretation and appreciation.

6. To foster greater independence in the reading of poetry by senior students (36).

An interesting note is sounded in the fifth aim, for the writers suggest that as students

"mature," the goal for reading poetry is "a more objective aesthetic interpretation and appreciation." Is this the hidden agenda for the poetry classes? Does the actual purpose of all this response and enjoyment have as its ultimate goal the development of a reader/critic, one who can fully understand poetry, because there is a proper aesthetic interpretation for each poem? However, the teaching strategies in the next sections are ones that encourage the development of personal responses. Perhaps the fifth aim could be rewritten to say that the aims is "to achieve both a personal response and an aesthetic interpretation."

The first activities of the teaching unit are group discussions, with students preparing open-ended questions. A small group strategy based on a model developed by Patrick Dias is recommended, although more information about the kind of techniques that Dias uses as a researcher should be given. Next, there are three approaches that recommend storytelling as a way of responding to poetry, and then sections on reading poetry aloud, and poetry and writing. The poetry sections conclude with a unit developed for grades 7/8 with eight lessons written out complete with "principles", resources, lesson plans, and evaluation processes. This unit can be used as a model because the last suggestion is to develop a unit using picture books for a poetry study. In summary, the section "Experiencing Poetry" starts with some very general guidelines and principles and with several suggested approaches for teaching poetry. The sample unit is a model from which teachers can develop their own poetry units.

The reader-response theory is the basis for the aims and the principles of the Peel

English Curriculum. This theory provides a framework for the development of the sample unit. The concerns I have about the poetry lessons are concerns about teachers being able to use the documents to change classroom practices. As a general guide for grades 7-12 for the teaching of poetry, how will this orientation change how poetry is already being taught? Is there enough of a rationale given for teachers to accept the reader-response theory as a new basis for planning their units? In fact, will teachers and schools accept the challenge to write their own units in poetry based on this orientation? The lack of a longer bibliography under suggested resources is a problem because teachers who want more help or who want to do further research will need to find their own references. Part of the contribution of this unit is to provide for the teachers an overview of the reference materials as well as a summary of the reader-response theory. When teachers can see how the theory has been applied in this unit, they will be much better prepared to write and implement their own poetry curriculum.

This brief survey of some of the current documents in English serves as a background for my poetry unit. All teaching occurs in a context. In fact there is a multiplicity of factors that serves as a background to directly affect what is being taught in any particular classroom. I believe that the more teachers are aware of why and how the dominant theories should affect the classroom, the better teachers can shape their own classroom and curricula. Teachers must be central in planning their own curricula and realize that their competence and professional expertise are based on theory and actual practice.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE DEVELOPMENT OF A POETRY UNIT

> In the classroom, an account of one student's moment-by-moment experience of the text, though it differs in every substantive respect from a formalist analysis of image patterns, still treats meaning as the goal of critical inquiry, still takes the text as the primary unit of meaning, and still performs its operations on the same texts that were used to illustrate irony, paradox, ambiguity, complexity, organic unity, and the use of the persona. The text remains an object rather than an instrument, an occasion for the elaboration of meaning rather than a force exerted upon the world (Tompkins 225).

It is not within the scope or framework of this project to explore how the new Ministry guidelines influenced the Peel Board English Curriculum, or how this new curriculum was developed and will be implemented. However, it is important to understand the personal context and shaping of my own poetry unit. In their book on curriculum, Miller and Seller suggest that:

> ...curriculum work is based on the particular orientation of the curriculum worker. This orientation will reflect one's philosophy, one's view of psychology

> and learning theory, and one's view of society, which in turn, are related to one's basic world view, or paradigm (225).

The development of my own perspective and orientation on teaching, curriculum work, view of the learner, and English theory are intrinsic to the writing of this unit. I will briefly highlight some of the influences that led to this particular unit and its philosophical perspectives.

The experiences of the classroom are of course paramount for any teacher's growth and development. My teaching career has mostly been in a private school setting, in schools which are members of the Ontario Alliance of Christian Schools (O.A.C.S.). The schools of the O.A.C.S. were formed mainly from the members of the Christian Reformed Church, which in turn were established by many of the Dutch Calvinist immigrants coming to Canada after World War II. However, the North American Calvinist Christian School movement has a history that covers the past 150 years (Van Brummelen 1-2). Although these schools were founded for ethnic, religious, and moral reasons, they took pride in teaching the basics. Van Brummelen suggests that the Canadian schools began to differ from the American schools in the 1960's and 1970's:

> ...many Canadians, dissatisfied with what they felt to be the shallow Christian perspective of American curriculum materials, began developing their own approaches and writing their own materials. Canadian Christian school leaders--supported by a number of Americans--did not want to train children to fit into the

individualistic, pragmatic, materialistic American way of life (7).

The strong faith and religious direction of the schools has always provided the context for my own beliefs and directions in teaching.

The Christian schools and consequently my classroom were quite traditional with the emphasis on teaching the "basics" in a faith-centred curriculum. In the last number of years, professional development through writing curriculum guides for the O.A.C.S., and course work for the McMaster M.A.(T) Programme, have been influential on my teaching. Writing curriculum (novel guides) forced me to think about the classroom strategies and the interests and needs of adolescents. One of the first courses at the M.A.(T) level was called, "Action Research", and it involved the theory of using research within the classroom to improve teaching. A project on teaching the novel that I developed was based on The Action Research Planner. The authors, Kemmis and McTaggert, focus on four fundamental "moments" to effect change:

1. Development of a plan of action to improve what is already happening.
2. Action to implement the plan.
3. Observation of the effects of the action in the context it occurred.
4. Reflection on the effects as a basis for further planning, subsequent action and so on through a succession of cycles (7).

Using this action research gave a framework to some of my summer curriculum work.

Another course that centred on curriculum also influenced my professional development. In Curriculum: Perspective and Practice, the book used for this course,

Miller and Seller see three main curriculum orientations in schools: the transmission orientation, rooted in an atomistic world view; the transaction position, based on the scientific method; and the transformation position, founded on a holistic and interdependent world view (225-226). These distinctions helped me to clarify my own basis for evaluation and writing curriculum. I realized that although the Christian schools in which I taught, in theory tried to balance the transmission and transformation position, in practice the O.A.C.S. schools were oriented towards the transmission position and emphasized traditional learning strategies.

As I reflected on my own views on education and on the student as a learner, I realized that the O.A.C.S. schools, in my opinion, could benefit greatly by having teachers more involved in professional growth that centered on changes within the classrooms and curriculum work that was based on a distinct theory of curriculum development. It was also these two influences that helped me develop a grade 6 poetry unit as the culmination of the curriculum course. This project, called "The Development of a Poetry Unit", was modelled on what Miller and Seller call a transaction position which emphasizes "the dialogue between student and the curriculum in which the student reconstructs knowledge through a dialogue process" (6). The general aims of this unit were:

1. The students will develop an appreciation of poetry.
2. The students will learn to make decisions and grow in self-confidence.
3. The students will grow in using language effectively.

Many of the strategies that I used involved cooperative activities: partner work, student sharing, reading and talking about poetry, and integration with art activities. Although I considered the unit quite successful, perhaps the greatest benefit from planning this unit came in my subsequent two years of teaching.

I accepted a teaching position in English at the high school level, (Beacon Christian high School, St. Catherines), where I taught courses in grades 9, 10, and 12. Having taught at the elementary level, grades 6-8, for many years, this was a major change in focus for me. And naturally, in each of the English courses, there was a poetry unit. The strategies which I learned and used in the grade 6 unit were immediately transferable in teaching poetry at the high school level. Keeping in mind that I wanted students to enjoy poetry, I tried to stay away from the traditional focus of teaching at the high school level, which was the teaching of poetic terms, poetic forms, and analysis. Integrating drama and oral activities kept high school students involved in the poetry they were reading. With these kinds of practical experiences, I was now ready to reflect, revise, and rewrite a poetry unit. However, there was to be one more important consideration for the unit. I accepted a teaching position in the public school, (Coldstream Senior Public School), a completely new environment for my teaching career. This final change brings me to my current teaching situation.

This matrix of experiences, influences, and guideposts brings me to the writing of a poetry unit. The choice of a poetry unit signals, by its very nature, a recognition of the importance that poetry can have in the lives of students. There may be claims that

the curriculum involves the students, or that the students make their own choices about poetry. However, the very context of the classroom and the actual texts, books, or poems that the students have in their hands, involves a complex set of interactions. For example, even if a teacher claims that students may choose their own poems, the students are still often limited by the selection of books the teacher has put out on shelves, or by the selection in the libraries, also chosen by teachers or librarians.

There are always assumptions about the value, the usefulness, the artistic relevance, or the poetic importance of particular poems or texts. If part of the whole process of the language arts classroom also questions what makes texts "visible in the first place" (Tompkins 225-226) then students will begin to understand the nature of language as they are "experiencing" it. As Jane Tompkins suggests: "If the world is the product of interpretation, then who or what determines which interpretive system will prevail?" (226). After all, the reader-response theory is also another concept or interpretation of how literature/poetry should be "handled" in the classroom. If it is truly to have the kind of personal connection and potential to involve students, then recognition must also be given to its limitations. The development of a unit must consider what a reader-response theory can do and what it can't do for a classroom of students and a teacher. The general aims must be established in this context, with the awareness that the choices being made necessarily exhibit the biases of the theory. The unit becomes acceptable and "teachable" to the extent that those who use the curriculum guide reflect critically and ask questions about the theory itself. For this unit, the decisions made

about grade level, context, choices of poetry books, resource materials, and teaching strategies all reflect personal choices. How well these decisions match the context of the other documents and the general teaching climate may well determine how this unit will actually be taught.

The decision to develop a poetry unit originally came from what I thought was a neglect of poetry, particularly in the schools in which I was teaching. The poetry that was taught did little to interest the students. This assessment was based on incidental observation and on discussions with other teachers. My research confirmed these ideas. As cited in the "Introduction," studies by Terry and Norwell, have revealed that "teachers have alienated children from poetry" (Huck 365). A recent article by Elizabeth MacCullum in The Globe and Mail, sums up my own feelings about the teaching of poetry in schools in general:

> Poetry seems to be an art that is often bypassed in our schools. My impression as a parent is that occasionally classes "do" a poetry unit when the pupils all work on a particular poetic form, such as haiku. The children's efforts, some of them impressive, are illustrated and pinned up on the bulletin board in the hall. Poetry then disappears from their lives until the next unit appears (12).

The writer compares this with the way in which poetry was taught when her family was living in England:

> ...the children all had their own poetry notebooks, where they glued copies of the poem they were currently memorizing, and drew in their own illustrations on the

> opposite page. Each child always had a poem he or she was learning, talking about, mulling over. My six-year-old loved to recite it to us, complete with approved expression. For those children, it was part of everyday life, not a week-long unit (12).

This idea of teaching "units" of poetry perhaps defeats the very purpose for which the units are intended. In Teaching Literature, Benton and Fox suggest that "regular exposure to a wide selection of poems in an informal way is the best grounding we can give children if we want to cultivate a liking for poetry" (24). Developing a two or three week poetry unit is not the same as regular exposure, but I feel that teachers, such as those using the Peel curriculum, can use this unit and its general philosophy to plan strategies for continuously exposing children to poetry.

Once teachers learn strategies on how to deal with poetry that interests students, I believe that they will be more inclined to make poetry a part of their classroom on a regular basis. If poetry is to find a meaningful place in students' lives, and if they are to enjoy reading and writing poetry as a life-long activity, then the teaching of poetry will have to be revitalized. Therefore, it is strongly recommended that teachers themselves begin to read poetry, have poetry books on their personal shelves, and integrate the sharing of poems with other subjects or themes that they are teaching. Tapes of poets reading their own poetry can be shared with students. Poetry notebooks issued at the beginning of the year will aid in implementing strategies of sharing and discovering poetry throughout the weeks. If the teacher follows these strategies and

guidelines, the teacher may then meaningfully pick up this unit as a natural extension of a regular feature of the classroom.

This unit considers learning to be a process so the question to ask is: what purpose will the aims or objectives serve? Are goals, aims, or objectives inconsistent with the learning theory proposed for teaching this poetry unit? Objectives may reduce opportunities for the teacher and the students to creatively explore divergent activities. Personal responses cannot be programmed and behavioral objectives would inhibit a teacher's freedom in risk-taking or in developing ideas along student interest. In The Educational Imagination, Eisner uses what he calls "expressive outcomes" to describe the "consequences of curriculum activities that are intentionally planned to provide a fertile field for personal purposing and experiences" (103). It would seem appropriate that the goals for this poetry unit be written in terms of "expressive outcomes." The activities that are planned in the lessons allow for a range of educational outcomes. For this unit I provide three general aims following the Ministry idea and put the aims in terms of "students shall have opportunities to..." (Ministry 8). In giving expressive outcomes, I keep in mind the range of responses possible in the classroom and ones that extend beyond the educational setting. At all times, the interaction among the students, the poetry itself, and the teacher has a dynamic potential that transcends any expected student outcomes. Presupposed student behaviour may unnecessarily impose a mode of thinking that will inhibit the teacher and prevent the creative interplay of responding to poetry.

The lessons that follow are based on a project first created for a grade 6 class.

With the further experiences of two years of high school teaching, research on literary theory, and exposure to the new Peel curriculum, changes and modifications have been made. The Canadian emphasis exposes students to Canadian poets, through whom they may discover a closer connection with their own lives. I have modified the lessons to include more drama activities which I learned from teaching a grade 9/10 drama course. I give time for student talk, sharing, and personal choices about the extension of classroom activities. Perhaps one of the keys to succeeding with this unit will be the creative use the teacher makes of any topical or current student interest. It is sometimes surprising to discover what captivates students. After the film Dead Poets' Society had played in the summer, references to it in the fall immediately sparked student response. And of course, any "rap" songs or other popular music may catch student interest. The poetry books themselves, the selection of authors, and texts will play a pivotal role in determining student participation and involvement.

There has been an interest in Canadian poetry in recent years which has expressed itself in the publication of some excellent Canadian poetry books for students. These books are available from various sources; bookstores, publishers, and libraries. It is essential that the classroom has a selection of 25-40 poetry books from which students can read and share poems. The major premise for the unit is that students will have time to select and read from a wide variety of poetry books, ranging from the mosaic of Canadian culture, chants and rhymes, picture book poetry, story-poems, anthologies, and single poet collections. Can teachers find that many Canadian poetry books on this

diversity of topics? In Appendix 1, I have listed the books that are available from most public libraries. The more recent publications are still in print and can be ordered for the school libraries so that they will be available on a year to year basis. Teachers and students may be pleasantly surprised to see how vibrant the publishing of Canadian poetry has become.

CHAPTER FIVE

EXPERIENCING CANADIAN POETRY

A GRADE SEVEN CURRICULUM UNIT

General Aims

The students will have opportunities to:

1. Develop an appreciation and love for poetry
2. Make decisions and grow in self-confidence with sharing poetry
3. Experience a variety of response to poetry, both personal and communal.

Expressive Outcomes (These are suggestions that will depend on the individual situation.)

1. The students will use their poetry notebooks on a continuing basis.
2. The students will choose to read poetry books for enjoyment.
3. The students will illustrate their own poetry.
4. The students will decide to use poetic expression in giving classroom presentations.

LESSON OVERVIEW

* All lessons are planned for approximately 40 minute periods which can be adapted to fit into a rotary timetable often in use in many senior public schools.
* The classroom should be arranged in such a way that group work, partner activity, or whole class sharing is possible.
* It is essential that students have poetry notebooks. If the reader-response orientation is used effectively, then the notebook will be one way of recording personal responses. Students can keep these all year to accumulate poetry tidbits.
* With the reader-response theory the poem is viewed as an interactive relation between the words (read or heard) and the student. The responses of the students take a variety of forms in the lessons, but in all cases they are participating in creating a connection between the poems and their lives.

LESSON 1: WHY DO PEOPLE READ, WRITE, AND LISTEN TO POETRY?

Introduction

* See Appendix 1 for a comprehensive list of Canadian poetry books. Borrow as many as you can for the unit.
* Have 20-30 Canadian poetry books displayed around the room for easy access.
* Hand out the student questionnaire (Appendix 2) as you explain that the focus for the next three weeks will be poetry.
* Collect the questionnaires after individual completion.

Activities

* Arrange students in groups of 4-6 students each.
* Ask each group to consider two questions and pick a recorder to report back to the class:
    1. What poems or poets do you remember from earlier years?
    2. Why do you think people write, read, and listen to poetry? (10 minutes for sharing)
* Recorder report to class.
* Share some of your selected poetry with the class from books on display.

Culmination

* Introduce a poetry notebook to the class, briefly outline some of your expectations and discuss the purpose for keeping the poetry notebook.

* Allow students to browse through the poetry books and read their choice of selections.

* With this general introduction and the questionnaire, the teacher can gauge reactions to poetry. This will help to see what student attitudes are and possibly show where student interest lies.

LESSON 2: CANADIAN POETRY

Introduction

* Suggest that all the poetry books on the shelves have something in common. Ask: "Did you notice this yesterday?" Discuss. There will be many things mentioned; accept these answers but lead students to the observation that all these books are by Canadian poets.

Activities

* Give students time to choose poetry books and read poems.
* Find a poem that gives a Canadian reference.
* Invite students to share a poem that they found particularly enjoyable.

Culmination

* Ask students to work in their poetry notebooks with the following instructions:

    1. Design a poetry title page.
    2. Write a journal entry in your notebooks that expresses your reaction to today's poetry.

LESSON 3: CANADIAN AUTHORS

Introduction

* Ask: "What makes poetry Canadian?" Have students identify some Canadian authors?

* Arrange students in groups of 4-6 students.

Activities

* Give each group books or poems by a particular Canadian author. The poets suggested are: sean o huigin

  Lois Simmie

  Robert Heidbreder

  Sheree Fitch

  Dennis Lee

* Instruct each group to read silently through some poems. Each person chooses a poem to share in the small group.

* Each group is to choose a poem to present chorally to the class. All of these poets have excellent poems for this type of presentation.

Culmination

* The groups share their choral presentations to the class.

* Have students write a journal entry describing which poem they liked the best.

Note: The teacher may want to give some direction to presentations,

e.g., introduce the poet and poem.

LESSON 4: RESPONDING IN GROUPS

Introduction

* Choose a poem to read aloud to the class. A suggestion is "The Bull Moose" by Alden Nowlan (Round Slice of Moon).
* Instruct students to record some of their thoughts in their notebooks as they hear the poem.

Activities

* Ask for volunteers to share their responses and accept all answers without commenting on their acceptability as interpretations of the poem.
* To further develop an aesthetic response to the poem ask the following:

How did you feel when the moose died?

What would you have done when the moose roared?

* Give students a copy of the poem and have them study the poem individually. Instruct them to write a second response to the poem expanding on their first ideas.
* Have students break into small groups and share their second responses to the poems.

Culmination

* Ask students to write a journal entry that compares what their first reaction was to what they learned from others by sharing in their groups.

LESSON 5: PICTURE BOOK POEMS

Introduction

* Ask students if they have read any poems that tell stories.

* Ask if they recall any story poems with pictures from primary grades. Read a Dr. Zeus book.

* Suggest that story poems have been an ancient art form and briefly read from The Iliad or The Odyssey.

Activities

* Arrange students in groups again and choose a good oral reader from each group. (The teacher can do this the night before).

* Have this person read a picture book poem to the small group sharing the illustrations as he/she reads.

* Suggestions for picture book poems:

1. Borrowed Black, by Ellen Bryan Obed
2. The Cremation of Sam McGee, by Robert Service
3. Lizzy's Lion, by Dennis Lee
4. Ringtail, by Patricia Sillers
5. The Shooting of Dan McGrew, by Robert Service.

Culmination

* Have students fill out a questionnaire (Appendix 3) on the picture book poem.

* Read a story book poem to the class without showing them the pictures.

Ask: What lines would you illustrate for this poetry picture book?

What background do you think the scenes should have?

* Read the story again this time showing the pictures.

Ask: How did the illustrator fulfil your expectations?

LESSON 6: SHARED EXPERIENCE POEM

This is a lesson that may help students realize some of their own potential for writing poetry from everyday experiences. Involving the students as a group will help them initiate and share ideas. The process of composing poems together will be an excellent model for students to compose their own poems.

The group writing has five different stages:

1. A shared experience
2. Taking notes together
3. Composing
4. Making the lines
5. Individual writing

1. The most important shared experience can be done outside of the classroom. The following are a few suggestions, but this experience is entirely dependent on the teacher's imagination. Take a trip to a senior citizens home. Have students blindfold each other and walk through the school. Take a walk in a cemetery. On a very cold or rainy day run across the school yard until the class is exhausted, etc., etc.
2. After the common experience, arrange the class in front of two large blackboards or an overhead. Ask for descriptions and phrases of things that were seen or felt. Sharpen the students observations by asking questions that involve the senses. Ask for words and comparisons in plain unpretentious language. Receive as many student

responses as you can, filling up the overhead or chalkboard.

3. After one chalkboard is full of student descriptive phrases, there is enough to start making a poem. Ask for "a first line." As students make choices, have the class vote on them. Continue this process, asking students to vote on particular phrases and ideas as you write these on the second chalkboard.
4. When you think you have enough phrases stop the voting and decide on a graphic layout. Elicit possible arrangements of words and lines. Write down some possibilities and discuss the choices with students voting on the arrangements. The completed poem will not please everyone, but the class will experience an excitement if you read the result and suggest its merits.
5. Complete the lesson by sending students home to choose topics, of ordinary things about which they can write.

LESSON 7: POETRY NOTEBOOK

Introduction

* Elicit from the students some of the topics that they have chosen for writing.

Activities

* Allow fifteen minutes for a poetry writing period and then ask for volunteers to share their poetry.
* Suggest to students that the rest of this class is for free time to work on their poetry notebooks.
* Students may read poetry books, continue to write about some of their selected topics, illustrate a story poem, or copy some favourite poems.

Culmination

* Ask students to share some of their work.

LESSON 8: RESEARCH A CANADIAN POET

Introduction

* Ask: "What do you think influences a person to write poetry?"
* Read some of the biographical information about a Canadian poet. See Appendix 1 - Pauline Johnson, Dennis Lee, or Jean Little are good choices.

Activities

* Have students choose a partner or assign pairs of students.
* Instruct students to research the life of a Canadian poet. Have them write a short summary of the important influences in this person's life.
* Ask each pair of students to share a favourite poem by this author with their partners. Have students record in their notebooks what they think about their partner's choice and write two questions about the author that they can ask their partners. Reverse roles and share the notebook entries.

Culmination

* Ask students to pick their favourite poem and copy it into their notebooks, and write why they like it.

LESSON 9: RECORDING A GROUP POEM

Introduction

* Start this lesson with a tape or recording of some poetry. It may be difficult to get a Canadian poet reading poetry for this level, so ask your librarian for help.

Activities

* Arrange students in groups of 4-6 students or if you think the class cooperates well, and no one will be left out, have them choose their own groups of 3-6 students in each group.
* Have each group choose a poem that they like and practise it as a dramatic reading.
* Inform students that this poem will be recorded on a tape recorder.
* Discuss what makes a good interpretation of a poem. Elicit suggestions as to what a good reading is. Ask: How could a person prepare for a good reading of a poem? Provide another example of a poet reading on tape.

Culmination

* Have students practise the poems orally and record the poems on a tape recorder.

LESSON 10: POETRY PROJECTS

Introduction

* Allow students to hear the group recordings made yesterday.

Activities

* Hand out the POETRY PROJECT sheet and go over the topics (Appendix 4).

* Decide how you want the projects done--in Poetry notebooks, or as a separate project.

* Establish a time line for choosing topics, and for presenting projects before the class.

Culmination

* Let students begin to choose topics, partners or groups for their poetry projects.

LESSONS 11-15

* Students should have class time to work on projects. Encourage and help the various groups or individuals to stay on task.

* By the end of the poetry unit allow all students to share with the class the work they have done on the poetry projects and in their notebooks.

* Evaluation: Since one of the main purposes for this unit was to involve students in poetry and have them respond to poetry, an evaluation that focuses on these goals is provided. For the teacher to assess the success of the poetry unit there are two tools to do this. The first is a student interview, (Appendix 5). Upon completion of the unit have students interview each other. Comparing this interview with the initial questionnaire should give a good indication of overall student attitudes and response to the unit.

  The second evaluation considers how the reader-response theory has been used in the unit, (Appendix 6).

* For the poetry project a self-evaluation is included, (Appendix 7). An evaluation like this helps students take greater ownership of their own learning and may help them reflect on their responses to poetry.

CONCLUSION

It has been my intention in this project, to write a poetry unit that relates to theoretical considerations with practical classroom activities. I suggested that teachers should use the reader-response orientation as a basis for making changes in their ways of teaching poetry. That my project is a direct complement to the new English curriculum, published by the Peel Board, makes it particularly timely.

My project provides a definition for reader-response criticism and gives a survey of the literature about reader-response criticism. As well, sources are provided for further research. All of these are lacking in the Peel curriculum. In Chapter Two, I explain the theory in terms comprehensible to the non-specialist intermediate teacher. The summaries and perspectives on current documents are useful for teachers in understanding the context of the lessons. It is my hope that this project will be used to create a greater understanding of how the reader-response criticism can be applied in the teaching of poetry.

For teachers implementing the unit, this project should provide the necessary background. In the lessons, the most distinctive features are those which focus on the interaction between the students and the poetry itself. The opportunity for students to respond to poetry means that teachers will have to allow students time to read poetry. This is suggested in each of the first three lessons. The next three lessons have the students responding to poems. The final three lessons and the culmination lessons 11-15 allow for a variety of student responses and activities.

For those teachers who are new to the reader-response theory, it may seem that some lessons lack direction and that students are allowed to do whatever they want. It was my experience in first developing the grade seven poetry unit that the feeling of relinquishing direction was soon replaced by a sense of wonder at how enthusiastic most students became when they were involved in poetry activities. Another area of concern for teachers using this project might be that of student evaluation. To "cultivate an appreciation and a liking for poetry" is a very ambitious aim and one that is difficult to evaluate. However, after my first experience I realized that there were actually more than the usual possibilities for evaluation. Some of these are now part of this project. The student interviews, survey sheets, and self-evaluations (Appendices 5-7) provide not only an idea of where the students are, but also an excellent way to evaluate the success of the unit by monitoring student interest and response.

As a culmination of my own growth and professional work, this project has helped draw together my research and classroom experiences. Since this project correlates so closely with the English curriculum adopted by the Peel Board, other teachers may be able to benefit from my experiences. Some of my colleagues express a frustration with the Peel curriculum, which makes the assumption that teachers will write their own units. Not all teachers have the time, interest, or experience to do this. In my discussions with the Peel English coordinator, he indicated an interest in seeing this project made available to teachers through the Peel curriculum library. Increasingly, teachers are attempting to understand the reader-response theory. Last month I led a

workshop on the reader-response theory for teachers in my previous school system (O.A.C.S.). In feedback from the participants they expressed a need for more teacher-developed units.

Further follow-up for this project would involve the teachers who are implementing the unit. I am interested in teachers' reactions to the reader-response theory and I wonder if those who use this unit feel that they have changed their teaching of poetry. Will this project help teachers understand the theory? Will teachers simply use the unit without reading the initial chapters on reader-response criticism?

It has been my premise that theory and practice go together. To help teachers understand the theory, it may be beneficial to introduce the initial chapters in workshops, which would then lead teachers to adapt the unit to their own classrooms. A further extension of my work would be the development of other units at various grade levels. For example, it would be possible to write a unit focused on the work of a particular poet such as William Blake. With the theoretical considerations in place, lesson plans would have a framework and a direction that would help teachers. Finally, I believe that the use of the reader-response criticism could be promoted by the development and implementation of poetry units at various grade levels which are modelled along the lines of the unit presented in this project.

APPENDIX 1

SINGLE POET COLLECTIONS

Allix, Heareward. The Maladjusted Jungle. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1991.

Bookwill, Jane. Pass the Poem Please. Halifax: Wildthings Press, 1989.

Cooper, Afua. The Red Caterpillar or College Street. Toronto: Sister Vision, 1989.

Dunn, Sonja. Crackers and Crumbs. Markham, Ont.: Pembroke Publishers Limited, 1990.

Fitch, Sheree. Toes in my Nose and Other Poems. Toronto: Doubleday Canada Limited, 1987.

Fowke, Edith. Ring Around the Moon. Toronto: NC Press Ltd., 1987.

Gorman, LeRoy. Dandelions and Dreams. Goderich: Moonstone Press, 1990.

Heidbreder, Robert. Don't Eat Spiders. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1985.

Johnson, Pauline E. Flint and Feather. Toronto: Musson Book Company, 1931.

Kouhi, Elizabeth. North Country Spring. Moonbeam, Ont.: Penumbra Press, 1980.

Lee, Dennis. Garbage Delight. Toronto: MacMillan of Canada, 1977.

Lee, Dennis. Jelly Belly. Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1983.

Little, Jean. Hey World, Here I Am! Toronto: Kids Can Press, 1986.

Musgrave, Susan. Gullband. Vancouver: J.J. Douglas Ltd., 1974.

Obed, Ellen Bryan. Wind in my Pocket. St. John's: Breakwater Books, 1990.

o huigin, Sean. The Ghost Horse of the Mounties. Windsor: Black Moss Press, 1991.

o huigin, Sean. Monsters He Mumbled. Windsor, Ont.: Black Moss Press, 1989.

o huigin, Sean. Scary Poems for Rotten Kids. Windsor: Black Moss Press, 1988.

Simmie, Lois. An Armadillo Is Not a Pillow. Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1986.

Simmie, Lois. Auntie's Knitting a Baby. New York: Orchard Books, 1984.

Waldron, Kathleen Cook. A Winter's Yarn. Red Deer: Red Deer College Press, 1989.

Ward, Ken. Mrs. Kitchen's Cats. Toronto: Annick Press, 1990.

Ward, Ken. Twelve Kids One Cow. Toronto: Annick Press, 1989.

Wynne-Jones, Tim. Mischief City. Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 1986.

POETRY FOR "OLDER" READERS
(a shortened list as obviously in this category many more anthologies or poets could be included)

Atwood, Margaret. The New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1982.

Avison, Margaret. No Time. Hansport, Nova Scotia: Lancelot Press, 1989.

Baltensperger, Peter and Brenda. Voices from the Niagara. St. Catherines, Ontario: Moonstone Press, 1987.

Kogawa, Joy. A Choice of Dreams. Toronto: McLelland and Stewart Limited, 1974.

Lane, Patrick. Selected Poems. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987.

Lane, Patrick. Winter. Regina, Saskatchewan: Coteau Books, 1990.

Newlove, John. The Night the Dog Smiled. Toronto: ECW Press, 1986.

PICTURE BOOK POETRY

Lee, Dennis. Lizzy's Lion. Toronto: Stoddart Publishing, 1984.

Obed, Ellen Bryan. Borrowed Black. St. Johns, Nfld.: Breakwater Books, 1979.

Patkau, Karen. Ringtail. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987.

Service, Robert William. The Cremation of Sam McGee. Toronto: Kids Can Press, 1986.

Service, Robert William. The Shooting of Dan McGrew. Toronto: Kids Can Press, 1988.

STORY POEMS

Fitch, Sheree. Merry-Go-Day. Toronto: Doubleday Books, 1991.

Molnar, Guen. I Said to Sam. Toronto: Scholastics, 1987.

BOOKS WITH BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION ON CHILDREN'S POET

Grant, Janet. Kid's Writers. Markham, Ontario: Fitzhenry & Whiteside Limited, 1989.

Greenwood, Barbara and McKim, Audrey. Her Special Vision. Toronto: Irwin Publishing, 1987.

Willoughby, Brenda. Pauline Johnson. Toronto: Grolier Limited, 1988.

POETRY ANTHOLOGIES

Booth, David. Till all the Stars Have Fallen. Toronto: Kids Can Press Ltd., 1989.

Downie, Mary A. and Robertson, Barbara. The Wind has Wings. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1978.

McMeil, Florence. Do Whales Jump at Night. Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 1990.

Newman, Fran. Round Slice of Moon and Other Poems for Canadian Kids. Richmond Hill, Ont.: Scholastic--TAB Publications, 1980.

POETRY WRITTEN BY CHILDREN

Carver, Peter. We Make Canada Shine. Toronto: J. Lorimer, 1980.

Ferris, Sean. Children of the Great Muskeg. Windsor, Ont.: Black Moss Press, 1985.

Hoeft, Jean. Ensemble. Calgary, Alberta: XV Olympic Winter Games Organizing Committee, 1987.

Mews, Alison. My Inside Self. St. John's: Newfoundland Library Association, 1980.

APPENDIX 2

NAME _____

STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE

1. What thoughts come to your mind when you hear the words "poems" or "poetry?"

_____

_____

2. Do you think you would like a unit in literature based on poetry? Why or why not?

_____

_____

3. So far what has been your school experience with poetry? (Teacher reads poems, write poetry, etc.)

_____

_____

4. What do you think a poem is?

_____

_____

5. Do you think it could be interesting to "take poetry" in school? If so, how should the class do this?

_____

_____

6. Why do you think people write poems?

_____

_____

7. Do you like poetry? Why or why not?

_____

8. When do you feel like writing poems?

_____

9. Name a poem that you like?

_____

APPENDIX 3

GROUP _____

1. Who is the author of the poem?

_____

2. Who drew the illustrations for the book?

_____

3. What feelings did you experience as you heard the poem?

_____

_____

4. How did the pictures make you feel as you heard the poem? In other words, what general impression did you get from the poem and pictures?

_____

_____

5. What colours were used? What kinds of drawings were used? Why do you think the author used certain colours?

_____

_____

_____

6. What was your favourite picture?

_____

7. How might you change the pictures if you illustrated the poem? Why or why not would you make changes?

_____

_____

8. What are the differences between reading a story poem with pictures and one without pictures?

_____

_____

APPENDIX 4

Poetry Projects

A. Required for every student:

1. Research one Canadian poet, write a short paragraph about the poet, and copy your favourite poem, with your reactions about the poem.

B. Optional topics--chose any two:

1. Illustrate a poem and make a poetry picture book for younger children.
2. Plan a dramatic poetry presentation for a primary class. You may use pantomime, chants, music, etc.
3. Make a tape, complete with background music, of five of your favourite poems.
4. Choose a theme such as, the environment, love, death, children, elephants, etc. Create a poetry anthology by selecting poems around this theme, copying them and making illustrations for the book.
5. The same as #4, however write your own poems on a theme.
6. Write a poetry "rap" about the environment and present it to the class.
7. Dramatize a story poem, with a narrator and acting troupe, and present it to the class.
8. Study the lyrics of Canadian rap singer Maestro Fresh-Wes. Research his background, copy some of his lyrics, and write him a letter telling why you like or dislike his lyrics.

APPENDIX 5

Student Interview Sheet

Student interviewed _____

Interviewed by _____

Take turns asking each other questions and taking notes.

1. Has this poetry unit affected you in any way?

_____
_____
_____

2. What kind of activities did you like or dislike in this unit?

_____
_____
_____

3. What have you discovered about poetry in the past few weeks?

_____
_____
_____

4. Name a poem you really enjoyed? Why did you enjoy it?

_____
_____
_____

5. Identify by name the Canadian poets you remember.

_____
_____
_____

6. What are you going to do with your poetry notebook, now that the unit is over?

_____
_____
_____

APPENDIX 6

NAME _____

1. How can you tell when you like or dislike a poem?

_____
_____
_____

2. When you hear a poem being read what happens in your mind?

_____
_____
_____

3. What are some things you like to do after you have heard a poem or after you have read a poem?

_____
_____
_____

4. If you come to a poem that you do not understand what do you do to help you understand it?

_____
_____
_____

5. In what way does talking about a poem or writing about a poem help you to enjoy it?

_____
_____
_____

6. What are some things that happen that make you feel like writing poetry?

_____
_____
_____

APPENDIX 7: POETRY PROJECT - SELF EVALUATION

NAME _____

A. I would evaluate my progress as follows:

	poor	average	excellent
1. enjoying poetry	___	___	___
2. using resources well	___	___	___
3. organizing my time	___	___	___
4. using different ways of responding to poetry	___	___	___

B. The area with which I had the most difficulty was:

_____

_____

C. What I liked best about my project was:

_____

_____

D. If there was one thing I could improve it would be:

_____

_____

E. I would evaluate my final project as: (circle one)

A (excellent) **B** (good) **C** (average) **D** (unsatisfactory)

My reasons: _____

_____

_____

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