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Transactional Criticism and Aesthetic Literary Experiences: Examining Complex Responses in Light of the Teacher's Purpose

Joyce E. Many
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In classroom literature discussions, teachers orchestrate situations in which readers and texts come together. Approaches teachers use may differ in terms of the stance or purpose for reading encouraged. Rosenblatt (1978, 1985) describes two stances readers can take while reading literary works. An efferent stance indicates a reader's attention is focused on information to be retained after reading and can result in a study of the text. An aesthetic stance, on the other hand, occurs when the reader's attention is on the lived-through experience of the story and the experiences, thoughts, feelings, images, and associations which are evoked. Rosenblatt (1978, 1983, 1986) contends that although the appropriate stance when reading literature is the aesthetic stance, most literature in schools is taught from an efferent approach. Research describing teaching approaches used in schools seems to support this contention (Sacks, 1987; Walmsley and Walp, 1989; Zarillo and Cox, 1992).

Recent research focusing on aesthetic approaches to literature also supports Rosenblatt's emphasis on the value of an aesthetic lived-through experience. Studies (Anzul, 1988; Farnan and Kelly, 1993) indicate literary approaches guided by an aesthetic focus affect group dynamics in that discussions become more involved. In a series of studies, Many and Wiseman (Many and Wiseman, 1992; Wiseman, Many, and Altieri, 1992) found that discussions centered on literary analysis or in which students controlled the focus of discussion encouraged more efferent responses. Students from these discussion groups who did respond aesthetically tended to do so in superficial ways (e.g., I like the story. It was funny). The researchers did note, however, that consistent with the findings from previous research (Cox and Many, 1992), some efferent responses consisted of literary analysis based on the student's aesthetic evocation of the story. In such responses students reflected on the impact of the artistic or literary technique which involved them in the story experience.

The importance of not losing sight of the experience of the story when analyzing literary works, has been stressed by others interested in reader-response approaches (Probst, 1988; Purves, Rogers, and Soter, 1990; Rosenblatt, 1978). Rosenblatt describes this as *transactive criticism* and underscores that in this type of response the object of analysis is not the isolated text, but the lived-through experience. In research focusing on third-grade students' responses to literature (Many, Wiseman, and Altieri, 1992; Wiseman, Many, and Altieri, 1992), story readers introduced literature aesthetically and then had students analyze what made the story experience possible. Findings indicated the discussion approaches which incorporated literary analysis based on students' initial aesthetic experiences resulted in aesthetic responses of similarly high levels of complexity as an aesthetic discussion approach which focused solely on the story experience. However, none

of the approaches in their study affected the level of complexity of responses in which the students' purpose in writing was to analyze the literary work. Given that this research focused on elementary age students, studies examining such approaches with older readers might reveal additional information on how students' responses are influenced by diverse discussion focuses. Also, although Wiseman et al. assert that their instruments to measure complexity may be of use for educators and researchers wishing to describe responses written by students at all levels, these coding systems have not as yet been applied to adult responses. This study was designed therefore to examine the effectiveness of the complexity instruments designed by Wiseman and her colleagues when used to describe the responses of older readers. Specifically, the purposes of this study were: 1) to examine the effects of literature discussion approaches on students' purpose in writing; 2) to explore the viability of the instruments developed in Wiseman et al. using responses from older students.

Method

Participants and Procedures. Participants consisted of undergraduate elementary education majors enrolled in two intact sections of a children's literature course. One section was randomly designated the transactional criticism approach (N=25) and the other an aesthetic literary experience approach (N=31). Students in each section shared a common syllabus and were introduced to the concepts of aesthetic approaches to literature and transactional criticism. The only difference between the two sections was the manner in which eight works of multicultural literature by award-winning authors were approached as the books were shared across the course of the semester. As shown in Appendix A, parallel types of activities were used for each book and each approach, but the purpose of the approaches differed according to the focus of the

students' attention. In the aesthetic literary experience group, students were encouraged to reflect on how the emotions, associations, and images evoked added to the personal significance of their story experience. For example, in response to *Mirandy and Brother Wind* (McKissack, 1988), the aesthetic experience group discussed the following question: "How would you feel at different points in the story if you were Blanche?" In contrast, the transactive criticism approach group, first experienced the works aesthetically and then critically analyzed the artistic or literary techniques which affected their own aesthetic experience. In responding to the same book, these students discussed the section of *Mirandy and Brother Wind* which drew their attention, and then they went back and analyzed what the author or illustrator did to stimulate that reaction.

Data Collection and Analysis. At the end of the semester, students read *Momma at the Pearly Gates* (Konigsburg, 1971), a story about racial prejudice exhibited by one school girl to a classmate Momma when Momma attended an all-white school. After reading the story, students completed a written free response.

Response Categories. Responses or response portions were classified according to three categories: literary analysis, aesthetic, or unable to be determined. These categories are described below. Two independent raters scored all responses. Interrater reliability was established with 98% agreement and consensus was reached on the coding of any responses upon which there was disagreement. Responses were then divided into thought units and the percentage of the response which fell into each of the categories was computed.

Focus on literary analysis. Responses classified as literary analysis indicated the students had stepped back and

objectified the story experience in order to contemplate the artistic or literary techniques involved in creating the text. Such responses might also incorporate attention to how this aspect affected the individual's unique reaction to the story. For example, in this literary analysis response, one student worked both an analysis of the literary technique (italicized in the response which follows) and her childhood memories into her response. *"I liked the story's format.* The little girl was so interested in her mother's life that she just asked question after question. That reminded me of myself when I was young ... always wanting to know everything."

Focus on the aesthetic experience. The intent of the responses coded as aesthetic was to focus on the students' engagement in the story world and reactions to the events within it. Aesthetic responses could have one or more of the following: visualizing scenes or characters, making associations between the story and literary or life experiences, relating emotions evoked, putting self in character's shoes, passing judgments on character's behavior, discussing preferences, citing metacognitive awareness of living through the story, hypothesizing alternative outcomes, and discussing personal relevance of story experience (Corcoran, 1987; Cox and Many, 1992; Many and Wiseman, 1992; Rosenblatt, 1978, 1985).

An example of an aesthetic response is seen in the following excerpt, "I can't imagine what the time must have been like when people were so cruel to black people. It's hard to believe people could be so heartless and uncaring about the feelings of others." This aesthetic response revealed the student's emotional involvement in the story world. Other aesthetic elements were evident in the way in which the writer judged character's actions and related characters' actions to real-life experiences.

Focus unable to be determined. A small number of responses or response portions were unable to be categorized as having either a literary analysis or aesthetic focus. These responses were too vague to allow the students' purpose in writing to be identified.

Response complexity

Aesthetic response complexity. Aesthetic response portions were analyzed by two raters according to the highest level of complexity reached using the following scale: 1) little or no evidence of story experience; 2) slight evidence of story experience; 3) evidence of story experience with little aesthetic elements; 4) evidence of story elements which directly relate to the story experience; 5) detailed evidence of aesthetic elements which give evidence of personal involvement within the story experience; 6) in-depth and highly inventive use of aesthetic elements which add to the personal significance of the story experience (Many, Wiseman and Altieri, 1992). These levels were used as guides as responses were read, reread, and sorted according to complexity. As groupings emerged based on these undergraduates' responses to literature, descriptors were added to the levels established by Many et al. A separate researcher coded one-half of the data using the levels with the data-driven descriptors. Interrator reliability of the aesthetic complexity rating was established at 74% agreement.

Literary analysis complexity. The literary analysis response portions were coded according to highest level of complexity using the following scale: 1) little or no evidence of literary analysis; 2) evidence of conceptualization of literary artistic elements; 3) identification of literary or artistic elements with direct reference to the text; 4) detailed analysis of literary elements with reference to the text; 5) detailed analysis of literary or artistic elements with reference to the reader's

personal story experience; 6) complex analysis of how the literary or artistic elements contributed to the reader's unique aesthetic experience (Many, Wiseman and Altieri, 1992). The highest levels of this scale are consistent with the constructs of transactive criticism in that the most complex responses focus on an analysis of literary elements or artistic elements in light of the contribution of these factors on the reader's aesthetic experience of the work. Two raters independently applied these levels with no adaptations to the descriptors as used in Many, Wiseman and Altieri's (1992) earlier research with a 91% agreement.

Results and discussion

Purpose in Writing. The approach modeled with the eight multicultural works significantly affected the students' purpose in writing the free response to the subsequent work at the end of the semester. The students who experienced the transactional criticism focus included a higher percentage of statements focusing on literary analysis (52%) than did the students who experienced the aesthetic literary experience approach (29%), $F(1,55)=4.95$, $p<.03$. Conversely, the students in the aesthetic literary experience approach group wrote responses with a higher percentage of statements focusing solely on their aesthetic literary experience (68%) than did the transactional criticism approach students (44%), $F(1,55)=5.65$, $p=.02$.

All but one of the 25 responses written by students in the transactional criticism group contained a combination of both aesthetic and literary criticism elements. That finding was consistent with the approaches demonstrated throughout the semester in that transactional criticism focuses not only on the analysis of authors' techniques, but also on the lived-through experience.

An example of a response that combined an aesthetic focus and literary criticism is evident in the following response.

"I liked this story, although it was over some pretty heavy issues. It was well-written. The story definitely got its point across, and there were even some humorous things going on. I liked how the author says the first time she thought black was beautiful was on the large blackboard. This is a neat way to think about prejudice. I've never thought about it in that light.

I also liked how Momma overcame Roseann. I especially liked it when Momma told her she was 'imitating a nigger.' It was unexpected by me, but it definitely made a long-lasting impact."

In this example, the first paragraph focuses on literary analysis while the second judges characters' actions and expresses emotional response. Responses, such as this one containing a combination of elements, had distinct sections which were focuses on literary analysis and the aesthetic experience.

In the aesthetic experience group, only three of the 31 students wrote responses which combined aesthetic elements with literary analysis. The rest of the responses were comprised totally of aesthetic elements. The following example exemplifies the type of focus found in responses written by students experiencing the aesthetic approach.

"This was a good story. It reminded me of growing up. Many minorities lived in my hometown, and some people truly had problems with this. They competed, ridiculed, and looked down upon them. This always made me sad to be around or hear it going on. Just like Momma, many of my friends felt like they had to prove to people that they were good enough. On the other hand, my friends couldn't accept themselves as

they were. I think we are all guilty of this sometimes. We get too busy with trying to impress others or to imitate them instead of being ourselves."

In this response the student made a personal connection and then compared that connection to the story of Momma. The exclusion of literary analysis as seen in this example, was typically found in the responses written by the students experiencing the aesthetic approach. Thus, although these students did write literary analysis across the course of the semester, their response to the multicultural short story directly reflected the modeling which occurred with the eight multicultural works.

Complexity of responses

Complexity in Literary Analysis. The complexity of the responses focusing on literary analysis was measured using an instrument developed by Many, Wiseman and Altieri (1992). On this instrument, responses were rated along a continuum ranging from a score one to six (See Appendix B). On the lower end of the continuum, students wrote responses which demonstrated little or no efferent literary analysis, such as: "This story does make me curious to know if it's based on the author's true mother." In contrast, on the upper end of the continuum, responses combined complex analysis of the literary or artistic elements along with attention to the impact such elements had on their aesthetic experience. For example, one student wrote:

This was a very colorful story. I liked how it added the "mom talk" while it told the story. It also reminds me of the book by dePaola called The Art Lesson. Both stories tell how illustrators got started and I like it. Mom though is a much more realistic story, and more valuable to readers because it touches on racism.

Analysis of the variances on the complexity of the responses focusing on literary analysis also indicated no significant differences as a result of the approach experienced. Few of the responses written by students from either group went beyond identification of literary elements in reference to the text. The response below (given a three in literary analysis complexity) is typical of the analytical responses written by students in both teaching approaches.

I liked how it was told from the daughter's point of view and how it combined the past with the present. It deals with a lot of issues in such a way that children can understand. I feel that students reading this story can relate with the narrator of the story in the ways that they are both learning about the past and that the thoughts she shares with the readers are realistic.

In many of the free responses, students did not mention specific literary techniques but instead focused on how the author achieved a positive tone about such a discouraging issue. For example, one student wrote,

I thought this story was wonderful. One of the reasons is because I feel like busing and integration was looked upon so negatively and this story seemed to show a positive aspect of it ... It was a great approach to the black culture, too. Very positive.

In such responses, although the literary analysis was present, the complexity was not evident. The responses explained why the reader liked the story, evaluated the story on personal taste, but did not give literary reasons or analyze the literary techniques in relation to the reader's personal judgment of the story. These results were surprising in that the students in the transactional criticism approach had opportunities to analyze literary works in reference to their story experience throughout the semester. With each of the eight works of multicultural literature, these students critically

reflected on the artistic and literary elements which affected their involvement in the stories and yet they were no more likely to draw on their aesthetic experience in a meaningful way when writing an analysis in the final free response.

Aesthetic Response Complexity. Analysis of the variances on the complexity of the free responses focusing on the students' aesthetic literary experiences indicated no significant differences as a result of the approach experienced. Thus the aesthetic responses of students who were continually exposed to transactional criticism through the literary discussions reached similar levels of complexity as did the students from the literary experience approach group.

The aesthetic complexity instrument as developed in previous research (Many, Wiseman and Altieri, 1992; Wiseman, Many, and Altieri, 1992) listed levels of complexity along with descriptors to help identify the types of responses representative of each level. Because the specific descriptors were developed from third-grade students responses, these descriptors were found to be inadequate in describing the types of responses which might represent levels of complexity in our undergraduate students' responses. This was most evident in Level 2 of the instrument which is titled, "Slight evidence of story experience." In Many and Wiseman's studies, Level 2 responses were described as identifying isolated objects, pictures, and/or characters. Such responses did not show a connectedness across events occurring in the story world. Because the earlier descriptors were not applicable to the undergraduate students' responses, new descriptors were developed through analysis of the present data. By working in a recursive-generative process, from the undergraduate aesthetic responses to the Level titles and previous research, appropriate descriptors for each level emerged. For example, Level 2 responses in terms of our students' responses were

either vague in their description of the aesthetic experience or focused on an aesthetic element in such a way that their response led them away from the experience of the story. For instance in the following response, this undergraduate student's attention to her own life led her away from a contemplation of the text:

Momma at the Pearly Gates reminded me of when I was young and I used to ask my mom what it was like to grow up in the era she did. She told me that she never watched t.v. because there wasn't one, she had to share a room with three of her other sisters (she had a family of eight in a three bedroom home) and she didn't have all the luxuries that I have today. She taught me to be proud of what I have and be thankful that I have a supportive and loving family to take care of me which can no way be replaced by material things. I cherish everything my mother has told me and I have finally realized that she knows best because I always thought (for some reason) that I knew more than she which always got me into more and more trouble. Now that I've matured and realize the facts of life that my mother's taught me, we are closer than ever and I'm so much happier. (Wiseman and Many, 1992, pp. 77-78)

While this reader's initial connection to her experience of listening to her mother's stories of another era was directly related to the story to which she was responding, this student's writing led her away from consideration of the story itself. Thus at Level 2, students may include aesthetic elements, but their attention to such aspects leads them away from the text in the manner of a free association exercise.

The range of aesthetic response complexity evident in students' responses is demonstrated through the responses shown for each level of complexity as listed in Appendix C.

The majority of the aesthetic responses were representative of Level 4 (Some evidence of aesthetic elements which related directly to the individual reader's story experience) or Level 5 (Detailed evidence of aesthetic elements which give evidence of personal involvement with the story experience).

Summary

This study adds to the body of research documenting the strong effect teaching approaches can have on students' stance when responding to literary works (Farnan and Kelly, 1993; Many and Wiseman, 1992; Wiseman et al., 1992). When works are consistently approached in a manner which focuses attention aesthetically or analytically, students are likely to use the same type of approach when responding to subsequent works.

The present study also supports contentions that a transactive criticism approach can be a valuable way of incorporating literary analysis without negating the reader's experience of the story (Rosenblatt, 1978; Probst, 1988; Many and Wiseman, 1992). Students in this study who experienced the transactive criticism approach wrote aesthetic responses of the same levels of aesthetic complexity as students in the purely aesthetic approach group. However, they also were more likely to include literary analysis in their responses. Thus the transactive criticism students actually demonstrated a wider repertoire of response strategies as a result of the approach they experienced.

The aesthetic complexity instrument developed in previous research (Many, Wiseman and Altieri, 1992; Wiseman, Many and Altieri, 1992) proved difficult to apply to adult responses. The specific descriptors originally provided for each level, which were drawn from the third grade responses, were not useful in coding the more detailed and elaborate adult

responses. However, using the level titles as a guiding conceptual scaffold and specific descriptors which emerged from the data, we were able to perceive a transactional relationship between the present data and the previous research instrument. Thus we were able to capitalize on previous research and on the benefits of using a data-driven analysis, using a recursive-generative process.

As in Many et al.'s third-grade study, the discussion approaches did not result in analytical responses which reflected complexity in terms of the notion of transactional criticism. One hypothesis for these findings might be that when students write free responses, they may not perceive the need to strive for complexity in terms of literary analysis. They may not see that free response is a time to demonstrate their knowledge. In both of these classes during the semester, when students wrote critiques of other literary works, they were capable of demonstrating complex analyses based on their aesthetic experiences. Such complexity, however, was rare in the free responses to the short story collected at the end of the study. Examination of response complexity in terms of transactional criticism might be more appropriate for focused activities rather than free responses. In other words, when examining for complexity in literary analyses, teachers may choose to focus on writing in which students have had the opportunity to take a piece of writing through the entire writing process. The resulting product could then be analyzed in light of the degree to which the analysis reflects the original aesthetic experiences.

In light of the strong links found in this study between approaches modeled in class and students' subsequent responses to literature, this research yields important information for teachers wishing to facilitate either aesthetic and/or analytical elements in students' responses.

The levels provided on both instruments could also serve as a useful tool in describing students' abilities to respond in complex ways and as a guide for teachers wishing to encourage sophistication in responses to literature. Through continued research and classroom application of reader-response approaches to literature we can continue to grow in our understanding of how to involve students in experiences and appreciation of the worlds found in literature.

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APPENDIX A

Differences in approaches with multicultural works

Transactional Criticism Approach

Flossie and the Fox: Read orally to whole class; partner share. What did you think about as the story was read? On what did you focus? What did the author/illustrator do that led you to consider that aspect? How did the author's or illustrator's style affect your experience?

Black Snowman: Read orally to whole class; written free response; whole-class discussion focusing on analysis based on aesthetic experience (character development and growth and personal reaction to that character and the issue of pride in cultural heritage).

Mirandy: Read in parts, narrator, characters. Discuss section which draws students' attention in small groups then go back and analyze what the author or illustrator did to affect that reaction.

Grey Lady: Shared reading in small groups; written responses to, "What artistic or literary elements contributed to or hindered your aesthetic reaction to this book?" Whole-class discussion.

Aesthetic Approach

Flossie and the Fox: Read orally to whole class; partner share. What did you think about as the story was read? On what did you focus? Whole-class discussion on questions.

Black Snowman: Read orally to whole class; written free response; whole-class discussion.

Mirandy: Small groups; students take turns reading each page; share in small groups. How would you feel at different points in the story if you were Blanche? Whole-class discussion.

Grey Lady: Shared reading in small groups; written free responses; whole-class discussion.

Transactional Criticism Approach

Gold Cadillac: Silent reading in small groups. Be aware of emotions evoked as reading the story. Share the criteria for evaluating historical fiction. Small-group share; whole-class share.

Talking Eggs: Read page by page taking turns. Write aesthetic response. Trade responses. Critique elements which affected reactions.

Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters: Write about image one sees while reading. Web emotions and associations. Choose literary element or artistic element which was most striking. Web out emotions and associations.

The Boy and the Ghost: Whole-class discussion. Discuss placement as fable, myth, legend. Analyze for specific aspects. Include reactions. Discuss related literature (other works with the same elements).

Momma at the Pearly Gates: Write free response.

Aesthetic Approach

Gold Cadillac: Silent reading in small groups. Write about emotions evoked. Trade papers two times and respond to both.

Talking Eggs: Small groups. One or two persons read narration. Others read dialogue of certain characters. Small groups discuss the section of the story which drew their attention and then groups share with class.

Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters: Read the text orally to the students but students follow along looking at the pictures in small groups. Focused journal entries; whole-class discussion.

The Boy and the Ghost: Read orally; whole-class discussion of associations evoked. Encourage students to weave their associations back into their story experience.

Momma at the Pearly Gates: Write free response.

APPENDIX B

Complexity of literary analysis

<u>Score</u>	<u>Explanation</u>	<u>Example</u>
One	Little or no evidence of literary analysis.	It seemed a little bit slow at first, but by the middle I was wanting to read on.
Two	Evidence of conceptualization of literary artistic elements.	It was well-written and it got its point across.
Three	Identification of literary or artistic elements with direct reference to the text.	The author really shows how brave the children had to be in order to make it back then. I just couldn't imagine going to school with someone who didn't like you because of your race.
Four	Detailed analysis of literary elements with reference to the text.	I liked how it added the "mom talk" while it told the story. It also reminds me of the book by dePaola called <i>The Art Lesson</i> . Both stories tell how illustrators got started and I like it. Mom though is a much more realistic story and more valuable to readers because it touches on racism.
Five	Detailed analysis of literary or artistic elements with reference to the reader's personal story experience.	This story reminds me of a project I did in one of my INST classes. We had to tape record our parents talking about things they did when they were growing up. It was a way to preserve history. The author wrote the story down and it will never be forgotten. I often think about my 90 year old grandmother and think about all the stories she has to tell.
Six	Complex analysis of how the literary or artistic elements contributed to the readers' unique aesthetic experience.	(No example from the research).

APPENDIX C

Aesthetic complexity

<u>Score</u>	<u>Explanation</u>	<u>Example</u>
One	Little or no evidence of story experience.	I couldn't really get into this story because it didn't spark my interest.
Two	Slight evidence of story experience.	I thought this story was really funny. I really enjoyed how the story was written. It was very descriptive and made me feel like I was really there with the two girls.
Three	Elements of story experience with few aesthetic elements.	The story was very touching. It is hard to imagine how cruel kids were back then, considering how they are now. I really do admire those who have been criticized as a child and those who have had families that were slaves yet they have learned to forgive — or at least move on.
Four	Evidence of story elements which directly relate to the story experience.	I thought the story was good. I think what really attracted me was that it was real. Momma really lived through the time period when Blacks were called "niggers" and were totally looked down upon. I liked Momma's personality. She always seemed to keep her composure when Roseann started giving her a hard time. She seemed to make the best out of everything.
Five	Detailed evidence of story elements which give evidence of personal involvement within the story experience.	Neither child seemed to show any change of prejudice. It must have been difficult to be bused to another part of town for the first time. Busing began in my town in the early '70's, so it was already established when I started school. I was not bused until 6th grade. I could not relate to the feelings of "change or different environment" because busing that one year seemed more like an adventure than turmoil.

<u>Score</u>	<u>Explanation</u>	<u>Example</u>
Six	In-depth and highly inventive use of aesthetic elements which add to the personal significance of the story experience.	I understand what Momma meant in the closing paragraph: she was now an artist, and one of her very good friends is Roseann. It always seems that the best of friends started off either by hating each other or quarreling. In this story, I could see the curiosity and even a twinge of jealousy in the actions of Roseann. I believe that had this happened 50-75 years later, these little girls would have had a better chance at being immediate friends. Obviously, Roseann's dislike of Momma came from her parents' views of Blacks. She wasn't born knowing the word "nigger." It was taught to her. How many times do we influence young children, not knowing that we may be hurting other people's feelings through our own child's actions. Luckily, Roseann overcame this.

*International Reading Association
Book Release*

The International Reading Association presents a new publication related to reading diagnosis. Michael W. Kibby's *Practical Steps for Informing Literacy Instruction: A Diagnostic Decision-Making Model* is a useful guide for teachers who assume full responsibility for designing reading instruction for each individual in their class. Because many teachers have adopted holistic, child-centered, or literature-based instructional rationales, author Michael W. Kibby has created a cognitive organizer of the components and strategies important to successful reading and a schema for evaluating each student's reading proficiency in a rational and efficient manner. Contact Kim Principe, 800-336-READ, extension 283.