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Connecting composition and literature through the rhetorical situation

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CONNECTING COMPOSITION AND LITERATURE
THROUGH THE RHETORICAL SITUATION

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
English Composition

by
Maria Luisa Douglas Notarangelo
December 2002
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ABSTRACT

Addressing the debate of whether to assign literature in composition classes, this thesis suggests that the idea of the rhetorical situation—a work’s text (or language), author, audience, and social context—can serve as a connection between literature, literary theory, and composition studies. It focuses on teaching students critical reading skills but also discusses the connection between reading and writing.

Because the goals and purposes of first-year composition must be considered before any type of text is assigned, the "WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition" is reviewed for its suggestions about the reading skills that students should develop. The idea of the rhetorical situation and how it connects composition studies, literature, and literary theory rounds out the discussion.

As a basis for this connection, research that contrasts how beginning readers and advanced readers interpret difficult texts is reviewed. The research shows that advanced readers investigate texts' rhetorical situations for clues as to how to interpret them. The
connection between rhetorical reading skills and writing is explored as are the pedagogical implications of this research.

The argument extends to literary criticism, which can be categorized into the elements of the rhetorical situation. Under the headings Text, Author, Social Context, and Audience, various schools of criticism—formalism, deconstruction, genetic, Marxist, feminist, reception aesthetics, and phenomenological—are described in the context of the rhetorical situation.

Finally, criticisms of Emily Dickinson’s Poem 754 are presented, and each is categorized according to the element of the rhetorical situation upon which it focuses. The thesis concludes with a brief exploration of this new relationship between composition and literature.
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To Joe,

and to my Mom and Dad
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CHAPTER ONE

COMPOSITION, LITERATURE, AND
THE RHETORICAL SITUATION

Whether literature is appropriate reading material in composition courses continues to arouse debate. In 1993 in *College English*, Erika Lindemann presented the case against and Gary Tate presented the case for including literature in composition courses. In subsequent articles, Lindemann, Tate, and other compositionists took hard-line stands on each side of the debate (see “Symposium: Literature in the Composition Classroom”). Rather than aligning myself with either of these stances, I will take a different tack in this thesis. Instead of listing reasons for including literature (for that is the side of the debate that I favor), I will argue that both literature and literary criticism can be usefully linked with composition studies through the idea of the rhetorical situation, defined here as a work’s author, audience, text, and social context.

In “Freshman Composition: No Place for Literature,” Lindemann outlines many reasons not to include literature in composition classes. However, central to her argument against using literature is her assertion that “we cannot
usefully discuss the role of imaginative literature (however defined) in freshman English without first asking what the purpose of the first-year writing course is" (312). In making the definition of purpose primary to her argument, Lindemann reminds teachers and theorists alike that the composition class must be purposeful; there must be a sound pedagogy guiding the syllabus, reading material, and assignments.

Despite the disclaimer that the argument is not about literature, that it is about the need to more clearly define the purposes and goals of the first-year writing course, Lindemann devotes the article to outlining the reasons why literature is not appropriate in any type of composition course. The two issues, of course, are intricately linked. However, Lindemann, in effect, invalidates her argument against literature by ruling it out before defining the goals and purposes of the first-year composition class. After all, without a clear understanding of what should be achieved in a composition class how can any type of text be excluded or included?

Once these goals are clearly articulated and agreed upon, it could be that literature does have a place in the
composition classroom if it can help students achieve the agreed-upon goals.

A recently published document takes on the task of making the goals of first-year composition clear. The "WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition" articulates a set of common assumptions about what students "should know and do" by the end of their first year of composition. The statement is meant to provide some common ground for the diverse composition programs in universities throughout the United States. Although the expected outcomes are expressed in fairly broad language, and there are no directives as to how each goal is to be achieved, the statement addresses the issue that Lindemann finds most important.

One essential goal for first-year composition students is learning to read critically. Under the heading Critical Thinking, Reading, and Writing, the WPA document states that "by the end of first-year composition, students should"

- Use writing and reading for inquiry, learning, thinking, and communicating
• Understand a writing assignment as a series of tasks, including finding, evaluating, analyzing, and synthesizing appropriate primary and secondary sources

• Integrate their own ideas with those of others

• Understand the relationships among language, knowledge, and power. (324)

In order to evaluate, analyze, and synthesize sources, and "integrate their own ideas with those of others," students need a well-developed understanding of the texts that they read. They need to move beyond mere reading comprehension to successfully enter into the conversations of their particular fields of study, of the academy, and of life beyond college.

To help students become more critical readers, instructors can help them understand the rhetorical situations of the texts they read. Indeed, the WPA outcomes statement says that students should understand the rhetorical dimensions of the texts they write. Under the heading Rhetorical Knowledge, the document states that students should "respond appropriately to different kinds of rhetorical situations" and "use conventions of format
and structure appropriate to the rhetorical situation" (323-24). But this type of understanding need not be limited to students’ writings. Although the outcomes statement does not use the same language when discussing reading, students may become more critical readers if they learn to develop an understanding of the many dimensions of texts by exploring the elements of their rhetorical situations.

I will argue in this thesis that a work of literature that has a significant body of criticism can be an excellent tool for teaching students the concept of the rhetorical situation. Here, I use the terms literature and literary works to indicate prose fiction, poetry, and plays, as opposed to the essays and other nonfiction pieces generally found in composition readers. I make the distinction primarily because there is a large body of criticism that accompanies literary works; often, the essays and other nonfiction pieces in composition readers have not been subjected to critical inquiry.
The Rhetorical Situation

The elements of a work's rhetorical situation are its text (or language), author, audience, and social context. The idea of the rhetorical situation includes an understanding that a text does not have one ultimate meaning but is made up of words and phrases that both restrict its meaning and make it continually open to interpretation; it is constructed by a writer with certain and uncertain, recoverable and unrecoverable intentions; it is developed in a historical, social, and political context that can to some extent be understood but is never entirely able to be reconstructed; and it will be read by different readers, even by the same reader at different times, in many different ways. My use of the term rhetorical situation indicates these dimensions of a text—its language, author, audience, and context—and the questions that readers can ask, by focusing on one or another element of the work, to discover its potential meanings.

Many theories recognize reading as a constructive act that reflects the interplay between writers, readers, text, and context. Here, the idea of the rhetorical situation is merely to suggest a structure by which to understand the multidimensionality of a text. It works as a reminder for
students to read from alternative points of view. It is flexible enough to incorporate ideas from composition studies with those from literary theory.

A Connection to Literary Theory

The idea of the rhetorical situation is a useful bridge between composition theory and literary theory. Literary critics emphasize different elements of the rhetorical situation; that is, critics from different schools ask different types of questions of the texts they study. For example (as I will show in chapter 3), a formalist approach asks what the text, both content and form, says; questions about the author and social context are not usually included in these analyses. With a historical approach, in contrast, a critic may look beyond the text to its contemporary society in order to make sense of it.

Lindemann argues that “recent work in critical theory” (314) does not provide adequate justification for teaching literature in a composition class; although “critical theory may offer new ways of interpreting texts, we do not have to study literature to apply these insights” (314). She realizes that “reader-response criticism, social
constructionism, and feminist approaches can inform the teaching of writing" (314) but concludes that because these critical theories apply equally to nonliterary texts, literature should not be included in the composition class. However, nonliterary texts do not usually have the broad base of criticism that literary texts have. Literature provides not only excellent texts for students to read but also published interpretations of those texts—something that readings in composition and cross-curriculum textbooks do not usually have. Thus, literature can be a crucial component of a composition class when it is taught by an instructor who has some knowledge of literary theory and who has read some criticism of the particular work taught. The idea of the rhetorical situation can be a tool by which teachers can recognize the different approaches to literature that different critics take and, in turn, aid them in teaching students to read and write more critically. And, as I discuss in chapter 2, being able to construct a text’s rhetorical situation is a crucial skill for college students to develop.

In the next chapter, I will discuss studies that have demonstrated that advanced readers and writers construct complex rhetorical situations for the texts they read and
write. In chapter 3, I will demonstrate how different approaches to literary criticism can be seen as explorations into the different elements of the rhetorical situation. In chapter 4, I will discuss criticism of Emily Dickinson’s Poem 754 and classify each critic’s argument according to the element of the rhetorical situation on which it focuses. Finally, I will consider how this alternative view of literature and literary criticism may guide composition teaching.
CHAPTER TWO
READING, WRITING, AND THE RHETORICAL SITUATION

Rhetorical Reading Strategies

In "Rhetorical Reading Strategies and the Construction of Meaning," Christina Haas and Linda Flower point to the usefulness of readers' constructing a text's rhetorical situation. Haas and Flower used a think-aloud protocol to see whether the strategies used by more experienced readers (in this case, graduate students) differ from those of less-experienced readers (college freshman) when reading a difficult text, one that was "easy to decode but difficult to interpret, with a high density of information and a number of semi-technical expressions which had to be defined from context" (171). The text they used "began in media res, without orienting information about author, source, topic, or purpose" (171) so that all readers would need to build its meaning and so that prior knowledge would be one of many strategies readers used to build their interpretations.
Following much literary and composition theory, Haas and Flower view reading as a constructive, rhetorical process:

That is, when readers construct meaning, they do so in the context of a discourse situation, which includes the writer of the original text, other readers, the rhetorical context for reading, and the history of the discourse. (167)

They show in their study that one way advanced readers try to make meaning is by using "rhetorical strategies," which take a step beyond the text itself. [Advanced readers] are concerned with constructing a rhetorical situation for the text, trying to account for author's purpose, context, and effect on the audience. In rhetorical reading strategies, readers use cues in the text, and their own knowledge of discourse situations, to recreate or infer the rhetorical situation of the text they are reading. (176)

Creating a complex and multifaceted understanding of the text—using rhetorical reading strategies—seems to be an important element of critical reading. The advanced readers in the study were able to "recognize an important claim
that was never explicitly spelled out in the text" (180), whereas the less-experienced readers seemed "to be focused almost exclusively on content" (177). Rhetorical reading "is the kind of constructive reading we desire our students to do." In other words, we want them "to understand the author’s intent, the context, and how other readers might respond" (181).

In a criticism of Haas and Flower’s article, Ruth Ray and Ellen Barton find problems with the first authors’ classification of students’ rhetorical reading strategies. Ray and Barton argue that inexperienced readers do use rhetorical skills, but the interpretations they build are more personal, and personal reflections are not considered legitimate in the academic community. Ray and Barton claim that it is important to recognize [...] that both the experienced and inexperienced readers use rhetorical strategies to construct meaning. The point is that some of the strategies are promoted and privileged in the academic community and others are not. (481)

Haas and Flower’s response further clarifies the importance of teaching rhetorical reading strategies. The authors
distinguish between personal responses to texts and more complex, rhetorical responses:

An informed, rhetorical response to texts opens the door for our students to engage in important debates and conversations, within academia and within the political and social world, because a rhetorical reader understands the action inherent in the words of the page. A purely personal response cannot move a reader beyond a reaction to text; a rhetorical response can allow her to recognize—and ultimately to become a part of—the dynamic action of discourse. ("Reply" 482)

It is crucial, then, to help students move from personal responses to responses that engage students in a discourse community, entry to which can be gained by investigating a text’s rhetorical situation.

In 1999, Haswell and his colleagues twice replicated Haas and Flower’s 1988 study. In the first experiment, Haswell et al. found that “the replication tends to support the main finding of Haas and Flower (1988), that older and presumably more experienced college students tend to use more rhetorical reading strategies” (10). Again, for these experimenters, rhetorical strategies “included inferences
of the author’s purpose and intended effect on the audience, the context in which the text is written, and the response of the reader” (7-8). In the first experiment, Haswell et al. used the same prompt as in Haas and Flower’s experiment.

However, in the second experiment, Haswell et al. wanted to see if first-year students would use more rhetorical skills if the passage they read was more familiar to them than the one used by Haas and Flower. The passage for the second experiment was an editorial from a local newspaper, written by a college senior. They found that “when our undergraduates interpreted a text on a topic familiar to them, they used rhetorical and personal reading strategies at about the same rate as did our graduate students” (17). The less-experienced readers, then, did have the ability to use rhetorical strategies to decipher this more familiar text.

The finding, of course, does not challenge the supposition that older or more experienced readers better know to resort to rhetorical strategies when they are faced with unfamiliar content, but it does argue that first-year
college students can and do use rhetorical strategies under certain conditions. (17) Here, the “certain conditions” are a text or topic that is familiar to the less-experienced readers. “All of this context—author, intention and historical background—clearly attaches to a social scene the undergraduates find comfortably familiar” (17). It will be especially valuable then for first-year students to further develop these skills and to be able to transfer them to more difficult and complex texts.

The idea of helping students to develop rhetorical reading strategies seems to have substantial support from these two studies.³ As Haas and Flower say,

To interpret any sophisticated text seems to require not only careful reading and prior knowledge, but the ability to read the text on several levels, to build multi-faceted representations. A text is understood not only as content and information, but also as the result of someone’s intentions, as part of a larger discourse world, and as having real effects on real readers. (170)
The ability to construct rhetorical situations for the texts that they read can be a great help to students both in terms of their own intellectual development and their success in college. In constructing rhetorical situations, students come to see that reading a text is more than understanding what the words say but that a successful reading includes a probing of the author's intentions, the effect on the audience, and the social context in which it was written.

Rhetorical Writing Strategies

Although this thesis focuses on teaching students rhetorical reading skills, I do want to briefly address how an understanding of how to build a work's rhetorical situation is beneficial to the task of writing as well.

The idea of the rhetorical situation does not only apply to the texts that students read; after all, when they write, the texts that they produce have rhetorical situations of their own, as the WPA outcomes statement points out. Haas and Flower explain that their work with student and experienced readers provides a potential parallel to research results with student and expert writers. While expert
writers [. . . ] work within a rhetorical framework—imagining audience response, acknowledging context and setting their own purposeful goals—student writers often concentrate on content and information. (182)\(^4\)

In *A Teacher’s Introduction to Deconstruction*, Sharon Crowley explains deconstruction in terms of writing pedagogy. There are strong connections here with Haas and Flower’s understanding of reading as a constructive act, and in the classroom, Crowley connects the act of reading one text with the act of writing another. She says, “Any readings that were undertaken in connection with such a class [one guided by a deconstructive pedagogy], literary or not, would also be seen as texts to be rewritten, to be incorporated into students’ writing processes” (47). This type of rewriting requires a solid, multifaceted understanding of the texts read.

Crowley incorporates the idea of the rhetorical situation with writing, as Haas and Flower do with reading: “writers must always take into account the restraints of the rhetorical situation in which they find themselves” (46). Indeed, underlying both works are strikingly similar
ideas about the reading and writing processes. As cited above, Haas and Flower write that when readers construct meaning, they do so in the context of a discourse situation, which includes the writer of the original text, other readers, the rhetorical context for reading, and the history of the discourse. (167)

Crowley develops a similarly complex picture of the writer: It is all too easy to forget, while writing, that one’s language belongs to a community of speakers and writers, that one has begun writing in order to reach (absent) readers, and that one’s “innovative ideas” have long textual histories behind them, histories which contain many many voices. (35)

Essential to both works is the idea that the acts of reading and writing depend upon the complex construction of a rhetorical situation: consideration of a text’s language, author, audience, and social context. Successful construction requires not only the act of building but the use of diverse tools. Haas and Flower call these tools “rhetorical reading strategies,” whereas Crowley refers to
a writer’s consideration of the “rhetorical situation” (46).

It is useful to compare Crowley’s description of an experienced writer with Haas and Flower’s description of an experienced reader. In examining an experienced writer who must write in a prescribed genre—in this case, a book review—Crowley describes all the resources, internal and external, that the writer uses:

During composition [. . .] she also considers her responses to the work in question, as well as the probable response of the audience for the review, and the context (journal or periodical) in which the review is to appear. If she is acquainted with the author, as often happens, she also considers that person’s probable response to her review, and so on. She struggles to balance all of these constraints within the writing process, availing herself of whatever linguistic resources become apparent to her while she writes. (42)

What Crowley describes is the writer’s knowledge of, questions about, and skillful balancing of the rhetorical situation. The writer must consider her audience, she must
consider the text in front of her, and she must consider that text’s author.

When Haas and Flower describe an experienced reader, that reader considers many of the same things Crowley’s writer does. The reader is creating a multi-dimensional representation of the text that includes representations of its content, representations of the structure and function of the text, representations of author’s intentions and his own experiences and knowledge as a reader of the text. (174)

Like the experienced writer, the experienced reader is using rhetorical strategies to try to “account for author’s purpose, context, and effect on the audience” (176). Crowley succinctly expresses what she and Haas and Flower are describing: “the complicity of writers and readers in all acts of composing. That is, readers of any discourse become its writers as they re-construct a ‘meaning’ for it” (36). This is helpful for teaching skillful reading and writing to students: as writers, they must understand when they write that readers will construct new meanings; as readers, they must understand when they read that they are constructing the meaning of the text.
Pedagogical Implications

The pedagogical implications of this discussion are grounded in the idea of the rhetorical situation: it is the place where readers and writers take each other into account. Haas and Flower say that "helping students move [. . .] to a more complex rhetorical model—in both their reading and their writing—is one of the very real tasks which faces us as teachers" (182). They emphasize that instructors, instead of teaching texts, should teach students how to read:

The teacher as co-reader can both model a sophisticated reading process and help students draw out the rich possibilities of texts and readers, rather than trying to insure that all students interpret texts in a single, "correct" way—and in the same way. Yet this goal—drawing out the rich possibilities of texts and readers—is easier to describe than to reach. (169)

Christina Haas, in a follow-up piece to Haas and Flower's 1988 article, argues that beginning college students are usually good readers in the sense that their "automated processes of word recognition are often well developed" (27)—they read primarily for content and facts—
but that readers who use rhetorical strategies "go beyond, or, more accurately, 'behind,' the text to the author that created it, to the situation (including other texts) to which it is a response, and to other readers who may read it" (27). She offers some direction for teachers:

> We can lead [students] to see what kinds of reading strategies they use, the value of those strategies in various reading situations, and ways to increase the "repertoire" of reading strategies at their disposal. (28)

Haas suggests more specific exercises for doing this, each probing a text from different angles: the role of the reader, the author, and the social context (29-30).

Although Haas does not address using literature specifically, she does comment that

> literary texts offer the most obvious example of texts that may be constructed in vastly different ways by different people—and in some sense the power of a literary work lies in its ability to be read in richly diverse ways. (21)

Indeed, literature offers the advantage of literary criticism, and critics offer various interpretations of a text's rhetorical situation. Jonathan Culler describes the
quality of literature that makes it open to questioning: “Many of the features of literature follow from the willingness of readers to pay attention, to explore uncertainties, and not immediately ask 'what do you mean by that?‘” (27). Literature is an excellent tool with which to begin to teach students the idea of the rhetorical situation: the questions one can ask of it are endless. In the following description of fiction, which comes from a discussion of the properties of literary works, Culler combines the elements of the rhetorical situation: “In fiction, the relation of what speakers say to what authors think is always a matter of interpretation. So is the relationship between events recounted and situations in the world” (31-32). “What speakers say” is the element of a text’s language; “what authors think” accounts for the author’s role; “a matter of interpretation” is the consideration of audience; and “the relationship between events recounted and situations in the world” puts a text into its social context. “The fictionality of literature separates language from other contexts in which it might be used and leaves the work’s relation to the world open to interpretation” (Culler 32).
CHAPTER THREE

LITERARY CRITICISM AND THE RHETORICAL SITUATION

In this chapter, the idea of the rhetorical situation will guide my discussion of several schools of literary criticism. The types of questions that critics from different schools ask of texts guide how different approaches to literature can be categorized into the four elements of the rhetorical situation: text, author, social context, audience. In “Orientation of Critical Theories,” M. H. Abrams discusses a “framework of artist, work, universe, and audience,” which roughly coincides with the elements of the rhetorical situation. Abrams explains that “although any reasonably adequate theory takes some account of all four elements, almost all theories [...] exhibit a discernible orientation towards only one” (4). Of course, the various critical approaches do not sit comfortably in only one category; however, the questions that I develop from each are oriented toward one element of the rhetorical situation. Also, I do not try to discuss various theories of literature comprehensively. Rather, I try to offer enough information on the different approaches to justify
my classification of each. A critic rarely announces, “I am a [fill in the blank] critic, and this is my interpretation.” However, it is possible to examine where critics search for meaning in a work, what element of a work offers the richest place for that critic to mine, and which element a critic’s attention is drawn to.

Although it seems rather reductive to parse out the various critical approaches to literature into concerns of author, text, audience, and social context, this type of categorization is meant to be helpful to composition teachers who decide to use literature in their classrooms. I hope this structure is an aid to understanding the criticisms of a piece of literature so that a teacher is able to bring the many different types of questions asked of a text to bear in class discussions and writings on that text. That is, a teacher’s understanding of the various critical approaches to a literary text can be very helpful in teaching students the idea of the rhetorical situation.

David Richter lists some of the important questions that “defenders of literature” have asked and are still asking today:

What are [art’s] sources in the artist, in the literary scene, in the society for which it is
produced? [. . .] How is the nature of literature circumscribed by the properties of language itself? [. . .] What are literature’s effects on individuals and communities? (1-2)

These broad questions align with the elements of the rhetorical situation. Richter also includes a map of the modes of literary interpretation that incorporates ideas from R. S. Crane and Norman Friedman. At the center of this concentric map is the poem, followed by rings for formal interpretations, biographical and psychological interpretations, sociological interpretations, and historical interpretations. (The final ring is ethical and myth and archetype interpretations.) The rings of the map, then, include the elements of the rhetorical situation that I am using here (Richter 9-10).

In asking what determines the meaning of a text, Culler describes the different approaches that can be taken. These also line up nicely with the idea of the rhetorical situation:

What determines meaning? Sometimes we say that the meaning of an utterance is what someone means by it, as though the intention of a speaker determined meaning. Sometimes we say meaning is
in the text—you may have intended to say $x$, but what you said actually means $y$—as if meaning were the product of the language itself. Sometimes we say context is what determines meaning: to know what this particular utterance means, you have to look at the circumstances of the historical context in which it figures. Critics claim [. . .] that the meaning of a text is the experience of the reader. Intention, text, context, reader—what determines meaning?

Now the very fact that arguments are made for all four factors shows that meaning is complex and elusive, not something once and for all determined by any one of these factors. (65-66)

As a teacher reads various criticisms of a work of literature, she will gain multifaceted understandings of it; she will know how critics from different schools have interpreted it. An understanding of different types of readings of a literary work can make clear the different elements of its rhetorical situation. Aided by this knowledge, a teacher can help students see how asking different types of questions of a work—by alternately
focusing on its text, author, audience, and social context—will yield a fuller and more complex understanding of it.

The nature of this exercise is not to make a text’s meaning utterly unattainable; rather, it is to help students understand that texts are multidimensional and that, beyond the words on the page, they can understand texts as manifestations of authors’ intents, as products of certain times and places, that will have different effects on different audiences. It is important that students understand the many types of questions to ask of texts. One way to teach the concept of the rhetorical situation is to show how different critics have read a piece of literature differently by each asking it questions that primarily focus on one or the other element of the rhetorical situation. A teacher’s understanding of the many, varied approaches to a work opens up the possibilities of interpretations.

If reading, then, is a process of responding to cues in the text and in the reader’s context to build a complex, multi-faceted representation of meaning, it should be no surprise that different readers might construct radically different representations of the same text and might use
very different strategies to do so. (Haas and Flower 169)

Text

Critics who take a formalist approach and those who take a deconstructive approach pay extremely close attention to the text, the language, of a literary work. They do so, however, in radically different ways. Central to each is the language of a work, not its author’s intent or its social context or how various audiences might respond to it.

With its close attention to textual matters, formalism is concerned with the unity of a work. In a short description of New Criticism, a branch of formalism, Culler distinguishes the approach of the New Critics from that of historically oriented critics. Note what New Criticism is not concerned with:

Opposed to the historical scholarship practised in universities, the New Criticism treated poems as aesthetic objects rather than historical documents and examined the interactions of their verbal features and the ensuing complications of
meaning rather than the historical intentions and circumstances of their authors. (124)

In discussing formal criticism, New Criticism in particular, Donald Keesey stresses the centrality of the text and the summary dismissal of other elements in the consideration of its meaning.

The status of the poem as an "object" [ . . . ] implies, on the one hand, that we can have access to the poem quite apart from the mind of its creator or the circumstances of its creation and, on the other, that any reader's interpretation can be measured against and corrected by the "objective" standard of the poem itself. (66)

Questions of author, social context, and audience are not at all entertained by critics who use the formalist approach. They are mainly concerned with the "unique verbal construct before them, with the particular words in this particular order" (67). The goal of this type of analysis is to show how the various elements in the poem fit together, how the parts cohere to produce the whole, and how our understanding of the whole conditions our understandings of the parts. Such an analysis illustrates the central formal axiom
that the primary context for the understanding of any part of the poem is the poem itself. (67)

The questions, then, that formalist critics ask of a work are directed only to the work itself—its form, content, language, and so on—and how its various elements form a unified whole.

With a deconstructive approach, the text is also primary, and critics from this school tend to focus on the language of a particular work. However, deconstruction does not assume that there is an essential unity to be found by analyzing a text—just the opposite. "Deconstruction principally involved abandoning the search for the balance and resolution" that the formalist critics had sought (Richter 825). Crowley's description of deconstruction shows the primacy of language and, more important, how language creates meanings beyond its intended effects:

A deconstructive reading does not try to aim or turn the text toward some overarching system of meaning that would "make sense of it" [. . .]. Deconstructive readings do not try to tie a text to some signified that existed prior to and outside of the text [. . .]. Rather, such a reading looks for places in the text where a
writer’s language mis-speaks her, where she loses control of her intention, where she says what she did not “mean” to say. (7)

In a deconstructive reading, then, a text’s language is examined not for what the author meant to say but for what is revealed in the “gaps, aberrations, or inconsistencies in a given text” (7). Deconstruction does this because it is aware that language, especially written language, is reflexive rather than representative; it folds back on itself in very interesting and complex ways which produce meanings that proliferate beyond an author’s conscious control. (6-7)

A deconstructive reading of a text shares with a formalist reading a close attention to language but asks radically different questions of the text. Traditional critics (including those who take a formalist approach and those who search to recover an author’s intended meaning, as discussed below) assume that “written texts contain some determinable coherent meaning” and that “‘expert’ readers of the same text would find similar meanings in it” (Crowley 20). That is, texts contain objective meanings that expert readers will discover. In contrast, with a
"deconstructive model of textuality, literary texts do not hold still and docilely submit themselves to repeated identical readings; they can be read and reread, and each reading differs from the last" (20). A formalist critic might ask, How does the text reveal the unity of the work?, whereas a critic applying the tenets of deconstruction might ask, How does the language reveal the transgressions of language?

Both formalist and deconstructive approaches to literature have been criticized for not taking into account what could be important political contexts for works of literature. The emphasis on the text itself, to the exclusion of considerations of author, social context, or audience, makes criticism, some people think, dangerously apolitical.

Radical critics mounted the same critique against deconstruction as they had against new criticism—neither critical program, they argued, had any built-in facility for immersing literary texts in the political and cultural contexts which shape them, and on which they comment. The only difference between deconstruction and new criticism, as far as many radical critics could
see, was that deconstruction's incipient critique of determinate meaning seemed more daring, more risky, than did the traditional critic's clinging to textual objectivity. (Crowley 21-22)

Other theories, as I discuss below, take more than the language of a text into consideration. Indeed, although a text itself may be the springboard, it may cede authority to what some critics believe to be more pressing concerns: the author or authorial intent, the social context, or the audience's response.

Author

To be sure, there is great debate about the activity of trying to establish a literary work's meaning by investigating what the author's intentions might have been. Intentions, of course, cannot be reconstructed in a reliable way by researchers or even by authors themselves. The attempt to discover intention also, in a way, reduces the many potential meanings a text can have, the various interpretations different readers can develop. However, many critics do, in the course of their work, investigate what was happening in an author's life when she was writing certain pieces, what had happened in her childhood that
might contribute to the shape of a piece of writing, or what other documents written by the author reveal about other writings. To shed light on a work, critics will focus on what they can discover about the author.⁵

Keesey uses the label “genetic criticism” for “those historical studies that ground the meaning of the poem in the mind of the poet at the time of creation” (9). In “Objective Interpretation,” E. D. Hirsch derides “inclusivist” interpretations of texts and proclaims that “the interpreter’s job is to reconstruct a determinate actual meaning, not a mere system of possibilities” (21). Hirsch criticizes the work of formalists because it focuses on the language of a text without ever trying to finally determine the author’s meaning, which is the job of the literary critic, according to Hirsch.

But it should be of some practical consequence for the interpreter to know that he does have a precisely defined task, namely to discover the author’s meaning. It is therefore not only sound but necessary for the interpreter to inquire, “What in all probability did the author mean? Is the pattern of emphasis I construe the author’s pattern?” But it is both incorrect and futile to
inquire, “What does the language of the text say?” That question can have no determinate answer. (23)

Outside data are necessary to validate one’s reading of a text; although the text should be primary, the interpreter should make an effort to go beyond his text wherever possible. [. . . ] The process of construction and validation involve psychological reconstruction and should therefore be based on all the data available. (26)

"The interpreter’s primary task is to reproduce in himself the author’s ‘logic,’ his attitudes, his cultural givens, in short his world" (27). Alastair Fowler, in “Intention Floreat,” concurs:

The field of criticism has a truth pole as well as an aesthetic interest pole: it matters to us which constituents are historically "in" the work. In saying "the work," I have in effect affirmed that the author’s realized intention must exercise a farther constraint. What we try to construct is the original work, in the sense of the intention realized by the author. (38)
The task of discovering authorial intent seems, ultimately, doomed to failure. Fowler states that “criticism’s fundamental predicament is that it inescapably concerns itself with an intended work that it must inevitably fail to discover” (39). Hirsch also acknowledges that the critic’s task is not so easily accomplished: “But no one can establish another’s meaning with certainty. The interpreter’s goal is simply this: to show that a given reading is more probable than others” (24). Despite the impossibility of the task, critics who focus on rediscovering an author’s intention do very interesting and important work in mining documents significant to the author’s task: “the evidence for what was intended, consciously or otherwise, is sought elsewhere, in letters, diaries, recorded conversations, in assumptions about what the ‘age’ demanded or understood” (Keesey 14). These critics ask not only What were the author’s intentions? and What did the author mean? but How can we discover what the author meant? What sources, other than the work, will illuminate it?
Social Context

Keesey explains that the work of the genetic critics spills over from questions about the author and authorial intent to questions about the broader society in which the author lived.

The inquiry widens to include a great deal more than the strictly biographical. For the genetic critic, after all, is by definition a student of causes, and if a poem is the product of an author and the author is a product of an age, then nothing less than a full understanding of that age—the author’s entire political, social, and intellectual milieu—is required if we are to fully understand that author’s art. (10)

Despite this broad range of research, understanding an author’s intent is primary for the genetic critic. Genetic studies that investigate an author’s life and times, so to speak, are still directed at the author: What do the data say about the author’s probable intention?

Other types of criticism, however, theorize about broader social structures that influence the ways in which works of literature are produced. Marxist approaches to literature are especially concerned with the social and
political structures in which a work is created: "the application and modification of Marxist theory [. . .] have been especially influential in ways of thinking about literature historically and socially" (Webster 59). As Terry Eagleton explains, "To understand literature, then, means understanding the total social process of which it is part" (430). In distinguishing a Marxist approach from other historical approaches, Eagleton claims that "the originality of Marxist criticism, then, lies not in its historical approach to literature, but in its revolutionary understanding of history itself" (429). A Marxist understanding of history is extremely complex, but Eagleton sums it up: "The social relations between men, in other words, are bound up with the way they produce their material life" (430). Culler explains that "for Marxism, texts belong to a superstructure determined by the economic base (the 'real relations of production'). To interpret cultural products is to relate them back to the base" (129). Eagleton claims that the task of relating the cultural products to the base is not simple. A Marxist approach to literature can take many angles:

All of the elements I have enumerated (the author's class-position, ideological forms and
their relation to literary forms, "spirituality" and philosophy, techniques of literary production, aesthetic theory) are directly relevant to the base/superstructure model. What Marxist critics look for is the unique conjuncture of these elements. (433)

Key to a Marxist approach, as well, is an exploration of the "ideological worlds" that literary works inhabit (Eagleton 430). Eagleton differentiates the Marxist approach from author-centered (psychological) approaches and from text-centered (formalist) approaches. He describes what a text is in a Marxist understanding of history:

Literary works are not mysteriously inspired, or explicable simply in terms of their author's psychology. They are forms of perception, particular ways of seeing the world; and as such they have a relation to that dominant way of seeing the world which is the "social mentality" or ideology of an age. That ideology, in turn, is the product of the concrete social relations into which men enter at a particular time and place; it is the way those class-relations are experienced, legitimiz[ed] and perpetuated [...].
To understand King Lear, The Dunciad or Ulysses is therefore to do more than interpret their symbolism, study their literary history and add footnotes about sociological facts which enter into them. It is first of all to understand the complex, indirect relations between those works and the ideological worlds they inhabit.

(430)

Working out some understanding of the "complex phenomenon" of ideology in a literary work is one of the Marxist critic's tasks. And this is itself complicated because literature and criticism operate within ideology. Discussing Eagleton, Roger Webster says that "ideology becomes for [Eagleton] a much more complex area than some Marxists have allowed for, seeing literature as a complex reworking and reinscribing of ideology" (72). Describing the work of another Marxist critic, Fredric Jameson, Webster highlights this problem and Jameson's solution to it:

Jameson acknowledges that all literary criticism or interpretive strategies are themselves inherently ideological: that is they construct forms of "truth" and writers, including critics,
cannot avoid colluding with this process. Jameson’s answer is that we need to be aware of the ideology of ideology insofar as this is possible: such self-consciousness is preferable to those discourses which do not draw attention to their own truth-producing mechanisms. (73) A Marxist approach to literature brings up questions about how ideology is reinforced and exposed in a literary work, about how it reflects and reinforces class structure, about how society’s complex mechanisms of production and ideology maintain and subvert the status quo.

Feminist criticism is another approach that, in many cases, focuses on the social conditions that surround a literary work. Feminism, though, is difficult to pigeonhole into one element of the rhetorical situation. In a broad sense, it is concerned with the experiences of women: women in society, women in literature, women as writers, and so on. Different types of feminist critique emphasize different elements of the rhetorical situation: studies of women authors, examinations of how readers are posited as men, deconstructions of the man/woman dichotomy, and critiques of the influence of the overarching nature of patriarchal society. As Culler sums up,
On the one hand, feminist theorists champion the identity of women, demand rights for women, and promote women’s writings as representations of the experience of women. On the other hand, feminists undertake a theoretical critique of the heterosexual matrix that organizes identities and cultures in terms of the opposition between man and woman. (128)

Webster concurs, “It would be dangerous to characterize feminist theory as a unified discourse: by its nature most feminist writing tries to eschew a singular, centralized vision for a more plural and decentered range of approaches” (77). Here, however, I include feminist criticism as an approach that is mostly based in questions of society: how do literature, the literary canon, criticism, and language reflect and reproduce women’s subordinate social position? How can these also be places where the social hierarchy is turned on its head or reimagined in radical ways? Even when a woman author is the point of departure, for example, she is usually studied in the context of women’s place in a patriarchal society.

Another way to explain this is in terms of power relations. One critic, Cheryl Walker, defines feminist
criticism in terms of power: "As a feminist critic I am concerned with power: both the power language confers and the power relations which affect language use itself" (9). The "power" that Walker describes, both in terms of power being conferred by language and in "power relations," I would argue, is primarily a social construct that is manifested through language. Language is indeed a critical part of feminist criticism, but feminist readings of language are not formalistic. Rather, close examinations of language reveal power relations (whether they exist outside of language in a social reality or whether the language itself constitutes the social) that implicitly reinforce women's subordinate or marginalized social position.

These brief (and reductive) accounts of Marxism and feminism reveal that investigating the social context of a literary work is mightily complex. That is, social context is an extremely broad category: it can be investigated in terms of economics, politics, social structure, hierarchy, and so on. Questions that focus on the social context of a work's rhetorical situation are broad: What about society is revealed in the text? What social, political, or economic conditions had bearing on the work's creation?
Audience

The idea of audience is complex; it can be constructed in many ways. Critical approaches that examine audience also necessarily spill into the other elements of the rhetorical situation. One way to understand audience is to consider it as a broadly construed group upon which a work will have an effect. Another way is to consider audience as individual readers, that is, as those who receive or make (two very different concepts themselves) a text's meaning. Richter explains,

In both the formalist-rhetorical and the semiotic-structuralist versions of reader-oriented criticism, the reader considered is generally the reader constructed within the tale: either the posited or implied reader for whom the rhetoric is contrived, or the narratee located explicitly, like a half-realized character, within the narrative framework. The psychological and sociological versions of reader-oriented criticism introduce a different reader, the actual reader. (923-24)

The first category—a sort of broad audience implied by the rhetoric of the work—is necessarily caught up in other
categories of the rhetorical situation; that is, an understanding of a literary work's audience can be a task that focuses on the text (What audience does the work construct?), on the author (Who did the author intend the audience to be?), or on the social context (Did this work create change in people or society?). With the second approach, the text’s author and social context disappear; the experience of the individual reader is paramount.

However, even criticism that focuses on the individual reading experience—usually called reader-response criticism—eventually brings the reader back to a group that defines acceptable norms of interpretation. For Stanley Fish, these are called "interpretive communities," which have "tacitly agreed to certain principles of textual interpretation, which authors must recognize as they write their poems or plays or novels" (Richter 922), whereas David Bleich considers the "social setting of the classroom" (as well as other social settings) as the place where "the private response is 'negotiated' into meaningful knowledge via the individual’s sense of the group’s purpose" (Richter 926).
Richter discusses theorists who find a sort of middle ground between the audience being defined by the text and the reader who creates the text’s meaning.

Iser and Jauss perceive in the text the mutual dependence—the creative collaboration—of composer and performer. Although the composer is the primary genius whose intentions must be respected, without the performer the composer would remain mute. (928)

However, Iser and Jauss approach this interplay between reader and text in different ways.

The difference between Iser and Jauss is primarily one of perspective: Iser’s interest is in the act of reading as it happens for each of us; Jauss’s concern has been with the history of reading and the contribution a history of reception can make to the broader concerns of literary history. (928)

Jauss, with the movement called reception aesthetics, is concerned with the reception of literary works throughout history. He focuses on a reading public, not on the individual’s reading process.
In literary terms, there is a dialogical relation between the text and the reading public. The public reads the text from within its current horizon of expectations—that set of cultural, ethical, and aesthetic norms current at any given moment—and attempts to bring the work within these horizons. (Richter 930)

The idea of the public's horizon of expectations accounts for changing literary tastes and for the changing nature of literature. Certain works may change the audience's "preunderstandings," while others may remain misunderstood or unread until a later audience's horizon of expectations has caught up (930).

Change in the horizon is produced partly by literary texts themselves, whose success creates a market and stimulates imitation by other authors, and partly by changes in economic, social, and political conditions, which make ideas and relations within texts more or less active. (930)

Understanding the public's horizon of expectations is crucial to this type of literary history-building. Audience
here, then, is the actual reading public over the life of a literary work.

For Jauss, the writing of literary history would require that we recreate the horizon of expectations of the reading public for any given period. This we can piece together, partly, from the texts themselves, and partly from the public and private responses of various levels of the reading public: other authors, publishers, critics, and private consumers. (930)

Over time, synchronic studies of a text’s reception—snapshots of the “literary world at a given date”—could be pieced together to form diachronic studies, “histories of the reception of a given text from its publication to the present day” (Richter 930). Audience, as the reading public, is a broader idea—indeed, an entirely different idea—than the audience that the author intended or that the text implies. With the idea of the horizon of expectations, the idea of audience is firmly rooted in specific social contexts.

In contrast to the idea of audience as a reading public, Iser describes the interplay between text and reader. In Iser’s “phenomenological approach” to reading
literature, "the reader’s performative activity is called into play by the gaps that every text contains, since no text can be fully explicit about everything" (Richter 928). The role of the reader is to approach a work of literature with certain expectations and then, as she reads the text, to continuously revise these expectations and form new ones.

One text is potentially capable of several different realizations, and no reading can ever exhaust the full potential, for each individual reader will fill in the gaps in his own way, thereby excluding the various possibilities; as he reads, he will make his own decision as to how the gap is to be filled. In this very act the dynamics of reading are revealed. By making his decision he implicitly acknowledges the inexhaustibility of the text; at the same time it is this very inexhaustibility that forces him to make his decision. (Iser 959)

The text—not only with what is written but, more important, with what is not written—makes the reader establish connections by filling in the gaps.
Richter describes how Iser transfers this approach from individual readers to the act of reading, historically construed. “For Iser, the history of the novel is the history of the ways in which writers created gaps for their readers to fill” (929). So, eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century readers were expected to subscribe to “the illusion provoked by the text,” that is, to make the correct discoveries and connections in it. The twentieth-century reader, in contrast, is expected to be more conscious of the work he is doing and “‘discover himself’” as opposed to the text’s meaning (929). Like other types of reader-response criticism, this approach to the individual reading experience is broadened to include readers of a certain era. Readers of certain eras fill in the gaps individually but to different ends than do readers of other eras.

Considering the different critical approaches, the idea of audience is very flexible. Audience can be completely separate from the text; text and audience can be interdependent; and audience can be constructed entirely by the text. Audience can mean an individual reader, a group of readers, readers of a particular society, or readers of a particular era. This aspect of the rhetorical situation
is difficult to separate from the others: to construct a
text’s audience, a critic can examine a text’s language,
investigate an author’s intentions, and seek to understand
a society’s response.

There are many ways to interpret literary texts. For
some students, just understanding what the words say—what
the sentences mean and what they mean in relation to one
another and to the work as a whole—is a challenge. Yet, I
do not mean to imply that students have a diminished
capacity to understand literary works. My examination of
different critical approaches, though, is meant to show
that beyond reading as comprehension there is a multitude
of questions that can be asked to move reading to a more
critical level. That is, part of developing reading
comprehension is learning to unearth what is not explicitly
stated in the text but what is important to understand
nonetheless. I hope that the division of criticism into the
categories of the rhetorical situation is helpful in
teaching this more critical aspect of reading.

In the introduction to his textbook The Critical
Tradition, an anthology geared to graduate students in
literature, Richter explains “the dull duty of an editor,”
which is writing brief introductions to each of the
"classic texts" in his anthology. He has, in effect, built one scenario of each text's rhetorical situation:

Each reading is prefaced with an extensive headnote that places the text within the context of the author's life and works, explores the key issues of each reading and it relationship with other readings, and occasionally analyzes troublesome twists in the argumentation. (ix)

The important considerations for students of the works in Richter's anthology, then, are those that I have been highlighting for beginning readers: some understanding of the author, the audience, the text itself (explaining difficult "twists in the argumentation"), and the context in which the piece was written. Of course, these are not the only tools that readers will need: Richter's headnotes set the context for advanced readers tackling difficult texts. The readers will now have to do most of the work themselves: as they read, they will have to question the authors' motives and intentions; they will have to keep in mind the social or political context in which each piece was written; they will have to consider the work's effect on past and present audiences; and they will have to read the text of each piece very carefully.
CHAPTER FOUR

THE RHETORICAL SITUATION

OF POEM 754

In this chapter, I will attempt to show how the ideas in chapter 2 (how advanced readers construct a rhetorical situation for texts they read) and those in chapter 3 (how critical approaches to literature can be seen as exploring different aspects of the rhetorical situation) can provide a structure for a work of literature that may be helpful in a composition class.

This chapter focuses on criticism of Emily Dickinson’s Poem 754, “My Life had stood — a Loaded Gun.” I attempt to show how different critics ask different types of questions of the poem to construct their interpretations of it. Interpretations of the poem are organized according to the element of the poem’s rhetorical situation on which each critic focuses. Crowley’s division of a poem into a structure and an event shows how literary criticism is divided along the lines of the rhetorical situation: text, author, audience, and social context.

Literary theory that is focused on poetry debates, among other things, the relative
importance of different ways of viewing poems: a poem is both a structure made of words (a text) and an event (an act of the poet, an experience of the reader, and event in literary history).

(75)

I chose this poem for two reason. First, there is a lot of criticism written on it. Second, it is a difficult piece. Haas and Flower state that "reading is a complex cognitive activity. It involves constructing representations on several levels, and student readers, even good students, seem to be bogged down in content: they focus on knowledge-getting while reading" (182). One way to solve the dilemma of getting students to read beyond content is to present them with a piece whose content is difficult to understand.

A teacher's knowledge of a variety of critical approaches to the poem is crucial to leading the class through discussions of the poem's text, author, social context, and audience. This is not a lesson in literature but in reading, questioning, and conjecturing. A teacher's understanding of a combination of different critical approaches to a piece of imaginative writing can help her guide students in building complex rhetorical situations,
learning skills that they will be able to transfer to all types of texts.

As many critics have noted, Dickinson’s Poem 754 is a poem that “defies understanding” (Dobson 117). It is a poem that combines clear images with unclear imagery. It invites questions about its language (text), author, social context, and audience. As its many critics have shown, the poem is rich and ambiguous, clear to some and confusing to others. Whatever each critic’s conclusions about the poem, each tries to solve the riddle of the poem by asking questions that focus usually on one aspect of the poem’s rhetorical situation.  

As in chapter 3, I do not want to imply that there is no overlap in the techniques the critics use to analyze the poem. Rather, the categorizations suggest the area where each critic finds the most influential material to support his or her particular reading. Some examine the text primarily, some examine Dickinson herself, and some examine the culture in which she wrote. Each of these areas are crucial investigative sites for readers and writers learning to build complex rhetorical situations.
My Life had stood — a Loaded Gun —
In Corners — till a Day
The Owner passed — identified —
And carried Me away —

And now We roam in Sovereign Woods —
And now We hunt the Doe —
And every time I speak for Him —
The Mountains straight reply —

And do I smile, such cordial light
Upon the Valley glow —
It is as a Vesuvian face
Had let its pleasure through —

And when at Night — Our good Day gone —
I guard My Master’s Head —
‘Tis better than the Eider-Duck’s
Deep Pillow — to have shared —

To foe of His — I’m deadly foe —
None stir the second time —
On whom I lay a Yellow Eye —
Or an emphatic Thumb —

Though I than He — may longer live
He longer must — than I —
For I have but the power to kill,
Without — the power to die —

To narrow the following discussion, I will focus on three aspects of the criticism: each critic’s overall explanation of its meaning, what each says about the doe in stanza 2, and how each reads the final stanza.

Text

Charles Anderson, in his book Emily Dickinson’s Poetry: Stairway of Surprise, announces, in a manner of speaking, that his will be a formalist approach to Dickinson’s poetry. He makes his method and purpose clear: “A close reading of her complete writings in the new edition brings two opposing impressions into sharp prominence: the excellence of her best poems and the mediocrity of the majority” (x). With close textual readings, Anderson will winnow the bad from the good.
Although he integrates other poems and letters of Dickinson's to support his analysis, Anderson's reading of Poem 754 is based on the poem's language. Anderson reads the poem as a "domestication on American soil of the tradition of courtly love" (174). Stanza by stanza, he builds this interpretation by reading each action of the gun as a declaration of courtly love, American style.

The knight has turned pioneer, his quest a hunting expedition in the wilderness, his bower a cabin with feather pillow and trusty rifle at his head, his lady the frontier wife who shares his hardships and adventures. (175)

He follows this relationship through most of the poem. He finds "the courtly roles" reversed: "he is only the adored 'Master' while she is the joyous servant, which accounts for her assuming the active role in the love-game" (174). The second and third stanzas show the devotion of love. Within this overriding theme of love, Anderson finds that "the quarry they hunt, 'the Doe,' is appropriate to the romantic theme" (174). The fourth and fifth stanzas show the "service of love" (174). In tracing the "over-image" of the first stanza through the rest of the poem, he fits the language of the poem to his interpretation.
What is striking about this reading is Anderson’s cavalier attitude toward its correctness. In the tradition of formalism, Anderson discovers that when the poem does not accommodate his reading, the poem fails; his reading does not. “The final stanza,” he writes, “presents a more serious problem to be resolved” (175). He claims that, in the final stanza, the poet made a “third switch in technique and concludes with an aphorism that seems to have little structural relation to the rest of the poem” (175). In light of the final stanza, he offers a reinterpretation, again focusing on love between a woman and man but a love different from the frontier love. Suggesting that “this is a poem about the limitations of mortal love and a yearning for the superior glories of the immortal kind” (175), he quickly offers a rereading of the poem in light of this type of love, admitting that “the clues for such an interpretation are not planted thick enough” (175). Finally, the last stanza comes to be a “suicidal wish to free him [the owner] from the encumbrance of her mortal love” (176).

Critics of every persuasion have trouble explaining the conclusion, but Anderson labels it an unquestionable failure: “The breakdown of the conclusion into prose brands
it, when judged by the highest poetic standards, as a failure" (176). His formalist reading requires the poem’s language to ultimately mean some unified thing. He even tries two different interpretations—each based on love—to stretch the poem to some final, ultimate interpretation. But the text will not yield to his structure.

It is interesting to juxtapose different text-based analyses because each one equates the meaning of the poem with something entirely different than the others do. To support her thesis that the poem “becomes a spelling-out of the dangerous, even lethal, consequences of the delivered letter, the power possible in language which has found its audience” (128), Ellin Ringler-Henderson’s close reading also identifies a typically American relationship. However, this relationship is not conjugal; it is “distinctly masculine” (128). Ringler-Henderson reads the poem’s imagery in terms of the tradition of American nineteenth- and twentieth-century male partnerships such as Ishmael and Queequeq, Huck and Jim, Batman and Robin. Reading each stanza carefully, she finds that the poet characterizes different facets of male companionship: its hierarchical dimensions, as well as its shifts of power and the way in which
speaker and Master become hunting partners, bedfellows, guard and guarded, protector and
defended. (128)

As Anderson reductively equates the imagery of the poem with clear images of love—conjugal or mortal/immortal—Ringler-Henderson reads the “rough and ready” male relationship as symbolizing something beyond a simple American friendship.

With a startling metaphorical leap, Dickinson has expressed her sense of the explosive potential of language through an adventure tale suggestive of the rough and ready male comradeship—a man’s best friend is his gun—of the American frontier. (130)

The hunting of the doe reflects this masculine relationship:

Happy hunters together, Dickinson’s pair chase the Doe, both as sexual quarry and as a source of food, one infers. In fact, one of the pleasures of this male friendship is its expression in a dominance over the natural world: [...] the Doe is hunted. (128-29)

Although she uses extratextual evidence (letters and other poems), Ringler-Henderson focuses on the poem’s
language, and indeed, she finds that the poem is about language. However, Ringler-Henderson’s interpretation is quite different from Anderson’s. She does not judge the poem according to “highest poetic standards.” Instead of calling the final stanza a “failure,” as Anderson does, Ringler-Henderson calls it a “riddle.” She offers a “tentative” reading of the final stanza, supporting her “idea of the speaker as the word” (130) by citing other Dickinson poems.

Another way of putting this is that the word is only instrumental, like the gun. It can transport meaning, have an impact, kill; but it cannot understand the consequences of its power: what it is to die. The “Owner”—“He”—(i.e. the identifier, the receiver of the letter) “must” live longer than the word so that there will be an audience: someone to transform (by understanding its full implications) the mere blind power of killing into what it really means: the power of death. (131)

The owner and the gun of the poem—the aggressive, violent masculine partnership—are symbolic of the audience and the
word. The word’s power is realized only when its audience receives it.

Author

In Lillian Faderman’s interpretation, the meaning of Poem 754 depends upon the poet herself. “Poem 754, like a number of other poems and letters by Emily Dickinson, is about her ambivalence toward heterosexuality, and particularly the role of a woman in a heterosexual relationship” (121). Faderman’s reading asks questions about the author, about Dickinson’s own intentions, attitudes, and opinions.

In this reading, as in those discussed above, Faderman traces a relationship in the poem. This relationship is one neither of love, as in Anderson’s reading, nor of comradeship, as in Ringler-Henderson’s. Rather, it is a relationship in which the speaker “now belongs to a sinister gentleman who defines her. The tasks he puts her to are malevolent, but as the female member of the union her role is not to question but to please by obedience” (123). The poem is an expression of the poet’s ambivalence toward the husband-wife relationship, an ambivalence that the poet has expressed elsewhere, as Faderman shows.
Faderman uses two of Dickinson’s letters to support her interpretation that the poem is “potentially autobiographical” (121). From the first letter, Faderman gleans that “Dickinson, like the speaker in poem 754, could at some period in her life entertain the notion of abdicating all autonomy in the service of a ‘Master’” (121). However, “such an obliteration of self in a heterosexual relationship was at other times in her life frightening” (122). In another letter, the “wife’s life is given up to the husband [. . .] [as] is the speaker’s life given up to the Master in poem 754” (122); Faderman suggests that for Dickinson, “heterosexuality for women, though compelling, was paid for at too great a price” (122). In Dickinson’s words: “to the wife, Susie, sometimes the wife forgotten, our lives [as unmarried women] perhaps seem dearer than all others in the world” (Faderman 122).

Faderman’s reading of the hunted doe also pulls from other sources to show what the poem reveals about Dickinson.

The first specified service to her Master is hunting the doe, an image which stands for any despicable act. The pitying terms in which Dickinson describes the “consummate terror” of
the hunted does in poem 565 help to corroborate
the notion of the author’s separate consciousness
which peers out from behind the poker-faced Gun-
wife speaker of poem 754 and gives the poem its
tenor of ambivalence. (123)

From the poem and from other sources of information about
the poet, Faderman sees Dickinson the poet as separate from
the speaker of the poem. The hunting of the doe expresses
not only the poet’s ambivalence toward the husband-wife
relationship portrayed in the poem but also her disgust.

Faderman reads the final stanza as “a pathetic
confession of her [the Gun-wife’s] dependence and
insignificance” (124). The wife is defined completely by
the husband; “without him she is a non-entity. She cannot
die herself because she has not lived herself” (124).
Faderman supports this reading with the claim that
Dickinson “had ample opportunities to observe the economic
and social difficulties of the nineteenth-century widow”
(124). Faderman concludes,

As so many of the poems and letters indicate,
while Dickinson felt some attraction to such
relationships, she feared to be taken over by a
force that would define her instead of permitting
her to define herself, eclipse her, overwhelm her. (125)

The author, then, is the ultimate source of meaning for Faderman’s reading of Poem 754.

Social Context

Joanne Dobson is not interested in uncovering and revealing the meaning of the Poem 754 “but rather to attempt to determine the significance of its impediments to understanding” (117). Dobson’s analysis, although it briefly discusses how the poem’s language defies understanding, does not rest with the text; rather, she turns to nineteenth-century society to find an explanation for the difficulty in understanding the poem. In following the gaps between language and meaning, she finds that in the poem is “embodied both strong pressure to speak and an intense need to veil the subject” (117), an expressive bind which “brings the poem to the brink of unintelligibility” (117). The indirect language of the poem—the “ambivalence and irony”—reflects the woman poet’s need to speak in a society and about a society that requires her to be silent because she is a woman.
Dobson sees the poem's language as being intentionally unclear. In the poem,
a crucial feature of communication has been flouted; in her use of a powerful metaphor—the life that contains the explosive potential of a loaded gun—without the provision of markers to indicate its area of reference, Dickinson intrigues but does not enlighten the reader. She creates a radical disjuncture between text and meaning indicating that an experience of profound significance is being expressed but refusing to name that experience. (118)

Since the text does not yield its own meaning, Dobson finds that the society in which Dickinson wrote is the key to the little understanding one might gain of the poem. She ties the dominant symbol of the poem to the danger of nineteenth-century women's self-expression:

This potent symbol—this gun-voice—embodies a superb ability and a pressing need to speak, filtered through a profound culturally conditioned anxiety about the acceptability of telling what she may well have considered deviant personal experience. For Dickinson, as for other
women writers of her time, articulation of the self was a venture fraught with obscure dangers.

(119)

Although she discusses the way the language works, Dobson does not do a close reading of the text. She does not discuss how each stanza ties into her interpretation (so she does not offer a reading of the doe-hunting scene). However, her reading of the final stanza underscores how indirect communication is key to this poem and to understanding other nineteenth-century women’s writing. Dobson reads the poem’s last lines as communicating “to us more through tone than through statement or even though analogy” (120). The poem expresses a “consciousness in conflict,” and the final lines underscore “an ironic fate: allowed power, but doomed to an unending eternity of destructiveness” (120). Again, this fate is not that of the author or of the gun character of the poem. It is the fate of women poets of the era:

Ambivalence and irony predominate over statement here. As in certain other women’s writing of the era, they are extratextual vehicles of expression that carry the communicative weight of the poem.

(120)

69
Dobson moves her interpretation from the poem to a more general understanding of how social pressure forced women to write in a certain way.

A knowledge of the anxiety-rife conditions under which women came to articulation, however, and of their need for indirection and selective expression, gives us both a new understanding of the debilitating omissions in the writing of most women, and a way of reading the best work of the era with increased skills of reconstruction.

(120)

Essential to Dobson's reading is the explicit connection between the poet and her society. This society determines how the poet shapes her writing. An understanding of the conditions under which women wrote "gives us new insight into how the characteristic indirection in the idiosyncratic poetry of America's greatest woman poet is related to her cultural milieu" (120).

Audience

Students can examine the role of audience by analyzing their own reactions to a poem and by gauging others'. They can report on their own responses to the poem. They can
investigate others’ responses by asking fellow students, professors, coworkers, and so on, to read the poem (this works with a short piece). They can discuss how they think the poet’s contemporaries may have responded. They can contemplate how members of different groups would interpret the poem (members of the National Rifle Association or of the National Wildlife Federation, for example).

Another point that can be made in terms of audience response is that what the poet has achieved in this poem—confusion and indeterminacy—is not one of the goals of the students’ own expository prose. And this can open the door for discussion of what effect different forms of writing—expository prose, prose fiction, poetry, and so on—can have on an audience and what an audience may expect from each form.

A New Relationship between Composition and Literature

Armed with an understanding of the concept of the rhetorical situation, an understanding of how critics focus on different elements of the rhetorical situation, and knowledge of the different critical approaches to a literary text, teachers can choose from a variety of ways to lead discussions and create assignments that help
students develop an awareness of how to build rhetorical situations when they read difficult texts.

In arguing that literature can be usefully included in composition classrooms, that is, that literature can help develop the critical reading and writing skills outlined in the WPA outcomes statement—students evaluating, analyzing, synthesizing texts and integrating other's texts with their own—I have tried to put literature and its criticism in a new light: literature not as belles lettres but as texts with rich rhetorical situations to investigate; criticism not as individualistic interpretations but as attempts to understand elements of texts' rhetorical situations. Viewed in this way, reading literature can enrich the teaching of reading and writing; it need not be banned from the composition course.

Lindemann's "ideal" first-year writing course would "raise questions of audience, purpose, and form that rhetorical training has always prepared students to address" (312-13). Indeed, viewing literature and its criticism in terms of the rhetorical situation helps students develop an awareness of "audience, purpose, and form" of the texts that they read and write. Lindemann continues that such courses should focus on
planning, drafting, revising, using data, evaluating sources, reading critically, interpreting evidence, solving problems in writing, understanding and applying the rhetorical and formal conventions of texts, becoming good collaborators. (313)

Learning to ask questions about the different elements of texts' rhetorical situations, and having teachers who are knowledgeable about various critics' interpretations, will help students learn to evaluate sources, read critically, interpret evidence, and begin to understand rhetorical and formal conventions.

As articulated in the WPA outcomes statement, an important goal of first-year composition is to help students become more critical readers and writers. When literature is seen not in opposition to composition but in terms of the rhetorical situation, it can be a powerful resource for students learning to read and write critically. Teachers who understand different critical approaches to literature are prepared to guide students to understanding rhetorical situations. They can help students ask questions about any text's language, author, audience,
and social context and use these insights to interrogate their own writing.
ENDNOTES

1. For an interesting discussion on the impossibility of defining what literature is, see Culler’s first chapter, “What Is Literature and Does It Matter?”

2. Lloyd Bitzer, Richard Vatz, and Barbara Biesecker each discuss different ways to understand the rhetorical situation in terms of classical and contemporary rhetoric. I use a very strict definition of the term rhetorical situation that is in some ways similar to but also quite different from the use of the term in classical rhetoric.

3. Please see Haas and Flower’s 1988 article for a description of the sample, which was relatively small: ten readers (four graduate students and six college freshman) (171). Haswell et al. discuss the hazards of extending results from a study of such few students to “a generalization of [Haas and Flower’s] research groups as ‘first-year’ and ‘experienced’ readers” (19-20). The small number of participants, however, does not undermine the value of the two studies or the value of the idea of teaching students to build rhetorical situations for the texts that they read and write.
4. I do not want to imply here that content and information are not important to understanding a text. They are, indeed, crucial. However, it is also important and expected that students move beyond a basic understanding of a text. We expect them to analyze texts, interpret texts, argue with texts, incorporate others’ texts into their own, and so on (see “WPA Outcomes Statement”). This type of work requires a more complex reading than one that is merely focused on information. Being able to construct a text’s rhetorical situation is potentially a great help when students are asked to perform more complicated writing tasks.

5. Uncovering the intent of the author can seem easier in essays or nonliterary documents in which the author clearly states his or her intentions. However, a clear statement of intention can be misleading. Questions can always be asked about an author’s motives. It is important for students to learn to question an author’s motives even when they seem clear-cut.

6. I’m sidestepping a huge debate on whether, or how, language creates social reality.

7. I’m not going to overtheorize what it means to basically understand a text’s meaning: comprehending the
language, following the gist. However, I realize how incongruous this is in the context of this chapter. Although I’m using the term meaning in a concrete, formalist way here, Culler’s description of it is more apt:

The meaning of a work is not what the author had in mind at some point, nor is it simply a property of the text of the experience of a reader. Meaning is an inescapable notion because it is not something simple or simply determined. It is simultaneously an experience of a subject and a property of a text. It is both what we understand and what in the text we try to understand. Arguments about meaning are always possible, and in that sense meaning is undecided, always to be decided, subject to decisions which are never irrevocable. (67)

8. Although there is much criticism of Dickinson’s poems, of particular use to me was finding a symposium (published in the journal Women’s Studies) that grouped essays of Poem 754 from different critics. The criticisms I discuss in chapter 4, except for Anderson’s, are from that published symposium. I mention this because it makes research and reading easier for a teacher who does want to
understand different critical approaches to a literary work. Journal symposiums, anthologies of criticism, and conference proceedings that focus on one work can be of great use to the composition instructor who wants to teach the idea of the rhetorical situation with that work.

9. Chapter 4 uses the same subheadings as chapter 3. However, not every approach that I covered in chapter 3 is presented here. For example, although I present criticism that focuses on the poem’s social context, I did not include a Marxist critique. Also, many of the readings, those falling under the Author and Social Context headings especially, are feminist.
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