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Cover Page Footnote

Brenda Daly, professor of English at Iowa State University, published *Authoring a Life* as well as a number of autobiographical essays. She also published *Lavish Self-Divisions: The Novels of Joyce Carol Oates*, essays on women writers, and has co-edited *Narrating Mothers*. In 2001, Daly was named the Louis Thompson Distinguished Undergraduate Teacher at Iowa State.

Stories of Re-Reading: Inviting Students to Reflect on Their Emotional Responses to Fiction

Brenda Daly

More than twenty-five years ago, in *Readings and Feelings*, David Bleich called for a pedagogy that invited students to disclose their emotional responses to literature. For a variety of reasons, I have been hesitant to adopt such an approach in my literature classes, but I have changed my mind during the past ten years. The major reason is that I have come to believe that the habitual censorship of emotions in the academy enforces a gender-based ideology that has negative consequences for everyone. As Jane Tompkins argues in “Me and My Shadow”: “Because women in our culture are not simply encouraged but required to be the bearers of emotion, which men are culturally conditioned to repress, an epistemology which excludes emotions from the process of attaining knowledge radically undercuts women’s epistemic authority” (123). For me, one consequence of this exclusion of emotion is that for years I struggled with issues of authority as a writer, unaware that my gender socialization would help to explain why. Not until I entered a doctoral program at the age of 37, and under the guidance of feminist professors, did I begin to analyze how gender socialization had shaped my identity. Sadly, only *after* having made major life decisions, such as marriage, did I find teachers who encouraged me to explore and write about how the act of reading might affect my life choices. Only in retrospect did I recognize that my schooling had actually been designed to prevent me from thinking critically about the effects of my gender socialization on my life.

Unwilling to perpetuate this kind of schooling, I have begun designing courses and assignments that encourage, rather than inhibit, the practice of introspection. My assumption is that the habit of introspection—the practice of looking within to examine one’s thoughts and feelings—does not simply emerge with maturity, but can be taught, or at least encouraged, in some students. Unfortunately, many literature teachers miss an opportunity to encourage the habit of introspection because, for one thing, we rarely ask students to reflect on their personal responses to assigned readings. Instead, traditional writing assignments require students to analyze a literary work while avoiding any use of the word “I.” Such pedagogy, I am convinced, forces students to suppress any examination

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of relevant life experiences, perpetuating the exclusion of emotion from the process of attaining knowledge. By contrast, teachers of writing frequently assign personal narratives, not only in first-year composition, but also in advanced courses in life writing. Why not, then, use this familiar genre in literature classes? While some readers will find nothing “new” in such an approach, the use of the personal in scholarly writing remains a controversial practice in literary studies; therefore, some literature professors might well argue that it is not wise to introduce this transgressive practice to undergraduates.

In fact, I once held this view, but I have changed my mind, and I’d like to explain why. My own resistance to making public revelations about my emotional responses to literature was rooted in a fear of exposing a family secret: that I am a survivor of childhood sexual abuse. It is difficult to say this, especially to strangers; however, as I have explained more fully in an autobiographical-scholarly book, *Authoring a Life*, I could not have survived as an English professor had I not managed to integrate this “personal” trauma into my professional life, the life of a reader, teacher, theorist, and critic of literature. I understand, in retrospect, that because of my traumatic past, I may have been overly worried about inviting students to make disclosures when writing about literature. I have been concerned, for example, that if a woman discloses that she is a survivor of rape, other students may not be supportive. As I know from experience and from reading works such as Judith Lewis Herman’s *Trauma and Recovery*, the lack of a supportive listener can be traumatic for a survivor. At the same time, literature teachers cannot expect students, who rarely hear personal disclosures, to know how to respond. Instead, based upon the assumption that emotions should be excluded from literature classrooms, the sharing of such stories is often disparaged as “touchy-feely.” The problem is: how can we teach students to analyze their own emotions—including the desire to rape or the desire for revenge against the rapist—if we exclude emotions from intellectual inquiry?

Despite such misgivings, I finally decided to address my pedagogical fears, rather than continuing to avoid them. Early in the 1990s, at the request of graduate students who had read my personal scholarship in collections such as *The Intimate Critique*, I agreed to conduct tutorials in how to write this taboo form of scholarship. More recently, I have designed and taught two graduate seminars that invite personal disclosures, one called “The Use of the Personal in Scholarship” and the other, “Trauma, Memory, Healing and Narrative,” both of which were rated highly by students. It bears mentioning that I might not have taken such risks had I not had the professional support of English educators Jane Tompkins and David Bleich, both of whom have also had a powerful influence upon how I teach literature. David Bleich has, for example, articulated theories that inform my belief that our social identities—or memberships, as he calls them in *The Double Perspective*—influence how we read, discuss, and write about literature. At the same time, inviting students to make personal disclosures is not always a benign practice. As Megan Boler explains, teaching is a form of “pastoral power” that employs “modern methods of maintaining discipline and control” (21), that include “surveillance, or *fear of being surveilled*,” “peer policing [that] capitalizes on such structures of feelings as shame, humiliation, and desire for conformity” (22).

In short, inviting students to disclose their emotional responses to literature

might become a means, not of asking students to explore their own emotions, but of putting them under pastoral surveillance. One can understand, given the ethical dilemma posed by this pedagogy, why some teachers avoid it. Bleich addresses this issue, at least in part, by differentiating between disclosure and confession:

Disclosure and collaboration require neither confession nor revelation, which take place in completely private and completely universalist contexts, respectively. To confess and reveal have an implied reference to a religious morality, as if one were confessing sins and revealing secrets. Disclosure refers to telling things in intermediate contexts like groups, subgroups, classrooms, and lecture halls, where estimations need to be made about appropriateness and helpfulness to others as well as oneself. (*Know and Tell* 17)

Confession would allow a teacher “pastoral power,” as Boler argues; by contrast, according to Bleich, “Disclosure presupposes readiness of a collaborative context, which includes a certain level of trust among peers and authority figures as well as the sense that the disclosed information could be germane to the ongoing work of the class” (17). Such “readiness of a collaborative context” is not always easy to achieve in undergraduate literature classes at a large university such as Iowa State, nor have students had the opportunity to learn how to estimate what is and is not “germane” or what is or is not “appropriate.” But they can be given an opportunity to learn these social skills.

I have learned that even when students do not know each other, as in English 384, “Twentieth Century Fiction,” which enrolls up to 35 students, it is possible to develop this “readiness of a collaborative context.” I decided to attempt an experiment in English 384, not only because I teach this undergraduate course on a regular basis, but because I had already successfully introduced the option of writing “personally” about literature to graduate students, and to undergraduates in women’s literature courses. Also, since few students in “Twentieth Century Fiction” are English majors, I do not feel obliged to teach them the conventions of literary criticism. But, most important, I have come to believe that disclosure has potential benefits for undergraduates, many of whom have yet to make life-altering decisions about marriage and careers. As Bleich argues in *Know and Tell*, “Disclosure can help to bring the subjective and the collective categories of experience together; it can maintain the necessity of understanding the collective within the subjective, and the subjective within the collective” (16).¹ Within this feminist, reader-response theoretical framework, I designed writing assignments that required students to reflect on their responses to fiction—including their emotional responses—at various stages in the reading and re-reading process.

As stated on the syllabus, “Twentieth Century Fiction” would focus, not only on the text, but on the text *and* reader or, more precisely, on what Louise Rosenblatt describes as the “transaction” between reader and text. Reading is a temporal activity, I informed students, an activity that occurs through time; there-

¹Again, having personally benefited from this process of self-disclosure in writing, I am reasonably confident that undergraduates will also benefit. I explore the risks of requiring students to make personal disclosures in “I Stand Here Naked and Best Dressed in Theory;” I focus on the benefits of making disclosure an option in “Radical Introspection in Teaching and Scholarship.”

fore, some of my writing assignments would require them to examine the experience of reading, both before and after class discussions, reports, and lectures. Next, I introduced students to the notion that they might read a story differently because they occupy different subject-positions. In an introductory lecture, I informed them that, as articulated by reader-response theorists—such as David Bleich, Elizabeth Flynn and Patrocinio Schweickart, Jane Tompkins, and others—a reader’s interpretation may be affected by a range of memberships and/or social identities: gender, sexual orientation, race, class, religion, or age. Because my goal was to encourage students to reflect on these differences, rather than simply take note of them, I sometimes pointed out during class discussions that my interpretation of a passage differed from theirs, perhaps because of my age, gender, or race. A few students joined me in this practice—once, for example, a young woman acknowledged that her emotional response to Tim O’Brien’s “The Things They Carried” was intensified by the fact that her father was a Vietnam veteran. However, I did not require self-disclosures during class discussions.

I assigned a series of short papers, only one of which, the last, I have space to examine here. The first assignment, in accord with academic convention, required students to analyze a theme or a modernist technique. However, rather than suppressing the “I,” as required by academic convention, this assignment also required students to analyze their own responses, as readers, to the particular theme or technique. How, for example, did they respond to ambiguous closure, a feature of modernist fiction? Some students shared their frustrations while, at the same time, acknowledging that the technique drew them into an engagement with the story. The second assignment required students to write a narrative of their reading experience. While most students have written personal narratives, I assumed that few had been asked to write a narrative analyzing their response, over time, to a literary work. Here is the assignment:

Write an essay (3 to 4 pages) in which you tell the story of your reading experience with one short story. You may choose any story. [. . .] If possible, take notes as you read, commenting on what cues guide your reading of the story (a repeated image, for example), what confuses or pleases you; what raises and/or disappoints your expectations (ironic conclusion, for example). After reading any commentaries, reflect on your interpretation; did it change? Explain how. After hearing a lecture or report on criticism, did your understanding change? How so? Did seeing a movie based on the story change your interpretation? Did class discussion alter your interpretation? If so, how? Before writing your narrative, be sure to reread the story. Keep in mind: the best story has some sort of conflict or problem that creates tension. Give us a story line, not just a report, that records the movement of an intelligent and inquiring mind.

To avoid a misuse of pastoral power, I did not *require* the disclosure of personal experiences or emotions, but the assignment does make room for disclosures, and some students—mostly but not exclusively women—did include personal details about their emotional responses.

The results of the writing assignment were intriguing. As I told the students, I had not anticipated how much I would enjoy reading their narratives. One reason for my pleasure was, quite simply, that this set of papers was different from the many I have read during the past the thirty years. I also enjoyed learning more about students' lives, as, for example, when they set the scene of their reading late in the day, after coming home from a job or studying for a biology test. These scenes also demonstrated some skill at writing the personal essay. At the same time, I was not completely satisfied with the results of this assignment. While their "Stories of Reading" demonstrated a willingness to be honest about their initial responses to a work of fiction, including confusion and distaste, they did not always demonstrate, as required by the assignment, how their interpretations had changed following lectures, reports, discussions, and re-readings. One or two young men reported, with refreshing honesty, that they were "too stubborn" to change their minds, even in the face of convincing evidence from reports, lectures, etc. In such cases, I asked them to reflect on, but did not penalize, this refusal to change. Instead, as I had explained in advance, I evaluated their attentiveness to details in the stories, as well as in commentaries (in the anthology), class discussions, as well as reports and lectures on criticism, historical, and cultural background. If students ignored background information, I lowered their grades, explaining that I had done so not because they did not share my views, but because they had ignored relevant information provided in lectures and reports.²

It seemed only fair to give students a second chance at this assignment before making it the focus of a pedagogical study. I decided to repeat assignment #2 for their final essay, but this time I would give them an option: they could write a traditional comparison paper or a narrative of their re-reading experience. I offered this choice to determine what preferences might emerge. While I did not plan to draw conclusions based on so small a sample, I hoped that the results might at least suggest possible improvements in this assignment for the future. Next, to make these two options roughly equivalent, I added one requirement to the narrative option: students were to "consider this story in relationship to a story we had read earlier in the semester. What similarities and differences, echoes or variations, do you perceive?" Thus, in both assignment options, students would be required to think comparatively about fiction we had read earlier and later in the semester. My purpose remained the same: to determine whether a different kind of writing assignment—in this instance, a narrative of their read-

²I also learned that I must change some aspects of my teaching, especially on issues of race. Even when students chose to write about stories such as Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues," they often avoided the topic of race, despite the fact racial issues had been addressed in reports and lectures. For example, some students ignored relevant background information—as, for example, when a white male reader analyzed jazz in "Sonny's Blues" without alluding to a lecture explaining the historical relationship between African American music and literatures. Such omissions occurred with greatest frequency when students wrote about stories by and about African Americans. In a future study, I intend to explore the silences about race. Is such behavior a form of misconceived "politeness," passive resistance, or habit? If I call student attention to such evasions, will they become more introspective about their attitudes?

ing and re-reading experiences—might encourage students to disclose their feelings about literature and reflect on them. Again, because it might be perceived as coercive, I did not require students to reflect on the effect of their social memberships on their reading experiences, but I hoped that a second experience with this assignment would prompt them to become more introspective about their socially constructed identities, especially since I had frequently modeled this practice in class. In the analysis that follows, I focus primarily on student disclosures (or lack thereof), and on their reflections on only one type of social membership: gender.

As I have already suggested in my introduction, my assumption throughout this study is that “masculine” and “feminine” are cultural constructions, subject to change. Of the 28 students in “Twentieth Century Fiction,” two females (out of 19) and five males (out of nine) chose not to participate in this study. I can only speculate about why there was a higher level of refusals from male students. Are males less willing to become “objects” of a study such as this because this places them, or their texts, in a vulnerable position? Gender differences also emerged in student preferences of genre: males showed a definite preference for the comparison paper, with seven (out of nine) choosing this more traditional form. Despite the fact that most had received from good to high scores on their previous stories of reading, only two chose this genre. The major reason may be that a comparative analysis is perceived as the “norm;” however, as Bleich points out in *Know and Tell*, often the “norm” is not neutral, but rather an unmarked “masculine” genre. By contrast, 11 females chose the narrative paper, while only six chose the comparison paper. Since the seven females had, with one exception, earned from good to high scores on their first attempts at writing “stories of reading,” I do not know why these seven chose the more conventional genre. One reason might be that, having learned to write comparison papers in high school or in a first-year college writing course, they may have felt more comfortable with this genre. Another possibility is that, because self-disclosure is rarely encouraged in literature classes, women have developed a “masculine” preference for suppressing self-disclosures, especially concerning their emotional responses.

For this final assignment, students chose a range of stories, but since the greatest number (seven women and two men) chose to narrate their experiences of reading and re-reading Joyce Carol Oates’s novella, *Black Water*, I am focusing my analysis on these papers. My sample consists of only eight papers (one male who wrote on this topic chose not to participate), yet these papers illustrate the kinds of self-disclosure, along with varying degrees of introspection, characteristic of their stories of reading. But first, to provide some context for this study of student essays on *Black Water*, I should explain that our first discussion took place immediately after students had just returned from a one-week Thanksgiving holiday and two weeks prior to final exams. Given such demands on their time and attention, students would, I anticipated, be less actively engaged in class discussion. I could not have been more mistaken. The discussion of *Black Water* proved to be our most intense of the semester. The discussion was intensified by information, provided in student reports, that *Black Water* is a fictional account of a highly publicized event, the death by drowning of Mary Jo Kopechne in a car driven by Senator Ted Kennedy. The novella is remarkably faithful to the

events that took place at Chappaquiddick in 1969; therefore, even though Oates had changed the setting as well as the names of the main characters—from Mary Jo Kopechne to Kelly Kelleher and from Ted Kennedy to The Senator—even a few of the 20-year-olds in my class, who had not yet been born in 1969, recognized the historical basis of the novella.

In one report, a student provided a drawing of Kennedy's car, showing how the young woman was positioned while she drowned (or attempted to escape drowning). Another student reported on the factual details of Kennedy's behavior after the accident, details that painted an even more damning portrait of The Senator than did the novella. At one point during our discussion, to demonstrate the politics of point of view, I put a 1969 *Newsweek* article on the overhead to show that both the cover and the story itself focused on Kennedy, making Kopechne a minor or marginal player. I then pointed out that Oates had deliberately altered the media's point of view to focus on the woman, portraying her during the time she was trapped in the car and drowning. Students debated whether historical information should be allowed to influence our interpretations of the novella, one student arguing forcefully that historical background should not be considered relevant. I countered that, from a reader-response perspective, readers' understandings of a work of fiction are inevitably shaped by the knowledge, beliefs and attitudes they bring to their reading of texts. Another controversial topic, heightened by the "factual" sources of Oates's novella, was the degree of responsibility of the major characters, the 26-year old female victim and the middle-aged male politician who was drinking heavily before driving the car and who continued to drink while driving. Near the close of our 80-minute class period, I asked students to address this ethical question in written responses (of three sentences or so) to be handed in at the end of the class.

Students knew from prior experience that their responses would not be graded, but that I would, at the start of the next class, reply to some of their questions or comments, placing a few responses on the overhead or reading them aloud. In this instance, because their ethical judgments were diverse, I typed them up, handing out all of their statements (on three type-written pages which I haven't space to include here) to illustrate the range of views on the issue of personal responsibility. While many students asserted that Kelly must share some degree of responsibility—she chose to ride with the drunken Senator—most thought that The Senator should be held most responsible for her death because he could have tried to rescue her but chose not to do so. A few students held Kelly most responsible, and I did not directly counter this position. Instead, I informed them that my position was probably most similar to student (I am omitting the male student's name): "The Senator coaxed Kelly. His power as a senator, a man she respects, and as a possible employer/political connection all drag Kelly beyond her wits. 'There may not be a next time' says it all. Kelly needs The Senator's approval. The guilt lies on both parties' shoulders: Kelly was greedy and desired to increase her social/political standing, and The Senator desired not only sexual fulfillment but also, after the accident, to retain the power of his senatorial position." The Senator should be held most responsible, I argued, because he had more power than Kelly did: he was not only older and more experienced, he was also a United States senator. I added that, in my view, Kelly had been scripted for

her submissive part, as we learn through flashbacks, not only by her family, but also by romantic discourses, such as advertising, which Oates satirizes in *Black Water*.

One student, whose response to the ethical question differed most sharply from all the others, asked, "Why do we feel we have to put blame on anyone? Should we blame Kelly for getting into the car with someone who'd been drinking? Should we blame The Senator for his driving? How about the town that didn't block off the abandoned road, or Buffy who was having the party? The Senator's wife was using their house; why don't we blame her and her family? What occurred was an accident. There were no motives." I replied that she had made an excellent point: sometimes tragedies occur, and no one is to blame. However, I explained that, personally, I differentiate blame from responsibility: blaming may be a form of scapegoating, sometimes of victims rather than perpetrators, but all societies hold people accountable (responsible) for harming others, both ethically and legally. I considered asking students to reflect on the gender implications of their ethical positions, but again, because I felt this might be perceived as coercive in a general education course, I decided not to do this. Instead, I concluded by stating, "While it is not appropriate to enforce a particular moral position in an English class, I want to emphasize that one important purpose for reading stories is that they engage us in defining and redefining our values, beliefs, and attitudes. Through such meaning-making activity," I pointed out, "we define and redefine our cultural beliefs and values as well."

How, finally, did students narrate their experiences of reading and re-reading *Black Water*? In contrast to their papers for assignment #2, students were attentive to the reports on historical background of *Black Water*. I am not sure why. Perhaps because they identified more fully with the narrative perspective of the female victim, women students were more willing to at least begin the process of reflecting on gender politics in relationship to their lives. However, all eight students, including one man, referred to the historical events on which the stories were based, information they had learned from reports. Two females opened their essays with an emphasis on this historical background. One wrote, "When I first read the book, *Black Water*, I had no knowledge of the Ted Kennedy incident or of the fact that Joyce Carol Oates based the book on it," while another said, "The highly publicized events behind the story *Black Water* were familiar to me." A third female student, who began her paper, "Inspired by actual events. Based on a true story," went on to explain how the reports had satisfied her hunch that the story was familiar. A male student, referring to class debate over "blurring the lines between fact and fiction," remarked, "It seems many types of fiction are drawn from actual life but it seems that this story was the only one that we truly discussed the difference in. Was that because the other true-life happening didn't affect the story in the way that this one did," he asks, "or was it just because this story shown such a horrendous light upon the actual participants" (3). This question certainly shows a capacity for introspection.

This same white, male student then speculated about why students, himself included, had become highly involved with *Black Water* while, by contrast, he noted, we "didn't bat an eye in class" on learning that both *Slaughterhouse Five* and *The House on Mango Street* drew upon the authors' personal experiences. He

continues, “It is interesting how certain things affect our lives and how certain things just slide off of us like water off of a duck’s back.” He says, “When it comes to a moral issue and one that involves death instantly, people are rising up in defiance. I admit I am one of the crowd [. . .] for I too felt apathetic towards this story when I first read it, but when I found out there was a real life involved and this had actually happened to someone I was outraged.” Not yet satisfied with his analysis, he continues, “The mind is an interesting tool, because when I think back I look at the way I read things [and] I can’t understand my reactions to situations brought before me. In *The House on Mango Street* we read about a little girl getting raped and it was barely part of our conversation, or in *Slaughterhouse Five* we read about atrocities committed against real men and it barely affected us.” I read on, thinking: “This student recognizes the moral issues in these stories; perhaps he will point out that Oates’s novella strikes more emotional chords in his classmates and him—all of them white, with the exception of one African American woman—because the characters, Kelly and The Senator, are also white.

But he did not examine his membership in a social group. Had he done so, he might have suggested that *Slaughterhouse Five* is more distant, historically, than *Black Water*, and *The House on Mango Street* is more distant because the protagonist, Esperanza, is from a different race and culture, as well as (for male readers) a different gender. In fact, when one male student stated openly in class that, of all the fiction we had read, *The House on Mango Street* was his least favorite, a remark that elicited agreement from a few other males, I suggested that differences in gender and race, between white male readers and a Mexican-American female protagonist, might explain why. However, this white male student resists (forgets about?) examining his membership in certain social groups; instead, he closes his paper by reiterating: “Is it the fact that the line between fact and fiction is blurred that makes us get riled up or is it the fact that the line isn’t blurred but is shown so completely that we can’t tell the difference?” Yet he had been “shocked and dismayed,” he wrote, to learn that the story was based on fact.

This young man’s willingness to choose the narrative format, “Stories of Re-Reading,” is encouraging, as is his willingness to reflect on his response; however, not once does he refer to his collective identity—as a young white male—despite the fact that I modeled such behavior during class discussions. Yet, as I see it, gender identity was a key issue in student responses to *Black Water*. The dramatic shifts of focus from the reports, which focused on the male’s (Kennedy’s) actions, to the novella, which focused on the consequences of The Senator’s actions for the female victim, intensified readers’ awareness of gender politics. In one story of reading, a white female student mentions that tensions between students had, in fact, even surfaced before class began: “I even felt a little defensive when I heard very derogatory comments about her [Kelly] in the hallway before class,” she wrote. The male student who had made the derogatory comment openly acknowledged during class discussion that he had blamed the female victim, but defended himself by claiming that he had not known of the novella’s historical background. Indeed, he claimed that such knowledge should not be relevant to our interpretation of the novel. (Incidentally, this same male student had, during the first week of class, challenged my authority.) From my

perspective, this male student chose to insist on sharp lines of demarcation between “fact” and “fiction,” rather than reflect on his disparaging views of the female victim. In the process, he managed to deflect the attention of many students, including a few women, from examining how their own gender identities may have shaped their responses.

Yet, most young women were willing, although not completely comfortable, with blurring the boundaries between genres. One woman made no apology: “The things I would learn later about that [Chappaquiddick] incident would completely change my perception on this story.” Another asserted, “Some people questioned whether we should look at the history in comparison to the story. I don’t see how I could have read it any other way. Only if I had not known about the accident could I have read this with a clean slate. Even then, I would still have a concept of the Clinton scandal or something to replace it.” A few women were less certain. One wrote, “Unfairly, I can not just analyze the book without thinking about and taking into account the decisions and steps that Kennedy took and placing them on ‘The Senator’.” Another tried to “keep an open mind. Even at the point when he [the senator] propelled himself to safety by stepping on her head. I tried to be objective.” She wrote, I even “questioned if it was fair of [Oates] to represent history in such a way that might do damage to the living.” Nevertheless, she concluded, “After my research, I couldn’t help but be angry with the Senator (and at myself for being so gullible and giving him the benefit of the doubt).” Another explained, “I try not to confuse fiction with real events, but the idea that this was not a whimsical storyline made me take the book more seriously.” Another stated, “Knowing the facts to the real accident changed my perspective on the novel. [. . .] Even after discussing the danger of joining these two, I still make the connection. I don’t think it will be easy for anyone to disassociate the two.” During a second reading, she said, the reports on historical background caused her to “superimpose that information into the fictional accounts.”

If students are to become skilled at introspection, they need to develop an awareness of and a vocabulary for their emotions; therefore, I was pleased that readers often used emotional terms to describe their responses. After hearing the reports, the male said he was “shocked and dismayed,” while one female acknowledged feeling “anger and confusion.” One woman said she read the book “more seriously,” while another reported being “relieved to know I wasn’t the only one with that idea nagging me. It was mentioned that the true-life story dealt with the Kennedy family. Ah ha!” Throughout their narratives, women described their emotional responses frequently, using a wide range of terms to articulate their feelings. For example, to describe their first reading of the novella, they used such phrases as: “Enjoyed the splashes of humor” and the imagery, “a little confused and sometimes frustrated by the repetition [. . .] of certain events,” “confused and sometimes frustrated by the repetition,” “put off [. . .] wondering if the whole book would be repetitious and disjointed,” “annoyed with Kelly [. . .] put the book down in defiance,” “haunting in my head [. . .] like voices calling from beyond the grave,” “I am submerged in a darkness of someone else’s creating. Struggling to breathe, I emerge to the top only to be pulled under once again,” and “[because of a vague sense of the story’s basis in fact] it was hard for me to concentrate.”

I was also encouraged by the fact that many students reflected on and even revised their initial responses. One explained, "When I finished the book [. . .] I realized that it [the repetition] did help to build to the climax of the story. It portrayed the intensity of Kelly's struggle, her refusal to give up, more than if Oates had merely stated the facts once and ended the story. How better to illustrate the emotions?" The woman, who had initially been "put off" by the novella, began to "enjoy the style and storyline;" she says, "The stream of conscious style was difficult to read, especially at first. However, it was a good literary device because I felt like I was Kelly trapped in the car. I felt as if I was thinking, not reading the book. It was like the words were my own ideas and memories, and it brought the book to life." Her reading experience of "a sense of chaos and need for survival," she explained, "mirrors how Kelly would have felt at the party and in the car." Another woman, initially annoyed with Kelly, said that after chapter 20, "I had all I could stand of Kelly; I put the book down in defiance and went to bed. As I lay there trying to sleep I realized that even though I was really annoyed with the submissive, and in my opinion stupid behavior that Kelly was displaying, I knew women who were just like Kelly." One young woman, who felt "bombarded with images of the 'All American Girl,'" reported, "I am there, holding her up, trying to breath life back into her."

Some students began to analyze how Oates, through her style, had shaped their emotional responses. Initially, one woman explained, "I felt bad for Kelly, but not really close to what was going on. But with each episode of her life, I grew to know her. This personalization made it harder for me when she dies at the end." She also noted, "The repetition of the event made me relive the accident over and over again, " an experience she found "emotionally draining," but she also noted that the repetition "makes it seem very fairy tale like, only gone very wrong." With both Oates's novella and her short story, she added, "I found myself wanting to escape the feelings they created in me, but not being able to. The emotions were haunting, resurfacing when I least expected it, causing me over and over to relive the stories of these two women." One woman, who also reported being "haunted" by the story, recognized that Oates, "through her style, had almost required me to feel this way. This was done in the manipulation of time," she explained, "which incorporated the use of flashbacks and repetition." She ended with a feeling of "hopelessness," interpreting the novella as a warning that there is "no fairy tale ending, no Prince Charming." Speaking of Oates's novella and her short story, another woman wrote, "My perceptions, of both pieces of fiction, are that Oates wants her readers to empathize with the female victims of these stories. She wants her readers to feel what the victims went through in order to have a better understanding of why it happened."

What is encouraging in this small sample of papers is the willingness of students to reflect on their initial responses and, in many instances, change their minds. One woman volunteered at the opening of her paper: "I really enjoy looking at how I perceive a story and how that perception can change depending on different information that I receive." This student, more open than most, also disclosed relevant information about her beliefs and values. "Many feelings [. . .] continue to program girls to feel incomplete without a man. I strongly disagree and am fiercely independent because I want to be different." In this pas-

sage, the student begins to examine the relationship between her individual and collective identities. Aware of her collective identity as a woman, she explains that she is actively resisting society's effort to "program" her to feel in need of a man. Another woman, who recognizes the novella as a parody of "Cinderella" waiting for her "Prince Charming," interprets *Black Water* as a warning to women, rather than as encouragement to resist social programming for female submission. However, another woman emphasized the victim's individual rather than her collective identity—perhaps to counteract the victimizer's failure to do so. In retrospect, I wish I had allowed more time for students to read each other's papers—as I often do—in order to discuss differences in their interpretations.

But before considering how I might do a better job next time I teach this course, I must ask: since women prefer to write narratives of their reading experience whereas men, if given a choice, avoid it, should I continue giving this assignment? My answer is a decided yes. I intend to continue making this assignment; however, since males are obviously capable of writing stories of reading, as well as capable of self-disclosure, I will not give students the option to write a more conventional analysis the next time I make this assignment. I am also considering what changes, if any, I should make in my explanation of the reading and re-reading writing assignment. If I require students to share their emotional responses, am I misusing my "pastoral power," forcing them to parade their feelings for my surveillance? I continue to think so. It may also be too coercive to require students to reflect on how their memberships in different social groups—race, gender, class, sexual orientation—may have influenced their reading experiences. For that reason I am planning a less coercive, collaborative practice: I will ask students to exchange their papers in small groups, making written comments on each other's work before turning in their papers to me. In this way, students more practiced in the habit of introspection might teach their less introspective peers to become more reflective, not only about what is "in" the text, but what is in their emotional/intellectual responses to the text. While such self-examination requires establishing a certain degree of trust in the classroom, this modest study teaches me that it is possible to develop enough trust, even within the short span of a 15-week semester, to encourage the habit of introspection. What I have learned, then, is that the potential benefits of disclosure outweigh the risks. ☺

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