



## A READER- RESPONSE APPROACH TO SHERWOOD ANDERSON: *DEATH IN THE WOODS* Yasemin Güniz SERTEL\*

### Abstract

With its revolutionary new styles, modernist literature assigns to the reader a new role and responsibility which obliges him to be an active participant in the understanding and production of meaning in the text; a role explained mainly by the reader-response theory. The following article entitled “A Reader-Response Approach to Sherwood Anderson: *Death in the Woods*” presents an interpretation of the American writer Sherwood Anderson’s short story *Death in the Woods* in the light of reader-response criticism which prompts the reader for his active participation in reading a text. In general, the short story takes the reader to the insignificant life of a woman victimized by the patriarchal society. However, she does gain significance after her death, when her dead body becomes a text to be perceived and contrastingly interpreted from the different perspectives of different people.

**Keywords:** Reader-response criticism, metafiction, textual body, narrative relativity.

### Özet

Modernist edebiyat beraberinde getirdiği radikal yenilikleriyle okuyucuya da yeni bir görev ve sorumluluk verir. Okur-odaklı kuramlar metin çözümlenmelerinde ve anlam üretmede okuyucunun aktif katılımının gerekliliğini vurgular. Bu çalışma, modern dönem Amerikan yazarlarından Sherwood Anderson’ın *Death in The Woods* adlı öyküsünü okuyucuya da öykü çözümlemesinde aktif bir rol yükleyen okur-odaklı kuram ışığında incelemektedir. Öykü genel olarak, ataerkil toplum yapısında kurban haline gelen sıradan bir kadının sıradan yaşamını anlatır. Ancak ölümünden sonra, farklı bakış açıları ve farklı algılar tarafından yorumlanan bu sıradan kadının ölü bedeni, farklı okumalar ışığında çözümlenecek bir metin olarak yeniden doğar.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Okur-odaklı eleştiri, meta-kurgu, metinsel beden, göreceli anlatım.

### Introduction

Reader-response criticism emphasizes the necessity of the active and creative involvement of the reader while reading a text, and asserts that a text activates a reader in his generating a message or a meaning. In ‘The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach’, Wolfgang Iser talks about the “strange situation” of the reader during his reading experience in these words:

We know that we share in certain experiences, but we do not know what happens to us in the course of this process. This is why, when we have been particularly impressed by a book, we feel the need to talk about it [...] we simply want to understand more clearly what it is that we have

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been entangled in. We have undergone an experience, and now we want to know consciously what we have experienced [...] Literary criticism [...] satisfies (or helps to satisfy) our desire to talk about what we have read (Iser, 1988: 201).

This strange situation has also been the reader's case while reading the modernist American writer Sherwood Anderson's story *Death in the Woods*, and this study is the issue of a desire 'to talk about what I have read' throughout the story in the light of reader-response criticism. As a matter of fact, *Death in the Woods* is one of the most suitable texts to exemplify this theory since it is accepted as "Anderson's best known treatment of his own story-telling technique" which is "a self-reflexive tale about the power of story" (May, 2002:143).

Sherwood Anderson's story *Death in the Woods* is about the life and death of a common and poor old farm woman Mrs. Grimes whose life has been one of suffering and victimization. Even her death becomes a proof of her destiny marked with agony since she is frozen to death in a snowstorm while returning home from the town. Found by a local hunter, her frozen dead body is reported as belonging to a beautiful young girl. An adolescent boy who is actually the narrator of the story gets highly excited by the naked dead body of Mrs. Grimes and this experience comes to initiate both his manhood and his artistic identity. Having been deeply influenced by what he has seen and heard, he re-creates the story of Mrs. Grimes years later when he becomes a writer in his story *Death in the Woods*.

#### **The Protagonist as a Text to be Read**

Mrs. Grimes who becomes the subject-matter of the story, also becomes a text within the story since she is gazed upon, interpreted and commented on from different perspectives. In Murfin's 'Self-Consuming Artifacts' there is a reference to two kinds of literary texts: "the rhetorical" and "the dialectical". However, it is also emphasized that for literary texts there is the necessity to force readers to generate meaning (Murfin, 1994:127). Anderson's story *Death in the Woods* enables the reader to trace the qualities of both kinds of texts in Mrs. Grimes' textual identity. The rhetorical text "reflects and reinforces opinions that readers already hold", whereas the dialectical text "prods and provokes the reader" (Murfin, 1994: 127). A dialectical text, "rather than presenting an opinion as if it were truth, challenges readers to discover truths on their own" (Murfin, 1994: 127). The rhetorical aspect of Mrs. Grimes' textual existence is presented through her female-gender role in the story as she becomes a life source, a nurturer for all the living bodies around her:

The woman... was one destined to feed animal life. Anyway, that is all she ever did. She was feeding animal life before she was born, as a child, as a young woman working on the farm of the German, after she married, when she grew old and when she died. She fed... life in cows, in chickens, in pigs, in horses, in dogs, in men (Anderson, 1969: 294).

However after her death, Mrs. Grimes becomes an artistic source for the writer therefore, the dead body becomes a dialectical text. As the narrator suggests, "The scene in the forest had become for me without my knowing it, the foundation for the real story I am now trying to tell"(Anderson, 1969: 293). That moment becomes significant because the dead body as a dialectical text "prods and provokes" its reader - the adolescent boy (Murfin, 1994: 127). Fascinated by the nakedness, the boy "discovers truths of [his] own" about his inclination to become an artist, namely a writer (Murfin, 1994: 127). According to Lawry, Mrs. Grimes' dead body with its "symbolic fullness" brings a new "consciousness" to the young boy (Lawry, 1959:307). As for Scheick, this process is how the boy "discovers fragments in [his] consciousness" (Scheick, 1974:145). Consequently, the boy acquires a new role and a new identity after this vision which can be accepted as the "artist in the essential gesture of art: creation" (Lawry, 1959:307). Therefore, while creating the dead woman's new tale, the boy

also experiences a “recognition of his being” (Lawry, 1959:307). Through reconstructing her tale over time, the narrator recreates the old woman's life and death in a piece of art, that is this story. Mrs. Grimes who is depicted as a simple and a common woman at the beginning of the story becomes an immortal art object; a source of a story when its reader realizes his capacity of becoming an artist:

The old woman was nothing special. She was one of the nameless ones that hardly anyone knows, but she got into my thoughts. I have just suddenly now, after all these years, remembered her and what happened. It is a story (Anderson, 1969: 294).

However, the reader while provoking and prodding his own truth, has to reject the commonly accepted perceptions when he reads this dialectical text:

Instead of offering a 'single, sustained argument', a dialectical text, [...] maybe so arranged that to enter into the spirit and assumptions of any one of its [...] units is implicitly to reject the spirit and assumption of the unit immediately preceding [...] The reader-response critic proceeds by describing the reader's way of dealing with the sudden twists and turns that characterize the dialectical text, making the reader return to earlier passages and see them in an entirely new light (Murfin, 1994: 127-128).

The narrator, who is transformed from an adolescent boy into a mature artist, rejects the general opinion about Mrs. Grimes, his art object, while reading her dead body. For him, she is not an old, common, simple woman as regarded by the others: “She was an old woman. All country and small-town people have seen such old women” (Anderson, 1969: 282, 283). He does see her in an entirely different and new perspective: “She did not look old, lying there in that light, frozen and still. One of the men turned her over in the snow and I saw everything. My body trembled with some mystical feeling” (Anderson, 1969: 292).

### **The Dead Body as Incorporating Various Meanings**

Besides the differences between rhetorical and dialectical texts, the responses to these texts also vary. The different responses have their roots in what E.D. Hirsch calls “the doctrine of critical relativity” which emphasizes that “everybody sees literature from his own angle of vision and responds emotionally to literature through his own system of values and associations” which in all possibility are in contradiction with one another (Hirsch, 1988: 231). These contradictory perspectives can also be traced in the responses directed to Mrs. Grimes' dead body. Towards the end of the story, when a woman's death is heard in the town, the adolescent narrator and his brother go to the woods where an unidentified dead woman's body is found. As a matter of fact, in this final section the process of reading and interpretation comes to the foreground. The town marshal interprets the distorted old body as a murdered corpse:

When she was found, a day or two later, the worn-out dress had been torn from her body clear to the hips... The marshal was thinking there might have been a murder. He kept asking the hunter questions. She might have been murdered and someone might spring out from behind a tree and murder him (Anderson, 1969: 292).

This is the perspective of “the crowd of men and boys.” (Anderson, 1969: 292). On the other hand, the hunter's perspective is totally different because he describes the dead body as belonging to a young girl. When the hunter “came into a grocery and told his story”, that is his interpretation he declares; “I didn't see any wounds. She was a beautiful young girl” (Anderson, 1969: 291). According to Colquitt, in this expression the hunter “seemingly misreads” the dead body (Colquitt, 1986:186). The death generally decays and brings corruption to the body. However, the hunter visualizes a beauty and a youth in that dead body.

This perspective is also shared by the narrator of the story who, just like the hunter, sees the slightly frozen body as a beautiful object of desire:

Her body was frozen stiff when it was found, and the shoulders were so narrow and the body so slight that in death it looked like the body of some charming young girl. She did not look old, lying there in that light, frozen and still. My body trembled with some mystical feeling. I had seen everything... had seen the white bare young-looking shoulders, had heard the whispered comments of the men (Anderson, 1969: 291, 292, 293).

### **The Position of the Reader**

Consequently, there are two crucial and contradictory interpretations adopted by the men who go out into the forest in order to witness the dead body. In this way, the dead body can be perceived as “a multidimensional space in which a variety of readings... blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture” (Barthes, 1988: 149). These various and contradictory perspectives are the exemplifications of Wolfgang Iser's theory in his work ‘The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response’. This theory is interpreted by the critics in such away: “the term reader can be subdivided into implied reader and the actual reader.” The implied reader is “the reader whom the text creates for itself and amounts to a network of response inviting structures which predispose us to read in certain ways” (Brooker, Selden, Widdowson, 1997: 56). In *Death in the Woods*, the hunter and the narrator are presented as the implied readers because they are functional interpreters who actively interpret and give a challenging and an innovatory meaning to the existence of the dead body by perceiving it as young and beautiful.

On the other hand, according to Iser, “the actual reader receives certain mental images in the process of reading; however, the images will inevitably be coloured by the reader's existing stock of experience” (Iser cited in Selden, Widdowson, Brooker, 1997: 56). This “stock of experience” refers in our case to the information that the reader has about the woman's past because as for Iser, “we hold in our minds certain expectations, based on our memory of characters and events” (Iser cited in Selden, Widdowson, Brooker, 1997: 56). Hence, in the story the marshal and the townsmen can be exemplified as the actual readers because they are not influenced by the sexuality of the dead body as the implied readers are; yet they too, have some “mental images” since they imagine her as a murdered woman. However, this image is modified when they discover the real identity of the woman:

She was recognized the next day and there was an investigation. The husband and son were found somewhere and brought to town and there was an attempt to connect them with the woman's death (Anderson, 1969: 291).

When the dead body is connected to the memories and events of her past, she is immediately identified as Mrs. Grimes, the old, suffering woman whose life was devoted to the task of feeding.

The use of implied and actual readers in *Death in the Woods* allows the reader to analyze the story also with Iser's perspective of literary work as consisting of two poles, as suggested in ‘The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach’. According to Iser, “the literary work has two poles, which we might call the artistic, and the aesthetic: the artistic refers to the text created by the author, and the aesthetic to the realization accomplished by the reader” (Iser, 1988:189). When *Death in the Woods* is analyzed from Iser's aesthetic pole, it is possible to decipher the responses of the implied and actual readers as various realizations accomplished by the marshal, the hunter and the narrator. Within this pole, the text as an object creates an influence on its readers. Hence, their responses to the text, namely the dead body, provide the basis of the aesthetic pole of the story. Within this aesthetic pole, the reader

actualizes the “combination of the text” and the “imagination of the reader” which comprises the “virtual dimension” and explained by Iser as follows:

The fact that completely different readers can be differently affected by the 'reality' of a particular text is ample evidence of the degree to which literary texts transform reading into a creative process that is far above mere perception of what is written. The literary text activates our own faculties, enabling us to recreate the world it presents. The product of this creative activity is what we might call the virtual dimension of the text, which endows it with its reality. This virtual dimension is not the text itself, nor is it the imagination of the reader: it is the coming together of text and imagination. The activity of reading can be characterized as a sort of kaleidoscope of perspectives, preintentions, recollections (Iser, 1988: 192).

The virtual dimension in *Death in the Woods* is the unity achieved when the textual dead body of Mrs. Grimes awakens different visions in the minds of its perceivers. Before her real identity is discovered, the marshal and the townsmen imagine her to be a victim of murder. Besides this vision, there are the hunter's and the narrator's visions of the distorted and old dead body as a young, beautiful and charming sexuality, which are also the products of their imagination. Without the support of imagination, such a challenging vision could never be accomplished. This argument inevitably calls to mind the idea that “a text can be likened to an incomplete work of sculpture: to see it fully, we must complete it imaginatively, taking care to do so in a way that responsibly takes into account what is there” (Murfin, 1994: 125). Therefore, as people view the dead body, the beauty that they perceive is not objective, but created subjectively in the eye and imagination of its beholders.

On another level, it is also possible to analyze the story from the perspective of what Iser calls “the artistic pole” that is, “the text created by the author” (Iser, 1988: 189). As mentioned earlier, the hunter and the narrator perceive the naked dead body as the body of a young and a beautiful girl. Hence, this is the textual body created in the imagination of its fascinated beholders. However, it is the nakedness of the dead body which makes the beholders misread this textual body. Mrs. Grimes' naked body may be associated with John Berger's analysis of nudity as argued by Berger in his 'Ways of Seeing'. From this perspective, the naked body is no more a dead body but in its nudity, it is endowed with an artistic weight and it is perceived as a nude object namely, an art object. Berger asserts that “to be naked is to be oneself” as Mrs. Grimes was before she was found (Berger, 1998: 100). However, Berger also explains, “To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself. A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become a nude” (Berger, 1998:100). Therefore, when the body is discovered, and viewed by the men in the woods, it becomes a beautiful and charming object of sexual desire at least for the hunter and the narrator, finally qualifying as a nude object in the words of Berger. In this way the dead body becomes a textual art object created by its beholders.

### **The Creation of the Story**

Besides the creation of this textual art object, there is still another process of creation within *Death in the Woods*, and that is the story itself. Giving full admittance to his own perception of the naked woman's body, the narrator feels an urge to complete that experience by producing his story without paying attention to the realistic aspects: “You see, it is likely that when my brother told the story, I did not think he got the point. He was too young and so was I. A thing so complete has its own beauty” (Anderson, 1969: 294). However, in order to transform the scene he has witnessed in the woods into a complete work and thus maintain a wholeness, the narrator has to blend that image with his memories and imagination. As a

matter of fact, “this multiplicity of connections” provides for him the materials, or in Iser's words “the background” of the story. Iser explains this process as follows:

Whatever we have read sinks into our memory and is foreshortened. It may later be evoked again and set against a different background with the result that the reader is enabled to develop hitherto unforeseeable connections. The memory evoked, however can never reassume its original shape, for this would mean that memory and perception were identical, which is manifestly not so. The new background brings to light new aspects of what we had committed to memory; conversely these, in turn, shed their light on the new background, thus arousing more complex anticipations. Thus, the reader in establishing these interrelations between past, present and future, actually causes the text to reveal its potential multiplicity of connections. These connections are the product of the reader's mind working on the raw material of the text, though they are not the text itself (Berger, 1988: 192).

The narrator explains his process of creating a whole story by bringing into play his “far-off” memories “that must have stuck in (his) mind from small-town tales when (he) was a boy” (Anderson, 1969: 284). Then he unites these memories of the past with the vision he has acquired from the woman’s dead body. And as the last step of the creation of this story, he enriches his memories and vision with his imagination. Therefore, his creation is likened to the notes of a piece of music as follows:

The whole thing, the story of the old women's death, was to me as I grew older like music heard from far off. The notes had to be picked up slowly one at a time. Something had to be understood (Anderson, 1969: 294).

According to Zanger, the narrator’s experience while he “creates and constructs... the story of Mrs. Grimes before [the reader’s] eyes, from fragments of his own experience” as a “creative act” can be accepted as a “generic American typology” (Zanger, 1990:25). Because this experience leads the narrator not only to the creation of a new story but also to the creation of a new identity for the dead woman.

As a matter of fact, this creative process that the narrator undergoes in the production of the story provides a typical example for those texts that Roland Barthes defines as “scriptible” or “writerly” that encourage the reader to become a producer, a writer. As Lodge explains, “By breaking down the text into small units or lexias, Barthes aims to show how they carry many different meanings simultaneously on different levels in different codes” (Lodge, 1988: 146). Hence as the reader adopts different viewpoints, the meaning of the text is produced in a multitude of fragments which have no inherent unity. Obviously, this case fully applies to *Death in the Woods* with the dead body perceived and interpreted in various ways and finally served up in the form of a story. Because as Barthes claims in ‘The Death of the Author’; “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author” (Barthes, 1988: 150). The interpretation of Anderson about Mrs. Grimes’ identity and life comes to an end. Now, it is the turn of the reader to give a new meaning to the dead body of Mrs. Grimes and to give birth to a new vision about the protagonist. In this way, the reader of the dead body is also reborn in the identity of the author of the dead body and its story.

At this juncture, it would be relevant to point to the complex structure of *Death in the Woods*. On the previous pages, it was mentioned how Iser positions a literary work between two poles namely, the aesthetic and the artistic. While analyzing the story from these two reverse approaches, one comes to realize that here, as argued in this paper, two poles are combined and, as suggested in this paper, the story can be interpreted on two levels. First of all, the dead body comprising the aesthetic approach generates multiple texts by its various beholders. Thus, it is both read and interpreted as multiple texts. On the second level, the dead

body is transformed into a literary text and, it becomes a story created by its author. In this way, the texted narrative comprises the artistic approach.

### **The Story as a Metafiction**

Another characteristic of *Death in the Woods* is that the narrative does not just tell us the old woman's story, but gives us a detailed explanation over and over. Therefore, the structure of the story is based on repetition. In the construction of this experimental form based on repetitions, there is a preference for "turning back towards the stuff of history itself and reinvigorating it with an imagination tempered by [...] fictional experimentation" (Scholes, 1980: 4). Robert Scholes terms this form "experimental fabulation" or "metafiction" as one of the special and important features of the fabulative movement. The narrator, while re-creating the story years later, makes it clear that the old woman's story is closer to fiction than truth: "I have just suddenly now, after all these years, remembered her and what happened. It's a story" (Anderson, 1969: 283). In this fictional story, the narrator admits that he turns back to his own old times to re-recreate the story by mingling in his remembrances and feelings: "I wonder how I know all of this. It must have stuck in my mind from small-town tales when I was a boy" (Anderson, 1969: 284). He also identifies his own past experiences with those of the woman in this process of re-creation.

Although the narrator suggests that the "fragments" of the story were "picked up slowly, long afterwards" (Anderson, 1969: 283) from his own experiences, as he re-tells the story years later, he deems his own story more complete and satisfying than the version his brother related on the night the body was found:

I went with my brother to distribute the rest of his papers and when we got home it was my brother who told the story... It may have been I was not satisfied with the way he told it... You see it is likely that, when my brother told the story... I did not think he got the point. He was too young and so was I. I am only explaining why I was dissatisfied then and have been ever since. I speak of that only that you may understand why I have been impelled to try to tell the simple story over again (Anderson, 1969: 293-294).

We can deduce from all this that in the construction of the story, the re-formulated story of the narrator is the sub-text which is enclosed in other texts; the story of the narrator materializes in the form of an innermost text enfolded within the intertexts of the brother, the marshal and the townsmen, and all these enclosed in still another text which is the frame text that the reader reads as the story entitled *Death in the Woods* by Sherwood Anderson. Hence, this is the process of re-creation with which the crafted and fictionalized story becomes a product of beauty, mystery and meaning, namely a consummate work of art.

### **Conclusion**

Since the purpose of this paper is to analyse Sherwood Anderson's story *Death in the Woods* from the perspective of the reader-response criticism, throughout the story the identity of the protagonist Mrs. Grimes embodies different kinds of texts to be approached, comprehended and commented on from different perspectives. As a rhetorical text, she is depicted as a victimized woman within a patriarchal society whose sole purpose in life is to serve for and nurture the living bodies in relation with her female-gender role. However, after her death she becomes a dialectical text to illuminate different visions of various beholders and mainly, she becomes a source of inspiration for the artistic development of the narrator. Therefore, the dead body becomes a text which incorporates various meanings and which prompts its beholders and readers to produce different interpretations that sometimes clash with each other. While reading the dead body as a text and a textual art object, the role of the reader is also significant since the active participation of the reader/narrator and the functional

use of his imagination becomes an occasion for him to transform the old dead body of Mrs. Grimes into a textual art object and at last an inspiration for the reconstruction of her story.

It is suggested that the purpose of the reader-response critics is to “show that a work gives readers something to do, and to describe what the reader does by way of response” (Murfin, 1994:130). In the case of my own reading, I can say that Anderson’s story *Death in the Woods* gave me ‘something to do’ and my ‘way of response’ has been to produce this article. Roland Barthes also accepts each reading as a rewriting and this paper has been my interpretation, in other words, my rewriting of *Death in the Woods* upon my beholding/reading the text in print, just like the story in question itself is Anderson’s interpretation/rewriting of the narrator’s perception/reading of the textual body discovered in the woods.

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