

# Draftings In

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Volume 4  
Number 1 *Draftings In Interactive Reading*

Article 2

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1089

## Prefatory Note

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### Recommended Citation

Hovet, Theodore (1089) "Prefatory Note," *Draftings In*: Vol. 4 : No. 1 , Article 2.  
Available at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/draftings/vol4/iss1/2>

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# Prefatory Note

The method of reading and writing about literature is undergoing a major change. The root of this change rests in the "structural" revolution that swept through the physical and social sciences early in this century. Rather than seeing the physical world as a collection of objects "out there," the structuralists demonstrated that "reality" was partially created by human consciousness. To quote Terence Hawks on the structural revolution, "any observer is bound to *create* something of what he observes. Accordingly, the *relationship* between observer and observed achieves a kind of primacy. It becomes the only thing that *can* be observed" (17). This revolution affected the humanities much later than the sciences. Until quite recently, literary study, for example, remained wedded to the notion that a literary text was a kind of object which existed independently of the reader. In the 1970s, however, the emergence of feminist and minority criticism, the development of reader-response theory, and the importation of deconstruction from France pushed literary study away from this "formalist" view toward a reader oriented method. The literary text is considered as much a creation of the reader/observer as of the author; therefore a major object of literary study is to examine the relationship between the reader and the text.

A brief description of one such influential reader oriented method clarifies this approach. It derives from the English program at Carnegie Mellon University and is described by Gary Waller, Kathleen McCormick, and Linda Flower in *The Lexington Reader and Reading Texts*. They instruct teachers and students on how to study their relationship to the literary work and how to assess the effect of that relationship on its meaning. They point out that both the author and the reader bring to the work a "general" and "literary repertoire." The author writes into a work a personal value system and a cultural ideology (the general repertoire) and assumptions about the purpose and conventions of literature (the literary repertoire). The reader in turn reads into the work a personal value system and cultural ideology (a general repertoire) and assumptions about the purpose and conventions of literature (the literary repertoire). Moreover, as these textbooks demonstrate, author and reader have writing and reading "strategies." The author may be attempting to change the reader's values, to undermine the influence of a previous writer, or to exorcize the ghosts of childhood experience. The reader may be attempting to find answers to personal problems, to broaden knowledge of the world, or to pass an exam. The repertoire and strategy of writer and reader, in other

words, will seldom conform, and whatever "meaning" the work has will emerge as reader and writer "interact" with each other within the text.

In traditional or formalist literary study, the student was usually taught that his or her personal response to the work was either irrelevant or a gross distortion of its meaning. The foundation of interactive reading is to recognize that a work has no single meaning, that the author is unaware of many of the possible meanings in the work, and that its immediate meaning is the creation of each reader. The key to reading a work, therefore, is not to dismiss one's responses as irrelevant to the work but to surface and "to own" the repertoires and reading strategies which created that response and to compare them to what we can learn about the author's. Thus writing about a literary work entails a certain amount of confession about experiences that shape one's view of the world and forthright acknowledgment of the values that dictate one's response to a literary work.

This interaction between the reader and the text is what is called a "strong reading," that is, the reader realizes that a literary work tries to get him or her to respond in a particular way, but the reader *then chooses to use an awareness of his or her own repertoire and reading strategy "to resist the prescribed way of reading."* In short, the reader becomes "a strong or independent reader" (an empowered reader, to use Robert Scholes's term) who defines "a particular perspective on the text," develops it "persuasively," and "articulates its implications" (Waller 13-15). While this might seem to some an unobjective or biased way of reading, proponents of interactive reading insist that formalist readings are equally biased--only the biases are concealed or repressed beneath a rhetoric of objectivity. In other words, honesty demands a strong reading rather than a deceptively objective one. Even more importantly, an interactive reading will elicit meanings from the text which have been concealed behind rhetorical strategies.

The following essays written by graduate students at the University of Northern Iowa in the course American Realism and Naturalism demonstrate interactive reading. More specifically, they demonstrate how an acknowledgment of general repertoires, ideologies, and reading strategies can surface provocative new readings of even the most over-worked "classics."

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