

Reading the Dead in “Death in the Woods”

Yasemin Güniz SERTEL¹

Abstract

This paper examines one of Sherwood Anderson’s stories “Death in the Woods” in the light of reader-response criticism. Since reader-response criticism emphasizes the necessity of the active participation the reader while reading a text and, asserts that a text activates a reader, one of the characters in “Death in the Woods” becomes a textual body within the story and, thus she is perceived and consequently commented on and recounted from different perspectives.

Keywords: *Textual body, implied reader, actual reader, multiplicity of visions, artistic pole, aesthetic pole, scriptible and writerly texts.*

Özet

Bu çalışma, Sherwood Anderson’ın “Death in the Woods” adlı kısa öyküsünü okur odaklı kuram ışığında incelemektedir. Okur odaklı kuram çalışmalarında okuyucunun aktif katılımının gerekliliği öykü içerisindeki belli karakterlerin metin olarak görülmesini ve böylece farklı bakış açılarıyla farklı şekillerde yorumlanmasını sağlar. Öykünün okur odaklı incelenmesi yapılırken Stanley Fish, Roland Barthes, Wolfgang Iser gibi bellibaşlı kuramcılarının görüşleri temel alınmıştır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: *Textual body, implied reader, actual reader, multiplicity of visions, artistic pole, aesthetic pole, scriptible and writerly texts.*

¹ İstanbul Üniversitesi, Edebiyat Fakültesi, Amerikan Kültürü ve Edebiyatı Anabilim Dalı
E-mail: ygunizk@hotmail.com

Reader-response criticism emphasizes the necessity of the active participation of the reader while reading a text, and asserts that a text activates the reader and illuminates him in his direction of response. In *The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach*, Wolfgang Iser mentions the "strange situation" of the reader during his participation with the text 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 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 in Lodge, 1988: 201)

This "strange situation" has also been the reader's "strange situation" while reading Sherwood Anderson's story "Death in the Woods," and this article is produced as a result of a desire "to talk about what I have read" throughout the story in the light of reading response criticism. "Death in the Woods" explains the deceptively simple story of the life and death of Mary Grimes; a poor and downtrodden farm woman. The narrator, who is an adolescent boy at the time of these events, observes the frozen body of Mary Grimes, and this experience results in his development as a man and artist. Eventually, he combines the fragments of her life story, which becomes mysterious as he explains it years later.

The narrator depicts the central character of the story as an anonymous old woman who periodically comes to town to sell eggs and in return buy a few supplies. The old woman's husband, Jake Grimes, has a reputation as a horse thief in the town. They had known each other when she was a "bound girl" (Anderson in Cochrane, 1969: 284), an orphan working for a German farmer. There were some rumors that the farmer also sexually harassed and maybe even raped her. After her marriage with Jake Grimes, they had a son and a daughter and Mary Grimes' life was devoted to nourishing the others: "She had to scheme all her life about getting things fed... She had got the habit of feeding anyway – that was fixed." (Anderson in Cochrane, 1969: 285-286) The story begins on a snowy winter day when Mary Grimes goes to town with her husband's dogs to exchange a few eggs with some supplies. The meat scraps she got from the butcher become a heavy bag on her back and she decides to take a shortcut through some woods in order to get home before dark. On the way home, she stops to rest and falls asleep under a tree. However, she will never wake up from that sleep due to the snow. The

hungry dogs that accompany her kill a few rabbits to quench their hunger while she sleeps. Disturbed by her immobility, they are excited and begin to dance around her in a “kind of death ceremony.” (Anderson in Cochrane, 1969: 289) When she eventually dies in her sleep, the dogs drag the dead body in order to reach the food bag tied to her back; they tear her dress, take the food, but do not touch her body. Later, a local hunter finds the frozen body of Mary Grimes and reports that the frozen body belonged to a beautiful, young girl. Excited by the news, the narrator and his brother get to the clearing to view the body; and it is the first naked woman the narrator has ever seen. The next day, he hears bits of her life story around town and years later, he remembers and recounts the story of Mary Grimes’ death.

Mary Grimes, who becomes the subject-matter of the story, also becomes a ‘text’ within the story since she is perceived and consequently commented on and recounted from different perspectives. In *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of the Seventeenth Century Literature*, Stanley Fish suggests his preference for literary texts that force readers to produce meaning, and he contrasts two different literary texts; the rhetorical and the dialectical. (Murfin in Schwarz, 1994: 127) In Anderson’s story “Death in the Woods,” it is possible for the reader to trace the qualities of both kinds of texts in Mary Grimes’ textual identity. The rhetorical text according to Fish “reflects and reinforces opinions that readers already hold,” whereas the dialectical text “prod(s) and provoke(s) the reader.” (Murfin in Schwarz, 1994: 127) A dialectical text, “rather than presenting an opinion as if it were truth, challenges readers to discover truths on their own.” (Murfin in Schwarz, 1994: 127) The rhetorical aspect of Mary Grimes’ textual existence is presented through her female-gender role in the story. Throughout the story, she is assigned the role of providing one of the basic life sources; she becomes the nurturer of both the animate and inanimate lives, and woman’s such nurturing position is accepted as a norm even in the society she lives in. This perspective is reinforced even on rhetorical ground:

[...] a literary work [...] refers to the extra-literary world by selecting certain norms, value systems or ‘world views’. These norms are concepts of reality which help human beings to make sense of [...] their experience [...] each norm asserts certain values at the expense of others, and each tends to contract the image of human nature to a single principle or perspective. The reader is therefore impelled by the unfinished nature of the text to relate the values of the hero to incidents. (Selden, Widdowson, Brooker, 1997: 57)

Thus, Mary Grimes’ role as a provider of food and a nurturer is closely tied to her gender role. In a sense, she, in her simple common role of womanhood, is depicted as a simple allegory of nurturing:

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 in Cochrane, 1969: 294)

However, there is no emotional, nurturing quality to her constant feeding of others; in fact, she views this role both as a duty and also a burden; "How was she going to get everything fed? – that was her problem." (Anderson in Cochrane, 1969: 286) The theme of Mary Grimes' role as a provider of food is reinforced by her role as an object of sexual desire. She becomes a version of nurturing the physical requirements of the male figures around her. Thus, feeding becomes a metaphor for even sex: "Thank heaven, she did not have to feed her husband – in a certain way. That hadn't lasted long after their marriage and after the babies come." (Anderson in Cochrane, 1969: 286)

On another level, when, in her death, Mary Grimes becomes an artistic source for the writer, her dead body can be perceived as a dialectical text: "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 in Cochrane, 1969: 293) That moment becomes significant, because the dead body as a dialectical text "prods and provokes" its reader; the adolescent boy. (Murfin in Schwarz, 1994: 127) Fascinated by the nakedness, the boy "discovers truths of [his] own" about his inclination to become an artist, namely, a writer. Through reconstructing her tale over time, the narrator transforms the old woman's life and death into a piece of art; that is the story. Mary Grimes, who is depicted as a simple and common woman at the beginning of the story, becomes an immortal art object; a story when its reader realizes his capability 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 in Cochrane, 1969: 282, 283)

Therefore, as Sarah Madsen Hardy suggests, the naked dead body becomes "transformational to the narrator as a man, in terms of the development of his idea of womanhood. It is also transformational to him as an artist, in terms of the development of his ideas of what makes a powerful story." (Hardy, 2000:12) 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, [...] may be 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 in Schwarz,1994: 127-128)

The narrator, who is transformed from an adolescent boy into a mature artist, rejects the general opinions about Mary Grimes, his art object, while reading her dead body. For him, she is not an old, common, simple woman as accepted by the others: "She was an old woman... All country and small-town people have seen such old women..." (Anderson in Cochrane, 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 in Cochrane, 1969: 292)

Besides the differences between the 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," a literary theory based mainly on the idea that "everybody sees literature from his own "angle of vision" and responds emotionally to literature through his own system of values and associations." (Hirsch in Lodge,1988: 231) The doctrine of critical relativity is reinforced by Stephen Booth's emphasis on "multiplicity of organizations" which becomes the results of reading experience. While reading a text, "multiplicity of organizations" provide the multiplicity of visions of various readers which generally do not make "complete sense," and which sometimes even seem "curiously contradictory." (Murfin in Schwarz,1994: 127) The shift in the various meanings of text due to the various responses of readers can be summarized as follows:

We can say that the [literary work] has no real existence until it is read; its meaning can only be discussed by its readers. We differ about interpretations only because our ways of reading differ. It is the reader who applies the code in which the message is written and in this way actualizes what would otherwise remain only potentially meaningful. (Selden, Widdowson, Brooker, 1997: 48)

The "multiplicity of organizations" with "curiously contradictory" perspectives can also be traced in the responses directed to Mary Grimes' dead body. Towards the end of

the story, when the news about a woman's death is spread in the town, the narrator and his brother join a party of men who go out into the woods clearing where a hunter has discovered the body of an unidentified woman. 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, but the dogs had not touched her body... 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 in Cochrane, 1969: 291-292)

This is the perspective of "the crowd of men and boys" (Anderson in Cochrane, 1969: 292). On the other hand, the hunter's perspective is totally contradictory because he describes the dead body as belonging to a young girl. When the hunter "came into a grocery and told his story," (Anderson in Cochrane, 1969: 291) that is his interpretation, he declares, "I didn't see any wounds. She was a beautiful young girl. Her face was buried in the snow." (Anderson in Cochrane, 1969: 291) According to Colquitt, the hunter "seemingly misreads" the dead body. This is because, although death usually corrupts the body, in the hunter's vision the woman is instead "restored to youthful perfection." (Colquitt, 1986:182) 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 strange mystical feeling...I had seen everything, had seen the oval in the snow like a miniature race-track,... had seen the white bare young-looking shoulders, had heard the whispered comments of the men. (Anderson in Cochrane, 1969: 291-292-293)

Another perspective about the dead body belongs to the brother of the narrator. Although the reader is not openly told about the brother's interpretation, it is obvious that he, too, is influenced by the scene:

My brother and I stood near the tree, beneath which the old woman had died... My brother and I were silent... Neither of us had ever seen a woman's body before. It may have been the snow, clinging to the frozen flesh, that made it look so white and lovely, so like marble... (Anderson in Cochrane, 1969: 292)

Therefore, 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 in Lodge, 1988:149) These various and contradictory perspectives are the exemplifications of Wolfgang Iser’s theory in *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*. According to Iser, the term reader can be subdivided into “implied reader” and “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.” (Selden, Widdowson, Brooker, 1997: 56) In “Death in the Woods,” the hunter and the narrator are presented as the implied readers because they are active 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.” (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.” (Selden, Widdowson, Brooker, 1997: 56) Hence, in the story the marshal and the town’s men can be exemplified as the actual readers because they are not influenced by the sexuality of the dead body as the implied readers; but 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 in Cochrane, 1969: 293)

When the dead body is connected with the memories and events about her past, she is immediately identified as Mary Grimes, the old, suffering woman whose life was devoted to feeding:

The woman who died was one destined to feed animal life. Anyway, that is all she ever did... Her daughter had died in childhood and with her one son she had no articulate relations. On the night when she died she was hurrying homeward, bearing on her body food for animal life. (Anderson in Cochrane, 1969: 294)

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 in Lodge, 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, the narrator and his brother. 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 realizes the combination of the text and the imagination of the reader which is called "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 in Lodge, 1988: 192)

The virtual dimension in "Death in the Woods" is the unity achieved when the textual dead body of Mary 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:

She might have been murdered and someone might spring out from behind a tree and murder her. In a woods, in the late afternoon, when the trees are all bare and there is white snow on the ground, when all is silent, something creepy steals over the mind and the body. If something strange or uncanny has happened in the neighborhood all you think about is getting away from there as fast as you can. (Anderson in Cochrane, 1969: 292)

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. At this point, it becomes inevitable to refer to Adena Rosmarin's suggestion: "[...] 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 in Schwarz, 1994: 125) Therefore, in their viewing of the dead body, the real beauty that is perceived is not objective, but created 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 in Lodge, 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 the fascinated beholders. However, it is the nakedness of the dead body which makes the beholders 'misread' this textual body. As a matter of fact, the naked body is transformed into a 'nude' when it is found, according to John Berger in *Ways of Seeing*. Berger asserts that "to be naked is to be oneself" as Mary Grimes before she was found out. 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. (The sight of it as an object stimulates the use of it as an object.)" (Berger in Peach, 1998: 100) Therefore, when the body is discovered and witnessed by men in the woods, it becomes a beautiful and charming object of sexual desire at least for the hunter and the narrator and, it becomes a 'nude' in the words of Berger. Thus, it becomes a textual art object created by its beholders.

Besides the creation of this textual art object, there is also another creation within "Death in the Woods"; that is the creation of a story as suggested by Lawry: "'Death in the Woods" is structured by the narrator's progress from recorder to creator." (Lawry, 1959: 308) As an adolescent boy who is fascinated by the first naked body he has ever seen, the narrator feels a need to understand Mary Grimes' life and death. Eventually he finds satisfaction and beauty in the "completion" he finally brings to the story as a story, without paying attention to its factuality:

You see, it is likely that, when my brother told the story, that night when we got home and my mother and sister sat listening, 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 in Cochrane, 1969: 294)

However, in order to transform the scene he witnesses in the woods into a complete work and thus maintain a wholeness, the narrator has to blend the vision, his memories and imagination. As a matter of fact, 'this multiplicity of connections' provides the materials or "the background" in Iser's words, of the story. This situation is also explained by Iser 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. (Iser in Lodge, 1988: 192)

The narrator explains his process of creating a "whole" story by combining his "far-off" memories, as he states at the beginning of the story: "(I wonder how I know all this. It must have stuck in my mind from small-town tales when I was a boy)" (Anderson in Cochrane, 1969: 284), his understanding the vision and use of imagination by comparing them to the notes of a piece of music as follows:

The whole thing, the story of the old woman'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 in Cochrane, 1969: 294)

On the other hand, Iser also talks about "gaps" or "blanks" which create an influence on the reader to a great extent. In order to maintain a 'completion' or wholeness in a work, the reader has to combine what the gaps separate as fragments and fill in the blanks:

These gaps have a different effect on the process of anticipation and retrospection, and thus on the 'gestalt' of the virtual dimension, for they may be filled in different ways. For this reason, 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 other possibilities: as he reads he will make his own decision as to how the gaps is to be filled. (Iser in Lodge, 1988: 193)

In "Death in the Woods," the narrator picks up fragments, fills all the gaps or blanks with those fragments and eventually creates his own story:

The scene in the forest had become for me, without my knowing it, the foundation for the real story I am trying to tell. The fragments, you see, had to be picked up slowly, long afterwards. (Anderson in Cochrane, 1969: 293)

As a matter of fact, this creative process that the narrator undergoes and the production of the story is also a typical example for the “scriptible” or “writerly” text of Roland Barthes, which encourages the reader to become a producer, a writer. 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. (Barthes in Lodge, 1988: 146) Hence, as the reader adapts different viewpoints, the meaning of the text is produced in a multitude of fragments which have no inherent unity. Obviously, this case is applied in “Death in the Woods” when the dead body is perceived and interpreted in various ways and finally produced as a story. Actually, this case is opposite of what Barthes mentions in *Death of the Author*: “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author.” (Barthes in Lodge, 1988:150) On the contrary, in “Death in the Woods,” the birth of the author is at the cost of the death of the reader. In other words, the reader of the dead body is reborn in the identity of the author of the dead body and its story.

At this point, it is worth mentioning the complex structure of “Death in the Woods.” On the previous pages, it is mentioned how Iser divides a literary work into two poles as the aesthetic and the artistic. While analyzing the story from these two various approaches, one also realizes that these two poles are combined since it is proved in this paper that the story can be interpreted on two levels; the dead body is both read and interpreted as multiple texts by the various beholders, and transformed into a literary text, a story created by its author.

Another characteristic of “Death in the Woods” is that the story does not just tell the old woman’s tale, but re-tells it. Therefore, the structure of the story is based on repetition. In the construction of this experimental form, 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 calls such a form “experimental fabulation” or “metafiction” as one of the special and important features of the fabulative movement. The narrator, while re-telling the story years later, makes it clear that the old woman’s tale is closer to fiction than truth: “...I have just suddenly now, after all these years, remembered her and what happened. It is a story.” (Anderson in Cochrane, 1969: 283) In this fictional story, the narrator admits that he turns back to his own history -(his-story) and recounts it by relying on his own experiences: “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 in Cochrane, 1969: 284) He also identifies his own past experiences with those of the woman in this process of re-creation:

I knew all about it afterward, when I grew to be a man, because once in a woods in Illionis, on another winter night, I saw a pack of dogs act just like that. The dogs were waiting for me to die as they had waited for the old woman that night when I was a child, but when it happened to me I was a young man and had no intention whatever of dying. (Anderson in Cochrane, 1969: 290)

Although the narrator suggests that the "fragments" of the story were "picked up slowly, long afterwards" (Anderson in Cochrane, 1969: 293) 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 told 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. a thing so complete has its own beauty. I shall not try to emphasize the point. 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 in Cochrane, 1969: 293-294)

Therefore, in the construction of the story, the re-formulated story of the narrator is the subtext which is enclosed by other texts; the story of the narrator appears in the form of an innermost text within the inter-texts of the brother and the marshal and the townsmen within another text which is the enclosing or frame text that the reader reads as the story of Sherwood Anderson, "Death in the Woods." 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 work of art. Iser explains this process as follows:

In a process of trial and error, we organize and reorganize the various data offered us by the text. These are the given factors, the fixed point on which we base our 'interpretation', trying to fit them together in the way we think the author meant them to be fitted. For to perceive, a beholder must create his own experience. And his creation must include relations comparable to

those which the original producer underwent. They are not the same in any literal sense. But with the perceiver, as with the artist, there must be an ordering of the elements of the whole that is in form, although not in details, the same as the process of organization the creator of the work consciously experienced. Without an act of recreation the object is not perceived as a work of art. (Iser in Lodge, 1988: 199)

Narration is another striking stylistic feature of “Death in the Woods.” The story is narrated by a man remembering an incident that happened in his hometown when he was a child. However, he is both a witness and also a participant in some events such as the discovery of the dead body. This position of the narrator within the story is perceived as a trick and named as the “unreliable narrator” which is explained as follows:

One needs only mention the very simple trick, so often employed by novelists, whereby the author himself takes part in the narrative, thus establishing perspectives which would not have arisen out of the mere narration of the events described. Wayne Booth once called this the technique of the ‘unreliable narrator’, to show how the extent to which a literary device can counter expectations arising out of the literary text. The figure of the narrator may act in permanent opposition to the impressions we might otherwise form. (Iser in Lodge, 1988: 200)

Mailloux suggests 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 in Schwarz, 1994:130) In the case of my reading, 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 states “each reading is a rewriting” (Barthes in Lodge, 1988: 147) and this paper has been my interpretation, in other words, my rewriting of my beholding the text of “Death in the Woods,” just like the story in question itself is Anderson’s interpretation or rewriting of the narrator’s reading the textual body discovered in the woods.

WORKS CITED:

- Anderson, Sherwood: “Death in the Woods”, *The Penguin Book of American Short Stories*, (London, Penguin Books, 1969)
- Barthes, Roland: “The Death of the Author”, *Modern Criticism and Theory – A Reader*, Ed. by David Lodge, (London, Longman, 1988)
- Berger, John: “Ways of Seeing”, *Women in Culture: A Woman’s Studies Anthology*, Ed. by Lucinda Joy Peach, (Malden, Massachusetts, Oxford, Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1998)

- Brooker, Peter, Selden, Raman, Widdowson, Peter: *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, (London, New York, Toronto, Prentice Hall, 1997)
- Colquitt, Clare: "The Reader as Voyeur: Complicitous Transformations in 'Death in the Woods', *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol.32. No.2, Summer 1986, pp. 175-190.
- Hardy, Sarah Madsen: *Short Stories for Students*, (Gale, 2000)
- Hirsch, E.D.: "Faulty Perspectives", *Modern Criticism and Theory – A Reader*, Ed. by David Lodge, (London, Longman, 1988)
- Iser, Wolfgang: "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach", *Modern Criticism and Theory – A Reader*, Ed. by David Lodge, (London, Longman, 1988)
- Lawry, John S.: "'Death in the Woods' and the Artist's Self in Sherwood Anderson", *PMLA*, Vol.74, No.3, June, 1959, pp.306-311.
- Murfin, Ross C.: "Reader-Response Criticism and 'The Dead'", *The Dead – James Joyce*, Ed. by Daniel R. Schwarz, (Boston, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1994)
- Scholes, Robert: *Fabulation and Metafiction*, (London, University of Illinois Press, 1980)