

Thinking and Feeling Poetry:
Exploring Meanings Aloud

Amy Eva-Wood
University of Washington
aevawood@u.washington.edu

Abstract

What role can emotions play in informing readers' interpretations of poems? This think aloud study, with a quasi-experimental design, featured 10 college freshmen randomly assigned to two groups. The think aloud (TA) group verbalized their thoughts as they read two poems while the think and feel aloud (TFA) group verbalized both their thoughts and their feelings. Students prompted to think and feel aloud identified more poetic devices and reported higher interest in the poems than students in the think aloud group. The TFA group also made more elaborative comments than those in the TA group. These speculative and exploratory responses often demonstrated a deeper understanding of the poems. The study's findings support and illuminate Miall and Kuiken's (1994) defamiliarization theory, which suggests that readers can use their emotional responses to help them comprehend poems.

Understanding implies the full impact of the sensuous, emotional, as well as the intellectual force of the word. —L. M. Rosenblatt

Poetry intimates, charms, grips, even startles. It unearths the shadowy contours of private experience. It invents and reinvents emotional qualities previously inexplicable, inscrutable. With their masterful word weavings, poets beckon their readers to enter into a verbal labyrinth, to journey and explore, to excavate meaning. However, in many cases readers resist the invitation. For many readers, poetry baffles, deceives, frustrates, and disappoints. As they stumble and blunder their way through dense poetic language, they begin to view poems as inaccessible. How might readers react if they were not only given permission but prompted to use their affective responses while “making sense” of poetry? If they relied more deliberately on affect to scout out poetic territory, would they find themselves more inclined to engage with the cognitive demands of the process? Louise Rosenblatt (1995) suggests that literature provides students with the opportunity “to think rationally within an emotionally colored context” (p. 217). Literary texts can serve as bases for the legitimate negotiation of affective and cognitive processes. As a part of literary response, emotions can serve as valuable signals, moving readers toward deeper understanding of poetry.

Beyond aesthetic appreciation and affective response, poetry reading holds fundamental educational value. When readers are attentive to poetry, they can develop a thoughtful sensitivity to language that may inform their critical orientations to other texts and, at the same time, cultivate a sharpened awareness of their own use of written and

spoken discourse. Haas and Flower (1988) claim that “being able to see one's own text and the texts of others as discourse acts—rather than bodies of facts and information—is desirable, useful, and important for reading and writing of all kinds” (p. 181).

However, in a recent think aloud study, a majority of high school students failed to characterize poetry as a genre distinct from prose (Harker, 1994). Few researchers, in fact, have attempted to identify and characterize comprehension strategies particular to literary genres. Zwaan (1993) and Miall & Kuiken (1994) have proposed theoretical models of literary response that begin to account for the role of affect in readers' responses, yet this field of research continues to benefit from further empirical work—particularly around readers' responses to poetry.

How students engage with poetry

Struggling student novices generally respond to poetry by expressing confusion and dismissing the task (e. g., “I don't know!”) or by simply bypassing a poem's complexities altogether and translating it into “plain sense.” I. A. Richards (1929) defined poetry's “plain sense” as “its prose sense, its plain, overt meaning, as a set of ordinary intelligible English sentences, taken quite apart from any further poetic significance” (p. 12). In his poetry think aloud study with high school readers, Harker (1994) found that the majority of his participants read poetry as I.A Richards described. They approached it as if it were prose, “as if it were some aberrant form of language requiring translation into its ‘plain sense’ to be understood” (p. 212). How does this relate to page 2?

Joan Peskin (1998) contrasted expert and novice poetry readers and discovered that despite novices' awareness of poetic qualities, they lacked the facility of their counterparts to engage with a poem's contradictions (i.e., “binary oppositions”). E.A.

Earthman's (1992) think aloud study with college freshmen and English graduate students revealed that freshman readings were more "closed" while graduate students read in a more "open" manner. College freshmen demonstrated quick and simple one-dimensional interpretations, and like Peskin's novices, were "unwilling or unable" to engage with the texts' ironies (p. 381). Graduate students, on the other hand, displayed more comfort with ambiguity and a willingness to accommodate various levels of meaning in their analyses.

If novices, like more experienced readers, could better sense and appreciate the rich connotative nature of words and language, they might be less intimidated when befuddled by a poem, and might value the meaning-making process as an open, exploratory experience with words. Certainly the academic focus on the literary terminology of the genre holds value. However, emphasis on literary terms like *iambic pentameter*, *metonymy*, *extended metaphor*, and the like has not necessarily quelled students' fears of the word maze called poetry.

Reading poetry: The role of emotion

Although research in text theory (e.g., Kintsch, 1988) has addressed the cognitive processes that take place during the comprehension of texts, this work does not account for the more affective reading processes associated with literary genres. Miall and Kuiken's (1994) defamiliarization theory describes literary texts as distinctive from other texts. According to this theory, literature's stylistic devices (e.g., metaphors, alliteration, phonemic and grammatical deviations) challenge readers to abandon prototypical understandings of words. The disconcerting process of departing from normal language conventions evokes a range of *feelings* that, in turn, stimulate "personal perspectives" and

“personal meanings.” With general text theory, the function of style is to “economize comprehension,” but with the defamiliarization theory of literature, the function of style is to “complicate comprehension” (p. 344). Hoffstaedter's (1987) description of “poetic processing” supplements the theory above. She states:

The poetic processing of texts is seen as a creative process, which can take place when the everyday routine of text processing is disrupted. A further condition of the occurrence of poetic text processing is that factors leading to such a disruption do not result in a total breakdown but provoke the reader to attempt to bridge the disruption. (p. 75)

Therefore, stylistic devices such as metaphors may “engage the reader’s feelings and evoke less prototypic, more personal meanings” (p. 341) as they prompt the reader to reinterpret and relocate paradoxical representations of language. Miall and Kuiken (1994) claim that poetry “overcomes custom, it defamiliarizes, and it restores feelings that were blunted and decayed” (p. 343). Their theory, however, does not move beyond a focus on textual properties to address specific context conditions, or dispositions of the reader.

Recent trends in literary theory emphasize the role of a reader’s emotions in the process of literary analysis (Feagin, 1996; Gerrig, 1993). For example, Susan Feagin (1996) proposes that readers should examine these emotional responses by asking themselves, “What warrants this reaction?” In posing such a question, they may be able to track their responses back to specific words or images. Readers’ careful monitoring of their emotional responses, therefore, could be the key to unlocking meanings in poems and other literary works. If this is the case, readers may be able to gain facility with poetic interpretation by initially identifying their feelings and tracing them to textual

sources. Thus, a focus on feelings might help students bypass the initial cognitive pressure to determine “the meaning” in a poem.

Method

Overview of Study

Given the potential role that affect might play in readers’ interpretations of poetry, I designed a think aloud study with two conditions. One group of first-year college students received prompts only to think aloud as they read two poems. The second group of students received prompts to think and feel aloud while reading the same two poems. This design best addressed the study’s framing question: What influence does directing attention to feeling have on readers’ responses to poetry? To examine the role of affect on participants’ responses, I compared protocols in both conditions while focusing on four specific queries:

- ◆ Will students cued to feel aloud recognize more stylistic devices (e.g., figurative language, rhyme, diction, allusion, and tone) than those students asked only to think aloud?
- ◆ Will students prompted to feel aloud report greater interest in the poems than those simply directed to think aloud?
- ◆ How might student responses in the think aloud versus think and feel aloud conditions differ as they explore themes in the poems?
- ◆ Will students directed to feel aloud produce longer protocols demonstrating deeper, more elaborative responses than those asked only to think aloud?

Participants

Like other researchers who have conducted think aloud studies with poetry (Peskin, 1998; Earthman, 1992), I selected my participant sample from a population of college freshmen. To represent the average student's response to poetry, I chose 10 non-English majors who rarely read poetry outside of a classroom setting. The 10 participants (5 men and 5 women) represented varying ethnicities and majors and reported verbal SAT scores below 670 (see Table 1). With purposive sampling procedures, the study's two conditions remain comparable in gender and ethnic representation with SAT scores in each condition averaging around 500 (i.e., think aloud (TA) condition: 526; think and feel aloud (TFA) condition: 516).

Table 1: Participants' Identifying Data

Name	Condition	Gender	Ethnicity	Major	SAT Verbal Score
Mark	TA	Male	Caucasian	Economics	660
Penny	TA	Female	Asian	International Studies	480
John	TA	Male	Asian	Electrical Engineering	450
Julie	TA	Female	Caucasian	Undecided	550
George	TA	Male	Asian	Undecided	490
Anne	TFA	Female	Caucasian	Undecided	430
Kevin	TFA	Male	Caucasian	Undecided	650
Jennifer	TFA	Female	Asian	Computer Engineering	550
Henry	TFA	Male	Asian	Business/Computer Sci.	390
Stephanie	TFA	Female	Asian	Pharmacy	560

Materials

I chose two poems, "There are Mornings" by 1997 Pulitzer Prize winner Lisel Mueller and "Away!" by Robert Frost, to reflect different levels of difficulty and emotional accessibility (see Appendix A). Mueller's free verse served as the more abstract and challenging poem whereas Frost's poem, with its regular rhyme scheme, played the role of the more understandable poem with clearer emotional overtones. By

including a second poem that was more difficult to interpret, I set up a task in which the participants, all non-English majors, might be more likely to express frustration and resignation or to simply produce “plain sense” translations of the poem’s meaning. With this design, I hoped that students prompted to feel aloud might be able to bypass their initial confusion and demonstrate greater facility with both the easy and more difficult poem.

Procedures

In order to study participants’ responses to the poems, I chose to utilize the think aloud methodology. Afflerbach and Johnson (1984) emphasize that think alouds “can provide data on cognitive processes and reader responses that otherwise could be investigated only indirectly” (p. 4). Protocol analysis can, in turn, provide valuable data for the development of instructional strategies (Bereiter & Bird, 1985). Think alouds cannot capture the full range of cognitive and emotive responses a reader may have in a given time frame. However, they do provide investigators with palpable evidence of some of these processes.

To familiarize participants with the methodology, each session commenced with a preparatory think aloud (or think and feel aloud) exercise with a poem (cf., Peskin, 1998). After participants demonstrated a level of comfort and proficiency with the process, they moved on to analyses of the two poems, which were presented individually in counterbalanced order. Each sheet contained the title and text of the poem without any other identifying data, such as the author’s name or the date the poem was written.

Participants in the TA Group received the following instructions before they were audiotaped: “I’d like you to think aloud as you try to make sense of the poems. Say

everything that you are thinking. It's just as if you are 'turning up the volume on [all your thoughts] as they flit through your mind. Don't censor anything'" (cf., Peskin, 1998).

During the TA process, open-ended probes such as "What are you thinking as you read this line/this phrase"? and "What do you think about the poem as a whole?" were used to encourage participant responses.

The TFA Group received directions that accentuated verbalization of feelings as well as thoughts. The directions for the TFA group follow:

Poetry is about the head and the heart. It isn't simply a fact-finding mission, but an experience with language that involves feelings and associations. Share everything that you are thinking and feeling as you read this poem aloud. Pay special attention to feelings you have as they connect to words, phrases, and lines.

Turn up the volume on all these feelings as you explore meanings in this poem. Additional prompts given during the feeling condition included "What feelings do you have when you read this line or this word?" and "What types of feelings do you experience as you reflect on the poem as a whole?"

During think aloud sessions in both conditions, I spoke only to prompt participants (1) when they appeared to be reading to themselves or (2) when they paused for more than three seconds. A semi-structured interview immediately followed the TA and TFA tasks, and featured questions about the nature of the TA (or TFA) process and its possible effects on students' analyses. Other questions focused on each participant's degree of interest, comfort, and confidence with the poems. The interview concluded with participants' accounts of their prior academic experiences with poetry, and provided

supplementary information regarding participants' dispositions and prior knowledge of poetry. For purposes of data analysis, I separated think aloud data from interview data.

Data Analysis

After transcribing protocols verbatim, I established an analysis plan that combined both deductive and inductive approaches. Because this think aloud study simulated an experimental design (think aloud prompts versus think and feel aloud prompts), it lent itself to hypotheses testing regarding the potential contrast between the two conditions. Some of my research questions made direct queries of the data that I verified deductively (e.g., protocol length and participants' recognition of poetic devices). After running word counts to establish the number of words uttered by each participant, I combed the data, noting each time that the participants commented on stylistic elements such as figurative language (metaphor, simile, symbol, and imagery), allusions, diction, rhyme, form/structure, and tone of the poem.

Next, I began a process of "open coding" (Strauss, 1987) where patterns emerged in the participants' responses that I began to categorize inductively. I noted participants' use of several comprehension strategies, and coded four basic categories of comments: (1) meta-level comments (e.g., "I don't know what he means," "I'm confused," "I think I'll read it again"), (2) summarizing/reiterating comments (i.e., paraphrasing or repeating the content of a line), (3) stylistic comments (i.e., recognizing stylistic devices, as discussed above) and (4) elaborative comments (i.e., exploratory responses that moved beyond the texts' literal content). The category of "elaborative comments" emerged during this "open coding" stage as I noted a trend in the TFA group's data to remark in an open and speculative fashion about various aspects of the two poems. This category

became the key analytic fulcrum for my analyses of the qualitative differences between the two conditions.

Finally, I sorted permutations of these elaborative responses into four categories under the heading “elaborative response.” These included elaboration on the speaker’s thoughts or feelings, elaboration on words, elaboration as visualizing, and elaboration as personalizing. Establishing individual computer files on each participant’s elaborative responses, I kept a record of the number of elaborative remarks made, which were parsed into conceptual units based on the four categories listed above. My final list of codes (see Appendix B) includes both those codes established prior to data collection and those created during open coding to capture the types of comprehension strategies and elaborative responses made by the participants. I tested interrater reliability with two minimally trained coders. Interrater agreement was 88%.

Findings

Length of Response

Protocol lengths differed by condition. Word counts on each participant's protocol did not reveal striking individual differences in word production. However, the TFA group distinguished itself from the TA group with 7826 words in total while the TA group’s total number of words was 5553 (over 2000 less). This difference might suggest that the TA participants were less engaged in the interpretive process. However, simple word counts do not adequately represent the content of participants’ responses as some use many words to say very little about the poems. For example, John’s (TA group) word production (1544 words) paralleled those in the TFA group, yet over 40 short phrases in

his protocol were expressions of confusion and frustration rather than interpretive responses.

Recognition of the Author's Craft

Participants in the TFA group identified a greater number of stylistic elements in the two poems than participants in the TA group. The think aloud group acknowledged 30 poetic devices in total while the think and feel aloud group noted 63 devices. Table 2 presents the means and standard deviations for each group. The TA group identified an average of 6 stylistic devices while the TFA group noted an average of nearly 13 devices—over twice as many. A t-test (with equal variances not assumed) revealed significant differences between the two means.

Table 2: Number of Stylistic Devices Identified

	<u>TA Group</u>		<u>TFA Group</u>	
	Mean	(S. D.)	Mean	(S. D.)
Stylistic Devices*	6.00	(1.87)	12.60	(3.85)

*p < .05

Recognizing 19 stylistic devices, Stephanie (TFA) claimed training in literary analysis during her follow-up interview (as did TA participants, Mark-8, and Julie-6). Yet even Henry (TFA), a remedial composition student with the lowest verbal SAT score of all the participants in the study, identified more devices (9) than each participant in the TA group.

Differences between the two groups can be seen as the TFA students more consistently recognized variations in diction (4 of 5 TFA participants) and related the poems' content to the title more frequently (4 of 5 TFA participants) than TA

participants. However, the sharp contrast between TA and TFA groups appeared when TA participants acknowledged the authors' use figurative language a total of 14 times while TFA participants pointed to 31 different occurrences of figurative language (e.g., simile, metaphor, symbol, and imagery) in the poems. Although the TFA participants received prompts to pay attention to their feelings, they were more attentive to variations in poetic language and the poet's stylistic choices, therefore demonstrating greater facility with this element of literary analysis. However, the marked difference may be due, in part, to another aspect of the TFA prompt that asked them to relate feelings to "words, lines, and phrases" in the text.

Acknowledging Interest in the Poems

To address participants' level of interest and engagement in the poems, I utilized data from students' interviews. During follow-up interviews, students rated their level of interest in the poems on a 10-point scale (10 signified very strong interest). Students reported their interest level in "Away" by Robert Frost, and Table 3 displays the means and standard deviations for the TA and TFA conditions. Although the results of my t-test only approached significance, participants' ratings indicated a higher level of interest from the TFA group.

Table 3: Interest Level in "Away" (1-10 Scale)

	<u>TA Group</u>		<u>TFA Group</u>	
	Mean	(S. D.)	Mean	(S. D.)
Interest Level	4.87	(2.25)	7.80	(1.30)

$p < .05$

The more difficult poem selected for the study, "There Are Mornings" by Lisel Mueller, received interest ratings that were slightly less disparate when comparing the

TA and TFA conditions. Think aloud participants' ratings averaged 5.25, while think and feel aloud participants awarded a higher average of 6.10. The less-pronounced contrast in interest between the two conditions could be attributed to the brief, abstract, and less-accessible nature of "There Are Mornings." Although students can indicate their interest level through numerical self-reports, their engagement with the poems can also be suggested on the basis of how often they elaborated in their responses.

Exploring through Elaboration

The richness of participants' responses showed itself in the proportion of "elaborative comments" (i.e., exploratory responses that moved beyond the text's literal, surface-level content) they made in their protocols (see Table 4). By dividing each participant's total number of words uttered by the number of words used to elaborate, I found notable differences between the TA and TFA groups. (Participants made four types of elaborations: elaborations on the speaker's thoughts and feelings, elaborations on words, elaboration as personalizing, and elaboration as visualizing.)

Table 4: Proportion of Elaborative Remarks

	<u>TA Group</u>		<u>TFA Group</u>	
	Mean	(S. D.)	Mean	(S. D.)
% of Elaborative Responses*	42.40	(17.01)	68.40	(7.44)

*p < .05

An average of only 42% of the TA group's protocols included any type of elaborative comment while the majority of the TFA group's protocols (68% on average) included this type of comment. A t-test (with equal variances not assumed) revealed that the difference between the two conditions was also significant. Group differences

appeared not only in terms of proportions, but also in terms of quality of response.

Having quantitatively reported group trends, a more focused, qualitative presentation of findings necessarily follows. In the sections below, I compare the individual responses of participants from the TA and TFA conditions as they employ each type of elaborative response.

Elaborating on the Speaker

Because both poems used in this study featured the conspicuous voice of a speaker, elaborations on the speaker's thoughts and feelings occurred frequently in both conditions. However, the examples in Table 5 illustrate a common trend in the data—students in the TA condition were often brief and more limited in their responses while students in the TFA condition contemplated numerous meanings and interpretations.

John (TA group) and Anne (TFA group) speculated about the speaker's circumstances as they finished reading "Away" by Robert Frost.

Table 5: Two participants' elaborations on the speaker in "Away"

Excerpt from "Away"	John (TA)	Anne (TFA)
<i>And I may return If dissatisfied With what I learn From having died.</i>	I think after he left this place, it wasn't a good place, and he died in some sort of way—either physically or his soul died.	She could be reborn. No one really knows if you can or not, but she might be able to. Once she dies, if her spirit lives on, which is what this poem is inferring, it could mean that she'll go off on her search . . . if she learns more about the process of dying and what happens to you after you die, maybe she'll learn that she . . . could come back.

After John read the last verse of "Away," he briefly considered the nature of the speaker's death. In a sense, a portion of his response, however, was simply a reiteration

of the speaker's words in the poem's final lines. Although John moved beyond a "plain sense," literal interpretation of this verse, his elaboration only scratched at the surface of the poem's possible meanings. Anne's comments were much more speculative and philosophical in nature; she deeply questioned the implications of the final verse as it introduced the idea of the speaker dying. She saw the speaker's death in metaphysical terms and imagined possibilities: the speaker might be reincarnated or might embark on a spiritual journey in the fictional future.

Elaborating on Words

The second form of elaborative remark, "elaborating on words," occurred infrequently. Although all study participants elaborated on the speaker's thoughts and feelings more than once, only 3 participants in the TA conditions and 4 participants in the TFA condition elaborated on specific words in the two poems. In addition, students in the both groups did not tend to isolate and respond to the same words and images. However, a brief comparison of two responses reveals a common difference between the TA and TFA students' responses.

Julie (TA), an honors English student in high school, commented on the symbol of the mirrors in the last lines of "There Are Mornings" (see Appendix A). Although no critical commentary is available on this recently published poem, one way to read this line is to imagine that the burning mirrors reflect an irrepressible aspect of the speaker's psyche that threatens to reveal itself. The mirrors may serve as a haunting reminder of the speaker's deeply felt desire or sense of purpose suppressed by life's call "to be ordinary." Julie elaborated on both the "mirrors" and the "sun" as she grappled with the poem's final lines, "*Inside the house/the mirrors burn/when I pass*":

And it's like the mirrors could be like a reflection, along with the sun, how it has reflection, and how at the end the mirrors burn and how sun intervenes before it can turn to stone. It kind of like melts away all that . . . maybe the sun because it's warm and because things that are warm can be comforting or can seem to save you.

Julie recognized a relationship between these two words based on the common connotation of reflection, yet her elaboration lacked coherence or direction, and she meandered into a brief exploration of images associated with “sun.” Ultimately, she failed to address the final lines of the poem.

Jennifer (TFA), a lover of poetry like Julie with an identical verbal SAT score (550), elaborated on a single word in the other poem—“Away.” She acknowledged Frost’s playfully tone and approached the text with a fun-loving demeanor herself. Jennifer zoomed in on the word “park” as she read, “*Don’t think I leave/For the outer dark/Like Adam and Eve/Put out of the park*”:

The Garden of Eden as a park! That’s kind of funny. . . . When you think of a park, you usually think of the city. A little area set aside to walk dogs, play in a little swing set. The Garden of Eden wasn’t only a little area set aside, it was *the* [italics to indicate emphasis in her voice] area where life started from what I’ve heard. And it doesn’t have swing sets, and you don’t go there and walk dogs. It’s the *super* nature preserve; nothing could come in that was pollution. Supposedly it was like the ultimate biosphere; it could survive on its own without human intervention. It couldn’t have human intervention anyway. People weren’t allowed to stay there, if they were bad like Adam and Eve.

Jennifer’s elaboration, although it may not deal directly with the poem’s themes, illustrates the curiosity and surprise with which she responded to Frost’s diction. She recognized the allusion to “park” as the Garden of Eden, and appreciated the fact that Frost had chosen a diminutive term to represent something much greater and grander in her mind. Although she did not state it explicitly, she apparently sensed a tone of playful irreverence in the poem. Her elaboration was more extensive and arguably more focused than Julie’s brief exploration of the “sun” and “mirrors” in “There Are Mornings.”

Elaborating as Personalizing

Later in her protocol, during her second reading of “Away,” Jennifer (TFA) seemed to step into the text and take the speaker’s experience to heart, using the third comprehension strategy identified in the study—elaboration as personalizing. She played with the line “put out of the park” (see Table 6) and related it to the poem’s themes. Perhaps drawing from additional lines in the poem (e.g., “*And my shoe and my stocking/ Do me no hurt.*”), she described the out-of-body experience of a wandering soul. Her use of the pronoun “you” indicates that she may have been imagining herself as that soul (i.e., elaboration as personalizing). Jennifer appears to have viscerally responded to Frost’s speaker in “Away” as she engaged with the evident theme of life after death in the poem.

Table 6: Two participants personalizing as they read “Away”

Penny (TA)	Jennifer (TFA)
Now I out walking/The world desert*/That’s kind of reminding of like, myself I guess, like a freshman leaving for college. . . . Kind of like I’m leaving my friends And my shoe and my stocking/Do me no hurt. I’m trying to think how it might apply to my life. I guess the possession that you have—it’s not hurting you, but . . . it’s	Don’t think I leave/For the outer dark/Like Adam and Eve/Put out of the park. Maybe you’re not “put out of the park” and there’s no one you’re “put out by.” You’re a soul just wondering around and you don’t feel anything in the body anymore because you don’t have your body anymore. In a way you’re kind of just floating around.

supposed to provide comfort for you . . .
 cause you're out exploring

***Bold text indicates lines of the poem**

Penny (TA) also used the third type of elaboration in her response to “Away” and personalized as she began to read the poem. Not knowing the poem’s conclusion, she related the speaker’s travels to her recent experience as a college freshman leaving home. Soon after, she literally voiced her desire to “apply to my life” the lines of the poem and tried, somewhat superficially, to engage with its third and fourth lines. Although she drew on her own experiences, she failed to use them to reconnect with the speaker’s journey in the text.

Could it be argued that Jennifer’s elaboration was much deeper and thematically focused than Penny’s simply because she had reached a later point in her reading? Jennifer had indeed read the poem once already when she made the elaboration above. Yet Penny, after reading the work in its entirety, essentially aborted the interpretive process early on failing to make any coherent comments about the poem’s themes. Generally, students in the TA group personalized somewhat independently of the text, not necessarily relating their experience directly to the poem and its speaker. TFA students, on the other hand, tended to personalize as a means of understanding and empathizing with the speaker—putting themselves into the speaker’s shoes.

Elaborating as Visualizing

Students employing the fourth elaborative strategy, elaboration as visualizing, followed a similar pattern. TA students’ visualizations were also more brief and self-contained than TFA students. In addition, they lacked the exploratory, speculative quality of TFA students’ visualizations with one peculiar exception. During his think aloud with

“Away,” Mark (TA) visualized abstractly as he read. He attempted to capture the mood of the poem by creating a representative image:

And when I visualize this [the entire poem “Away”], I see a black backdrop with a yellow lightening bolt going diagonal. And that just represents the mystery behind the suddenness, the natural progression with the lightening, and I can’t even put it all into words, but that’s what I see.

Mark fashioned a particular likeness of the poem apart from any single image or phrase within it. He attempted to capture the poem’s mood in its entirety through this parallel representation. Strangely, although he employed this visualization strategy, he did not necessarily communicate a clear reflection of “Away.” Mark’s obscure references to “mystery,” “suddenness,” and “natural progression” in the poem, however provocative, remain ambiguous. Further exploration of his visual images as symbols might have led him to clarify his interpretation of the poem.

The general trend, however, in the contrast between TA and TFA students might best be illustrated through the responses of two students, John (TA) and Stephanie (TFA) as they visualized while reading several lines from “There Are Mornings” (see Table 7). John’s visualization (TA) related directly to the lines of the poem. He

Table 7: Two participants’ visualizing as they read “There Are Mornings”

Excerpt from “There Are Mornings”	John (TA)	Stephanie (TFA)
<i>some mornings in summer I step outside and the sky opens and pours itself into me. as if I were a saint about to die.</i>	Right now I’m envisioning a cloudy sky and how when you step outside it opens up and the sun shines on you.	That kind of gives me a positive feeling . . . anybody would like to go outside and the sun comes in when the sky opens. And I see the image of a saint I guess because you know when you usually see saints, when you picture it, you see them with a halo and

there's that light shining up on them. And sometimes they show that in TV shows and movies and when the person is about to die, they see the image of a saint or somebody, like the movie "Ghost." I guess you could imagine that cause they see the light.

pictured the sky opening up and the sun shining upon him just as the speaker described. But his visualization stopped there; he did not move beyond the image suggested in "There Are Mornings." He responded to the lines literally, merely adding a vision of "a cloudy sky."

The first sentence of Stephanie's (TFA) response paralleled John's. In addition to picturing the sky and the sun, she identified a positive feeling connected with these images. Then she proceeded to elaborate on saints, halos, and light—drawing from her exposure to television shows and movies like Ghost. In weaving together these images, she shaped a clearer representation of the relationship between the sun and the saint in the poem. The poem's lines—"the sky opens /and pours itself into me/ as if I were a saint/ about to die"—rang true for Stephanie as she associated sunlight with sainthood in a multifaceted process of visualizing.

But Do They "Get It"? A Look at Students' Thematic Commentary

Both the proportion and quality of participants' elaborations indicate "deeper readings" by students in the think and feel aloud group. I use the term deeper reading to represent responses that move beyond literal, surface-level interpretations of poetry. Deeper readings are often more speculative and exploratory in nature, yet they can be thoughtfully mapped back to the text. If students in the think and feel aloud condition use

elaborative strategies more often and produce deeper readings than students in the think aloud condition, does this phenomenon suggest that they will also better understand the poems' themes?

Eschewing theoretical debates over meaning making (Fish, 1980; Scholes, 1985), I focus on the nature of students' responses. Without judging whether a student has located a poem's one "true" meaning, I would like to point to several indicators of personal understanding in students' thematic commentary. The table below provides a comprehensive look at all ten participants' interpretations of Robert Frost's "Away," the more accessible and unambiguous poem in the study. These comments reflect the summative remarks of each student, which often came at the end of their protocols.

Table 8: Students' Thematic Commentary

Think Aloud Participants	Think & Feel Aloud Participants
<p>To me it's just like taking a chance on the real world and if something goes wrong . . . Actually, if I think of real life you know you're out there and . . . I guess you need someone to be trusted and stuff, but I guess you're going to follow what everyone else says and stuff. And if you're not going to make it through with what you wanted or gain what you want, you'll return to where you came from.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">—Penny</p>	<p>They're trying to figure out, "How would you look at this, if you knew all of this, but you felt that maybe you knew something they didn't . . . And you have your own philosophy. Maybe this doesn't happen. Maybe you're not "put out of the park" and there's no one you're "put out by." You're a soul just wondering around and you don't feel anything in the body anymore because you don't <i>have</i> your body anymore. In a way you're kind of just floating around . . . Maybe this person believes in the second life or that you have another chance after this life.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">—Jennifer</p>
<p>I'm bad at getting conclusions. I read poetry because it sounds good. I'm bad at reading poetry to get meaning out of it . . . I thought this sounded good, but it doesn't make sense.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">—John</p>	<p>I guess that makes sense if he's leaving something that he doesn't find to be true or correct, and he's following a higher power, either of his conscience or of his god or something of that sort. He's feeling the influence of a higher power. . . . if he leaves and discovers what he's searching for . . . he'll know the truth.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">—Kevin</p>
<p>Maybe this is something he wrote before he died. . . . "Alright, I'll just come back if I don't learn anything." So, [he's] saying,</p>	<p>It sounds like he could come back anytime if ever his past life has been disturbing to him. . . . See, there is no way you can kill him, he keeps</p>

“Whoa, I guess hell is really good because everybody went there and didn’t come back.” So . . . when they are about to die, they write something funny. It’s humorous about life and death.

—George

coming back every time The poem is religious in some way . . . but I also think [the speaker] has magical powers. . . . [He’s] almost invincible—he can do anything, anytime, anyplace.

—Henry

He talks about all of this leaving and how that affects him and how that makes him feel, about how he doesn’t feel that it’s wrong. I think that’s pretty significant because it’s like the returning of Jesus.

—Julie

In a way it kind of gives you hope . . . he can always return to his other life. And it’s like he’s getting away from one life and going into another . . . I guess there’s hope but yet there’s not hope. I think maybe he’s trying to get away from something—something inside of him . . . not necessarily literally leaving.

—Stephanie

I think of a guy who is called away on a journey for the purpose of the journey. And at the end, it’s pretty clear it’s a journey of death He’s saying that, “I feel my calling; it’s time to let go. I leave my friends in town in their happiness and go lie down. . . . It’s as if he’s going to come back as a spirit, and if he doesn’t like the experience, he’s going to come back and haunt, come back and perhaps do evil to his good friends. . . . He just knows that he’s being called away to experience a new experience And if he gets there and hates it, then he’s going to come back and roam.

—Mark

It’s happy . . . even though you wouldn’t think of it because she’s talking about dying. But it’s like she’s coming to terms with her death because she’s saying that “I’m not hurt anymore and, hey, I might come back too if I find out how this thing works.” It’s like she’s on a journey to find out that kind of thing. It’s the natural course of things. “I’ll find out what happens, and I have to leave you behind, but this is the way it is. I have to obey it. This is how life works.”

—Anne

In “Away,” the speaker departs on an initially ambiguous journey that later appears to revolve around themes of life and death. In the final lines of the poem, “*And I may return/If dissatisfied/With what I learn/From having died,*” the speaker implies that his travels may not necessarily conclude with his death, but begin there. Frost’s surprise ending plays with metaphysical possibilities, suggesting a spiritual existence beyond the grave. Thus, the central metaphor of the poem, the speaker’s travels, serves to represent his journey after death.

Based on this broad interpretation of Frost's central metaphor, a brief look at students' responses once again reveals a fairly distinct division between the two conditions. Students in the think aloud condition inconsistently referred to themes of life and death as they grappled with Frost's central metaphor. Penny initially focused on the idea of risk and "taking a chance on the real world." She didn't appear confident about the implications of the poem and disregarded the final lines referring to the speaker's death. John refused to engage with themes or meanings and claimed that the poem didn't "make sense," while Julie commented on the speaker's feelings about "leaving," also neglecting the poem's metaphor. She recognized some biblical allusions in the poem, but did not relate them to her understanding of its themes. George acknowledged themes of life and death, but shifted his comments to focus on hell and humor. Among students in the TA group, only Mark's summary of the poem reflected a coherent, working understanding of its themes.

Students in the think and feel aloud condition demonstrated greater facility and cogency in their responses. They seemed to be stretching more in their exploration of themes, making overarching philosophical statements about the nature of life and death based on the speaker's words. Jennifer, although her initial sentence was a bit unclear, suggested that the speaker might be resisting traditional Christian interpretations (e.g., "Maybe you're not 'put out of the park.'") of life after death. She also speculated about the metaphysical nature of a soul after death and the possibility of reincarnation. Henry focused on the invincibility of the speaker who comes back after death; he also acknowledged the potential role of both religion and the supernatural in the poem. Kevin and Stephanie did not comment directly about the issue of life after death; however, they

focused on the central metaphor of travel with plausible interpretations based on the text. Kevin referred to the speaker's figurative departure as a search for truth dictated perhaps by "a higher power" while Stephanie suggested that the speaker might be dying to a former self, "getting away from something inside of hi . . . not necessarily literally leaving." Finally, Anne commented very insightfully about the speaker coming to terms with her death as "the natural course of things" and part of a journey of further discovery.

Discussion

Students in the think and feel aloud condition appear more thoughtful and competent in their understandings of these two poems. Although they articulate their feelings more than the think aloud group, think and feel aloud students actually do not consistently refer to their emotions as they respond to the poems. However, they do appear to step into the speakers' experience more fluidly and effortlessly in their protocols and therefore, seem more engaged with experiencing the text rather than simply coming up with the right interpretation. The think and feel aloud prompt may have served to provoke students' empathy toward both poems' speakers. Students in the think and feel aloud group who can "feel with" the speaker may also be more likely to sense the work's larger themes and implications. Dadlez (1997) states "Empathetic responses to literature can often provide the clearest route to a work's ethical perspective on the human condition or on human nature, for empathy involves imaginatively entering into a perspective other than one's own" (p. 191).

Miall and Kuiken (1994) claim that affective responses play an important role in a reader's comprehension of literary texts. This study's findings support and illuminate Miall and Kuiken's theory. Students prompted to think and feel aloud identified more

poetic devices, reported higher interest in the two poems and made fewer negative comments during their think and feel aloud than the students in the think aloud group. However, the most significant finding revolves around the quality and proportion of elaborative comments made by participants in the think aloud group versus the think and feel aloud group.

Students in the TFA group make proportionally more elaborative comments than the TA group; they are more speculative and exploratory in their responses, and the remarks themselves often demonstrate a richer, deeper understanding of the poems. These readings, therefore, might be characterized as “open” rather than “closed.” (Earthman, 1992). L.M. Rosenblatt (1995) describes approaches to reading on an imaginary continuum from “efferent” to “aesthetic.” Efferent reading, from the Latin “efferre” means “to carry away.” This form of reading involves gleaning facts and information from texts while aesthetic reading not only draws from one's cognitive resources but also employs emotion and sensation in an exploratory reading process. Rosenblatt argues that many English teachers focus too much on the “efferent” aspects of reading, eschewing the very essential, experiential aspects of reading literature. Similarly, Schraw (2000) develops Rosenblatt's theory by drawing distinctions between students with transmission beliefs (understanding the author's meaning) versus transaction beliefs (constructing my own meaning). Yet Rosenblatt and other reader response theorists (e.g., Bleich, 1975; Holland, 1968) place so much emphasis on a student's personal response to a text that they open themselves up to criticism for neglecting the more critical and analytical aspects of reading.

The findings presented here suggest that explicit attention to *both* feelings and thoughts on the part of the reader may lead to deeper, more complex responses to poetry. Emotions and thoughts can work in a reciprocal relationship to inform literary responses. However, because affect, even more than cognition, remains an often invisible and unconscious dimension of reading, the prompts in this study served to cue readers to become more aware of their affective responses as they read. Feagin (1996) claims that literary interpretation “requires the mental flexibility to make psychological shifts in sensitivities and points of view” (p. 58). Students, given the additional prompt to feel aloud, not only emerged with greater sensitivity to the images and tone of the poems, they also made more astute analytical observations.

Think and feel aloud participants’ superior analyses, including recognition of stylistic devices, may be due in part to a distinguishing characteristic of the think and feel aloud prompt apart from the direction to share “feelings.” Students in the think and feel aloud condition were also asked to relate their feelings to “particular words, lines, and phrases” in the poems. I did not include this specific instruction in the think aloud prompt. TFA participants may have been inclined to pay attention to aspects of the text in a way that TA participants were not. A follow-up study should address this question by including this additional phrase in the think aloud prompt.

Yet the prompts may have limited influence on the differences between the two groups. Numerous factors impact the way a learner frames a particular task. Some of the more sophisticated responses came from students with higher SAT verbal scores (e.g., Mark, the outlier in the think aloud group). And although I selected only those participants who claimed to “rarely” read poetry outside the classroom, two participants

later revealed that they had written some poetry outside the classroom (e.g., Mark in TA group; Anne in TFA group). Both Mark and Anne demonstrated facility with their interpretations, but they did not distinguish themselves from other readers (e.g., Kevin and Jennifer in the TFA group).

If affective responses play a significant role in literary interpretation (Miall and Kuiken, 1994; Feagin, 1996; Dadlez, 1997; Gerrig, 1993), what might readers lose if they ignore their emotions? Can readers “understand” by only expressly employing rational thought? In this study the students prompted to think and feel aloud generally approached the poems with a more open-minded, exploratory orientation. Could explicit attention to affect help students move from an “efferent” to an “aesthetic” orientation without compromising their analytical abilities? These findings suggest this possibility indeed.

Kevin, a think and feel aloud participant, recognized it himself:

Well, I *was* comfortable just in the thinking mode . . . I never really thought about looking at it emotionally. That sounds really, really bad. . . . Now since personally I think that the purpose of poetry is to express the author’s feelings, then I guess analyzing the poetry solely intellectually isn’t really all that productive For the complete effect of the poem, I think you have to let your emotions persuade your judgment.

Further research in identifying and describing affectively-based comprehension strategies may help readers learn to use both their thoughts and feelings interchangeably to understand and appreciate literary texts.

Ultimately, as educators, we hope that students might learn to appreciate poetic knowledge for its value beyond classroom settings. Taylor (1999) states: “whatever

poetic knowledge is, it is not strictly speaking a knowledge of poems, but a spontaneous act of the external and internal senses with the intellect, integrated and whole, rather than an act associated with the powers of analytic reasoning” (p. 6).

References

- Bereiter, C., & Bird, M. (1985). Use of thinking aloud in identification and teaching of reading comprehension studies. Cognition and Instruction, 2, 131-156.
- Bleich, D. (1975). Readings and feelings. Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Dias, P., & Hayhoe, M. (1988). Developing response to poetry. Philadelphia, PA: Open University Press.
- Dadlez, E. M. (1997). What's Hecuba to him? Fictional events and actual emotions. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Earthman, E. A. (1992). Creating the virtual work: Reader's processes in understanding literary texts. Research in the Teaching of English, 26, 351-384.
- Feagin, S. L. (1996). Reading with feeling: The aesthetics of appreciation. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Fish, S. (1980). Is there a text in this class? Boston, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Gerrig, R. J. (1993). Experiencing narrative worlds: On the psychological activities of reading. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Haas, C. & Flower, L. (1988). Rhetorical reading strategies and the construction of meaning. College Composition and Communication, 39, 167-183.
- Harker, W. J. (1994). "Plain sense" and "poetic significance": Tenth-grade readers reading two poems. Poetics, 22, 199-218.
- Hoffstaedter, P. (1987). Poetic text processing and its empirical investigation. Poetics, 16, 75-91.

- Holland, N. (1968). The dynamics of literary response. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kintsch, W. (1988). The role of knowledge in discourse comprehension: A construction-integration model. Psychological Review, 95, 163-182.
- Miall, D. S., & Kuiken, D. (1994). Beyond text theory: Understanding literary response. Discourse Processes, 17, 337-352.
- Pressley, M., & Afflerbach, P. (1995). Verbal protocols of reading. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Peskin, J. (1998). Constructing meaning when reading poetry: an expert-novice study. Cognition and Instruction, 16, 235-263.
- Richards, I. A. (1929). Practical criticism. NY: Harcourt, Brace and World.
- Rosenblatt, L. M. (1995). Literature as exploration (5th ed.). New York: Modern Language Association.
- Scholes, R. (1985). Textual power. New Haven, CT: Yale.
- Schraw, G. (2000). Reader beliefs and meaning construction in narrative text. Journal of Educational Psychology, 92, 96-106.
- Strauss, A. L. (1987). Qualitative analysis for social scientists. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Taylor, E. (1999). Poetic knowledge: The recovery of education. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Zwaan, R.A. (1993). Aspects of literary comprehension: A cognitive approach. Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Appendix A

There Are Mornings

Even now, when the plot
calls for me to turn to stone,
the sun intervenes. Some mornings
in summer I step outside
and the sky opens
and pours itself into me
as if I were a saint
about to die. But the plot
calls for me to live,
be ordinary, say nothing
to anyone. Inside the house
the mirrors burn when I pass.

—Lisel Mueller

Appendix A (cont.)

Away!

Now I out walking
The world desert,
And my shoe and my stocking
Do me no hurt.

I leave behind
Good friends in town.
Let them get well-wined
And go lie down.

Don't think I leave
For the outer dark
Like Adam and Eve
Put out of the Park

Forget the myth.
There is no one I
Am put out with
Or put out by.

Unless I'm wrong
I but obey
The urge of a song:
I'm — bound — away!

And I may return
If dissatisfied
With what I learn
From having died.

—Robert Frost

Appendix B: Codes for Analysis

Types of comments:

SUM	Participant summarizes, clarifies or reiterates the lines of the poem
META	Participant comments on the interpretive process itself
STYL	Participant acknowledges the author's stylistic choices
ELA	Participant elaborates in an open, speculative fashion.

Elaborative Responses:

ELA-WO	Participant elaborates on word meanings and connotations
ELA-SPE	Participant elaborates on the speaker's thoughts and feelings
ELA-VIS	Participant elaborates by visualizing while reading
ELA-PER	Participant elaborates by relating the poem's content to personal experiences and memories

Recognition of Poetic Elements:

SIM	Participant acknowledges a simile in the poem
MET	Participant acknowledges a metaphor in the poem
RHY	Participant acknowledges rhyme in the poem
RHT	Participant acknowledges rhythm in the poem
SYM	Participant acknowledges a symbol in the poem
ALLI	Participant acknowledges alliteration in the poem
ALLU	Participant acknowledges an allusion in the poem
DICT	Participant acknowledges the author's word choice
STRU	Participant acknowledges the form and/or structure of the poem

Participation/Engagement ("In vivo" codes):

ENG-NO:	Participant expresses lack of interest, negative commentary
ENG-YES:	Participant expresses interest, positive commentary
ENG-AMB	Participant expresses ambivalence about the poem