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Smith, M.W. & Rabinowitz, P.J. (2005). Playing a Double Game: Authorial Reading and the Ethics of Interpretation. *Journal of Language and Literacy Education* [On-line], 1 (1), 9-19.

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Playing a Double Game: Authorial Reading and the Ethics of Interpretation

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Students in English education typically have to live in (at least) two worlds: departments of English in which they receive their disciplinary training and departments or schools or programs of education in which they work to develop the pedagogical content knowledge they need to teach in that discipline. As Dilworth and McCracken (1997) point out, often those worlds are far apart. Dilworth and McCracken quote an English education student to make that point:

At nine o'clock on Monday morning I hear that Shakespeare was the greatest writer of all time; at ten o'clock I laugh along with my professor about the obvious limitations of a canon of dead white men; at noon I revise my essay in accord with [my English professor's] directions; at two o'clock I listen to my methods professor tell us not to appropriate our future students' texts. (p. 11)

Dilworth and McCracken (1997) report the results of a survey of the beliefs of professors of English and professors of English education that amplify this student's experience. Through their factor analysis they identify five different patterns that characterized the responses of their participants. At one extreme was the pattern characterized by the belief that "texts have frames of reference within themselves" and that "at the core of any given text is a meaning whose particular worth is discernible by apt readers" (p. 12). This group had the largest percentage of literature professors and the smallest percentage of English educators. At the other extreme was the group who believe that the text is a "socio-political construct whose significance emerges as each reader transacts with the text" (p. 12). This group included 80% of the English Education professors.

Addington's (2001) study of her experience in a graduate English seminar and a class in the school of education that was structured as a book group makes a similar point. Addington did a careful analysis of the patterns of discourse in both settings as she and her colleagues discussed the same novel. She uses that analysis to document that the discussions in the English

seminar were more detached, analytic, and presentational while the ones in book club class were more personal, emotional, and tentative. She argues that English education students are “shuffled back and forth” between “two very different discourse communities” (p. 243).

In our work together we have also experienced something of those disciplinary differences. (Michael is a Professor of Literacy Education while Peter is a Professor of Comparative Literature.) Our work together in writing this paper provides a quick illustration. After we had talked about what we wanted to accomplish in general terms, we worked independently to do some planning. We found that in line with the kind of writing done by literary theorists, Peter had been searching for a central metaphor around which to build the text while in line with the kind of writing done by many social scientists, Michael had been listing the main points he wanted the essay to address.

We’ve always been able to work through our differences (we have a central metaphor in this paper as well as plenty of subheads) in large measure because we share a theory of literary reading despite our different disciplinary norms. Our work developing this theory has been important to us, for it has allowed us to benefit from (rather than dismiss) each other’s perspectives as our exploration of two important ethical issues in the reading and teaching of literature will reveal.

#### The Theory of Authorial Reading

If we’re going to talk theory we have to have some texts in common. So we’d like you to play a little thought experiment. Imagine two comic strips, one that is centered around a single joke each day (we’re thinking of “Dilbert”) and one that is a serial that at least occasionally takes on a serious subject (we’re thinking of “For Better or For Worse”).

What we’d like you to think about first is how Scott Adams, the creator of “Dilbert,” goes about producing a strip that his readers will find funny. He surely has a great imagination. And part of what he has to imagine is his readers, for in order to write his strip, he has to make a lot of assumptions about who will be reading it. In crafting his strips, he counts on a whole range of knowledge and beliefs, most notably his readers’ understanding and suspicion of bureaucracies. He counts on their understanding how jokes work and knowing that their job as readers is to get them.

In short, he has to act as though a central tenet of the much reader-response theory<sup>1</sup> is not true, for if reader-response theory has taught us anything, it’s taught us that each reader comes to a text with a unique and complex set of beliefs, expectations, experiences, desires, knowledge and needs. But no author can make any rhetorical decisions without relying on prior assumptions about what beliefs, expectations, experiences, desires, knowledge and needs the audience has. Provisionally adopting those beliefs, expectations, experiences, desires, knowledge and needs is what we call playing the authorial audience, a term originally coined by Peter (1977) in “Truth in Fiction.” Our efforts to understand the implications of playing the authorial audience stand at the center of our collaborative work (Rabinowitz & Smith, 1998).<sup>2</sup>

We want to say right from the start that playing the authorial audience doesn’t mean

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guessing what was on the author's mind when the author wrote. We hope that our discussion of “Dilbert” establishes that we want to recast the concept so that authorial intention becomes a category of social convention rather than psychology. Let's consider another example, one that we have written about before (Rabinowitz & Smith, 1998). An invitation to a wedding that indicates that the reception will be “black tie” invokes a set of social conventions. Even paraphrasing the invitation requires conventional knowledge. The invitation means that a man should wear a tuxedo and a woman an evening gown. (A black tie alone would certainly be inappropriate.) But it also means that the reception is likely to be in the evening, that we probably shouldn't bring our children, and that we might want to spend a little bit more than usual on a gift. What it doesn't mean is that the person who invites us really wants us to come. We make many inferences that we can feel relatively sure of, but none of them has to do with the psychology of the sender.

But authors count on more than just what is in our heads. They also count on what is in our hearts. Some time ago Lynn Johnston devoted several weeks of her “For Better or For Worse” strip to chronicling the death of the mother of one of her characters. During those weeks, she counted on lots of knowledge: knowledge of who the characters are, knowledge of hospitals, and so on. But she also counted on readers caring about those characters as they read the strip. Every serial does. She may not have wanted readers to lose sleep over the death of Elly's mother, but she also certainly didn't want them to say, “Well, she's only ink on paper. No need to be concerned.” She counted on readers’ playing what we call the narrative audience, that is, pretending while they read that her characters are more than ink on paper. She counts on her audience reading as though the characters are people worthy of attention and concern.

Reading authorially, then, has at least two dimensions. Playing the authorial audience means applying as best we can the knowledge of texts and the world that the author seems to be inviting us to apply. For example, playing the authorial audience means recognizing that “Dilbert” and “For Better or For Worse” are different kinds of comic strips. It means recognizing how Adams wants readers to regard the examples of corporate-speak he provides. In contrast, playing the narrative audience means treating the characters about whom we are reading with an ethical respect. For example, playing the narrative audience means empathizing with Johnston’s characters for their loss.

The relationship between authorial and narrative audiences—and its consequent effect on readers—can vary dramatically, from author to author, from text to text, even from one part of a text to another. Adams counts on readers’ playing the authorial audience, but he surely doesn't want us to be worried about the fate of Dogbert. In like manner, in *The Real Inspector Hound* Tom Stoppard minimizes the importance of playing the narrative audience by refusing to allow identification with the characters by jumping back and forth over the narrative/authorial distinction. In contrast, Lynn Johnston works to promote our empathy with the characters by giving us glimpses into all aspects of their lives. The dense historical texture of Hemingway's *Farewell to Arms* works in much the same way in that that texture solidifies our alliance with the

characters and their fate.

Thus, while both the authorial and the narrative audience are abstractions, they are abstractions of very different sorts. The authorial audience is a hypothetical construction of what the author expects his or her readers to be like; the narrative audience, on the other hand, is an imaginative creation by the author--something he or she hopes to persuade the readers to pretend to become. To make the act of reading more complicated still, readers need to recognize that the narrative audience is embedded within the authorial audience, not independent of it: That is, in order to join the authorial audience, we need, simultaneously, to join the narrative audience. When we speak, then, of the importance of reading authorially, we are not speaking of a reading that ignores our involvement as narrative audience. We are, rather, talking about a kind of reading that engages us on both levels, a double engagement balanced according to the demands of that particular text.

We want to stress that reading authorially does not mean simply accepting the knowledge and beliefs an author counts on. It means *provisionally* adopting them. To return to our earlier examples, after readers have provisionally adopted the beliefs that Adams counts on when he creates "Dilbert," they can critique them. Once a reader has gotten the joke, he or she could criticize Adam's cynicism. Once a reader has worried over Elly's mom, he or she could criticize how the characters cope with her death.

The concept of the authorial audience is easily confused with similar terms, in particular, authorial intention and implied reader. It is therefore worth clarifying its scope. Two points are crucial. First, the authorial audience is not an inner psychological category. The term authorial audience refers instead to publicly available social practice rather than to the private mental processes often thought to be behind the term authorial intention. It is reasonable, for instance, for viewers to assume that they if they encounter a figure shrouded by shadows smoking a cigarette that they should associate the cigarettes with sinistrality. It's possible to do so, however, without making any hypotheses about the creators' psychological state. We do not need to know, for instance, anything about their own experiences with or personal attitudes toward smoking--any more than we need to psychoanalyze Edgar Allan Poe in order to recognize that the threat of being buried alive carries a negative valence in his stories.

Second, the authorial audience is not a purely textual category--and this is one of the differences between the authorial audience and the implied reader. The implied reader is the reader one can logically infer from textual features--but the authorial audience may well be more highly specified than any textual features allow us to determine. When Sara Paretsky (1988) describes a hospital waiting room with "a collection of *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Sports Illustrated*, and *McCalls*" (p. 9), we can tell, from the text, that the choice of magazines is supposed to tell us something about the people who inhabit the room. But the text itself is mute about what that something is. Here, as so often the case, the gap between implied and assumed reader lies in the attitude we are presumed to hold about the thing referred to.

Bridging the Gap: Toward Complementarity

We share a common theory. But we bring different disciplinary norms to our understanding of that theory. These differences are sufficiently great that *Authorizing Readers: Resistance and Respect in the Teaching of Literature*, the result of our collaboration, is a book in two voices. We write in different ways. We draw upon different theorists. We invoke different kinds of examples. And we disagree a lot.

However, what we share has allowed us to profit from what we don't share. More specifically, working out the model of authorial reading together helped us grapple with two important ethical issues--in the broadest sense of ethical (such as the one outlined by Booth, 1988)--that any teacher must engage: 1) What should readers' ethical connection with authors (or implied authors) be on the level of the authorial audience? and 2) What should readers' ethical connection with characters be on the level of the narrative audience?

Ethical Connections to Authors

Let us begin with readers' ethical connection to authors. Although Peter, as a student of Wayne Booth, was certainly well aware of this ethical dimension, the pressures of the canonical literary theory in university settings these days--theory that has consistently muted the importance of the author in literary transactions--sometimes made him defensive whenever he stressed it. When he talked about authorial reading, therefore, he tended to minimize its importance, calling it but one among many equally valid approaches. And for him, one of the most valuable aspects of working with Michael--who, because of his field, was less in the thrall of death-of-the-author theorizing--was the way it liberated him to take authorial reading, including the concomitant responsibility to authors, more seriously.

This ethical connection to authors eventually became central to our project. Indeed, the very title of our book implies it. But the ethical relationship to authors is not simple: In fact, our title has a self-consciously double edge. On the one hand, like many contemporary teachers and theorists, we use the phrase to mean giving readers power, freeing them from passively accepting their teachers' interpretations and freeing them to resist authors' claims on their emotional or ideological allegiance. This might seem precisely to minimize the ethical demands of readers with respect to authors--but at the same time, the phrase carries for us a second meaning that takes those demands into account and limits readers' freedom at least for a time. In that second sense of authorizing, we most assuredly do not mean allowing readers to read as Hamlet interprets the shape of clouds, decreeing whatever meanings come to mind. Rather, we mean helping readers engage intelligently with authors, and to do so, at least initially, by orienting themselves on the authors' terrain. And this means helping them develop the conventional knowledge they need to read with respect--whether it be the fairly straightforward knowledge necessary to get Adam's jokes or the more complex knowledge necessary, say, to untangle the irony of a short story like Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery." These two conceptions of authorizing are not at odds with one another: Indeed, our argument hinges on the belief that the first is dependent on the second. Only

after readers learn how to respect authors can they resist them. Such informed resistance is an assertion of readers' authority in the strongest sense.

Even while recognizing the ethical dimensions of informed resistance, it is possible to reduce it to a more-or-less intellectual category by treating the authorial audience as a cognitive construct. And Peter tended to do that in much of his earlier work. But Michael kept reminding Peter of something that Peter had sometimes played down in his earlier writings: the authorial audience, for all its cognitive components, is not reducible to a cognitive category. It has emotional dimensions, too, in a way that complicates the ethics implied in that notion of respect. Thus, *Frankenstein* not only assumes a reader with the interpretive strategies necessary to keep track of narrative levels and not get confused, even when, as in a set of Russian dolls, we get stories within stories within stories within stories. The novel also assumes a reader with the sensitivity to pity the monster, even as he murders the innocent for revenge.

#### Respect as a Precursor to Resistance

What impact does this have on nature of resistance? We would argue that a reader cannot seriously oppose the misogyny of, say; Mickey Spillane's *I, The Jury* without first joining the authorial audience. But acknowledging the emotional components of the authorial audience forces us to recognize that joining the authorial audience requires more than understanding, cognitively, what Spillane meant when he wrote the text. It also requires experiencing (at least provisionally), and coming to terms with, the ways in which the novel manipulates the emotions of the authorial audience—for instance, the way it creates a sense of satisfaction as Mike Hammer shoots Charlotte in the belly for her gender transgressions—and the ways in which these feelings as the authorial audience can come into conflict with a reader's knowledge, experience, and values as the actual audience. To resist the politics of this text in any significant way, one needs to respect Spillane's craft sufficiently not only to decipher his intellectual project, but also experience its emotional pull.

Experiencing that pull does not, in and of itself, chart out your next step: it only makes some next step possible. Our position is thus consistent with a variety of quite different ideological positions. Accepting the notion that interpretation needs to be oriented, at least initially, by reading as authorial audience does not commit you to reading as a traditional humanist any more than it commits you to reading as a radical feminist or an Orthodox Jew.

#### The Politics of Reading/The Politics of Teaching

What it does commit you to is recognizing that the initial reading that authors invite readers to do may not be moral. And here's where Peter's perspective has helped Michael recognize blind spots of his own. One difference between us is that Peter, as a narrative theorist, tends to focus on the encounter an individual reader has with a text whereas Michael, as an educator, tends to focus on what happens when many readers come together in a classroom. So while we both have political interests, those interests tend to be different. As is true for many

literary theorists, Peter thinks about textual politics in terms of a reader's encounter with the ideology of a text. This confrontation is often set against the background of a larger political issue, the politics of canon formation that privilege certain kinds of encounters with certain kinds of texts. Michael was always concerned with politics too, but his primary concern was the politics of the classroom, especially in minimizing the deleterious effects of differences in power on classroom discussions—the most notable of which is the difference in power between teachers and students. Working with Peter forced Michael to think about the role of the author in the politics of readerly resistance and caused him to rethink teaching he had done.

For example, it forced him to reconsider a unit he did on *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The unit centered around engaging students in considering important themes in the novel through the reading and discussion of stories and poetry in class while they were reading the novel at home. Upon finishing the novel, discussion focused on how the themes related. The unit also featured a wide variety of activities, for example: making maps of the street on which the characters lived, writing an issue of the local paper, rewriting the trial scene as a play and performing it, and having students teach a portion of the text. Throughout the unit students were actively engaged with each other. They appeared to enjoy the fact that Michael ceded so much of his authority to them. They appeared to like and to profit from being teachers and directors. When Michael thought about the politics of the classroom, the unit might pass muster. But thinking about politics in terms of the ideological encounter that a reader has with an author helped him realize some of what he left out. Michael helped his students recognize the codes upon which Lee was drawing in the novel, but he didn't then move on to a critical examination of those codes. The influence of Peter has helped Michael understand that once the class recognized what Lee counted on her readers' thinking about what it meant to be an African American or a woman in that setting, they should have discussed how they felt about those norms. The influence of Peter has helped Michael understand that once the class recognized that Lee's optimism about social change is rooted in a belief that slow incremental change (and that led by a White man) is enough, they should have thought hard about whether they shared that view. Michael's satisfaction with the politics of the classroom blinded him to what can be gained by readers when they actively resist the politics of the author. It also helped him recognize that he never engaged his students in thinking about why the most commonly taught novel about race in America was written by a White woman. Working with Peter opened Michael's eyes in an important way.

#### Ethical Obligations to Characters

Let us turn now to ethical obligations to characters. Here, too, Michael has had a major impact on Peter's thinking, enabling him to question, more vigorously than he had previously questioned, some of the theoretical givens that govern practice at colleges and universities these days, in particular the ways in which, over the years, he has increasingly minimized the importance of the mimetic aspect of the text.

High school teachers are less apprehensive of mimesis, that is, the ways in which art

resembles life, than are college and university teachers, who appear to fear being accused of naiveté on this account. In part, that's because of critical pronouncements like Ruth Ronen's (1996) blanket claim that "modern literary theory regards the mimetic view . . . as obsolete" (p. 27). But why do such pronouncements influence college teachers more than they influence high school teachers? One possible reason that high school teachers are overtly trying to get students interested in literature. They are much more likely than college teachers to see one of their primary purposes as helping students become life-long readers and to believe that probing connections between life and literature is a powerful way to do just that. College teachers, on the other hand, are far more likely to privilege providing training in the analytic procedures of the discipline. As a consequence, they are more likely to act on the belief that advanced analysis involves something more intellectual—the study of the semiotic, that is, the way that signs are manipulated and processed. This observation does not apply only to literature; one of Peter's colleagues in the Music Department was fond of dismissing the notion of teaching music appreciation on the grounds that we don't teach physics appreciation—using the model of the sciences, that is, to argue that teaching any aesthetic appreciation was anti-intellectual.<sup>3</sup>

But an important question lurks behind this difference: If the mimetic is more basic is it more basic in the sense of more simple-minded or more essential? Are high school students attracted to the mimetic aspect of literature because they are stupid and inexperienced, or because, on the contrary, they recognize that it is more essential than the more abstract questions deemed appropriate at the higher level? Peter wouldn't say that Michael has convinced him that abstract narrative theory is unimportant—only that perhaps he has, because of what goes without saying in higher-education literature circles, overstated its importance relative to the mimetic level.

This was brought home to Peter a few years ago when he was writing an essay on Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (Rabinowitz, 1996). He recognized that while an earlier generation of critics tended to universalize the novella as a statement about human nature, in contemporary university settings readers are now increasingly likely to explore more postmodern claims, steering away from universal themes, and instead treating even this apparently mimetic novel as if it were largely about the act of writing, or even about the nature of language itself. Peter Brooks (1984), for instance, describes Marlow's "ethical pronouncements" (p. 248) as a cover-up, but he focuses his attention more on the rhetorical mechanisms of that cover-up than on the political situation that is covered up. In many other readings, too, Conrad's short novel similarly turns into a self-referential text about its own interpretation.

### Conflicts in Ethical Obligations

What Michael consistently urged Peter to recognize is that such analyses not only betray one's responsibilities to Conrad, they also betray one's responsibilities to the characters by turning the suffering of the Africans so vividly depicted in the novel—for instance, Marlow's horrifying claim that he "could see every rib, the joints of their limbs were like knots in a rope"



(1899/1996, p. 30)—into a mere metaphor for something else more abstract, and presumably "more important." Michael has convinced Peter that taking seriously the story world may, in fact, inform discussion of the more abstract. In the case of *Heart of Darkness*, taking seriously the suffering of the Africans seems necessary to any consideration of whether the text is, as Achebe (1978) claims, racist--or whether the text's racism lies more in the way it has been constructed by readers. And as a consequence Peter has devoted more time in his classroom to considerations of the mimetic, to having students articulate their experience of entering the story world and playing the narrative audience.

While Michael helped Peter recognize the reader's responsibility to characters, Peter has helped Michael recognize that on occasion that responsibility may conflict with a reader's responsibility to the author. Michael's insistence on the importance of playing the narrative audience was informed by the belief that doing so was possible in all cases. Peter has caused Michael to question what Michael now thinks might be a too optimistic assessment. In *Authorizing Readers* Peter argues that some texts exclude some readers from the authorial audience and that that exclusion is central to their effect. As an example, he discusses Nella Larsen's *Passing*, a novel that appears only to be about race when it is even more a novel about sexuality. Peter argues that the effect of the work depends on its being coded so that heterosexual members of the actual audience do not recognize the lesbian subtext of the novel. Furthermore, Peter argues this is a fragile text and that teachers may betray Larsen by equipping heterosexual students with the interpretive apparatus they need to recognize that subtext and join the narrative audience.

Peter's argument about what he calls fragile texts forced Michael to think about the extent to which a reader can appropriate a text by an author from a different culture. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* provides a case in point. If a reader pays an ethical respect to Morrison, that reader has to ask where he or she should stand upon reading about Sethe's determination to kill her children rather than have them returned to slavery. Readers may draw on their own experience to help them understand Sethe's decision. Michael had always believed that making that effort was one of the most educative aspects of reading. Peter has helped Michael to understand that sometimes readers may have to recognize that their experience isn't enough, that they can't really understand, and that the most educative experience of some reading some texts is to develop that recognition. Michael has come to believe that *Beloved* is such a text. Knowing that the horrors of slavery are in some ways beyond his knowing is important knowledge to have. (See, in this regard, James Phelan's [1996] analysis of the novel as what he calls a stubborn text.)

### Conclusion

Our collaboration, then, has been fruitful because of our differences. And those differences mirror the larger disciplinary differences that students in English education experience. However, at a time when differences and diversity of a staggering number of kinds are academic buzzwords, we think it's important to note that what underlies our differences is a theory that

we share.

We want to encourage discussions of literature that are informed both by the head and the heart, discussions that see these seemingly polar positions complementing each other in meaningful ways. That goal has forced us to listen to and reckon with arguments informed by differences in our training, the contexts in which we teach, our prior writing, and many other factors.

We would say that the same holds true for classrooms, too. That is, it is most likely that students will listen to each other and value what they hear if they can employ the contributions of their classmates to work on a common project. We believe that authorial reading provides that common project. Playing the authorial audience requires readers to accept provisionally an author's invitation to read in a particular way and to draw upon particular kinds of knowledge. Because different readers will have access to different kinds of knowledge and because no reader is likely to have all the knowledge that an author is counting on, complementarity among readers is essential. To take an example we discussed above, if a class is reading *Frankenstein*, students who are not religious will have to rely on those who are in order to do their work. Religious knowledge is not often privileged in school settings, but it is our belief that non-religious students will be most likely to value it when they have used it themselves. Playing the narrative audience requires that readers pay characters an ethical respect and once more differences in the classroom may help. Turning again to an example from *Beloved*, Sethe may be stubborn for Phelan and for other White male readers, but she may be less stubborn for African American readers or for women. The White male readers, then, need other readers in a special kind of way if they adopt the project of playing the narrative audience.

We want to stress that the kind of valuing that we are talking about doesn't preclude resistance. In fact, playing the authorial audience provides students something to resist, the common experience they've shared, as well as something to resist with, the home institutions that they've employed.

The paradox of radical reader response criticism is that the death of the author also implies the death of all other readers but yourself--for all other readers inevitably become authors of their own interpretations, and subject to the same disdain we direct to any other authorial voice. We believe that the authorial audience provides a way out of this paradox. Playing the game of reading by joining the authorial audience is not, we repeat, a return to dogmatic classrooms; it does not force all students to march in the same direction. But it does allow them to articulate their differences in a way that clarifies their relationship to each other and makes possible both student-to-student (and student-to-faculty) conversation—and real student-to-student (and student-to-faculty) resistance. We cannot think of a better model for a democratic classroom.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>We recognize that there are a variety of theories that can be grouped under the heading of reader-

response. Beach (1993) identifies textual, social, psychological, cultural and experiential strands. Tyson (1999) offers a different set of strands, though there is much overlap: transactional theories, affective stylistics, subjective theories, psychological theories, social theories. She also notes that what she call an “emerging form” (p. 194) of reader response theory, rhetorical reader-response is growing in popularity. We also recognize that both Beach and Tyson place Peter among reader-response theorists. (Beach discusses his work both when he explores textual theories of response and rhetorical theories of response while Tyson sees him as a rhetorical reader-response theorist.) However, like Appleman (2000) we think it’s unarguable that the theory that has had the greatest influence on secondary-school teaching is one that emphasizes the personal response of an individual reader.

<sup>2</sup> The theoretical grounding for the current essay is set out, in far greater detail, in those texts. Since we cannot expect that our readers will be familiar with that earlier material, we hope we will be excused for repeating some of our arguments—and in a few cases, even some of our specific formulations of those arguments—here.

<sup>3</sup>In using the semiotic/mimetic distinction in this way, we are following the lead of Susan Lanser (1986/1991), who has explicitly addressed this issue and called for a reconciliation of this difference.

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