**Ways of Reading**

**Dominant, Alternative and Resistant**

All texts are deliberate constructions. Texts do not emerge from the ether in a moment of inspiration, free from cultural, social and historical influences and assumptions. To the contrary, texts are composed in a particular cultural, social and historical context. As such, they will reflect a certain world view or version of reality, conveying a particular set of assumptions, attitudes, and messages which may be understood as the ideology of the text.

It is equally important to remember that the act of reading takes place in a particular cultural, social and historical context. The meanings that a reader will find in a text will, in this sense, be beyond the control of the composer. They will be a reflection of who the reader is, including such factors as age, gender and sexual orientation, and socio — cultural factors such as his or her background and education, as well as the dominant ideologies (or pre-eminent world view) of their time and place.

For these reasons modern reading practice, or that with which you as a student are expected to engage, does not require the identification of the author’s meaning in a text. Rather, it requires the exploration of the range of possible meanings that may be ascribed to a text within particular cultural contexts.

A useful way for you to practise reading in this way is to consider the concept of three types of reading. (Source: Brian Moon, *Literary Terms: A Practical Glossary (2ndEdition)* , Chalkface Press, 2001).

**Dominant readings (invited meaning)**: those which the text may be positioning the reader to accept or favour, or which embody the dominant values and beliefs in a culture.

**Alternative readings:** those which are less common but are deemed acceptable because they do not challenge the dominant reading.

**Resistant readings**: those which move beyond the dominant cultural beliefs to challenge prevailing views.

By way of illustration, consider Andrew Marvell s poem “To His Coy Mistress” (1681)

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| ***TO HIS COY MISTRESS***  *Had we but world enough and time,*  *This coyness, lady, were no crime.*  *We would sit down and think which way*  *To walk, and pass our long love’s day.*  *Thou by the Indian Ganges’ side*  *Should’st rubies find; I by the tide*  *Of Humber would complain. I would*  *Love you ten years before the flood,*  *And you should, if you please, refuse*  *Till the conversion of the Jews.*  *My vegetable love should grow*  *Vaster than Empires and more slow;*  *An hundred years should go to praise*  *Thine eyes, and on thy forehead gaze;*  *Two hundred to adore each breast,*  *But thirty thousand to the rest;*  *An age at least to every part,*  *And the last age should show your heart.*  *For, lady, you deserve this state,*  *Nor would I love at lower rate.*  *But at my back I always hear*  *Time’s winged chariot hurrying near;*  *And yonder all before us lie*  *Deserts of vast eternity.* | *Thy beauty shall no more be found;*  *Nor, in thy marble vault shall sound*  *My echoing song; then worms shall try*  *That long-preserved virginity,*  *And your quaint honour turn to dust,*  *And into ashes all my lust:*  *The grave’s a fine and private place,*  *But none, I think, do there embrace.*  *Now therefore, while the youthful hue*  *Sits on thy skin like morning dew,*  *And while thy willing soul transpires*  *At every pore with instant fires,*  *Now let us sport us while we may*  *And now, like amorous birds of prey*  *Rather at once our time devour*  *Than languish in his slow-chapped power.*  *Let us roll all our strength, and all*  *Our sweetness up into one ball,*  *And tear our pleasures with rough strife*  *Through the iron gates of life:*  *Thus, though we cannot make our sun*  *Stand still, yet we will make him run.*  **Andrew Marvell** |

**A dominant reading** of this poem, an all-time favourite on reading lists for senior high school and first year university English courses, would emphasize

• Its place in the canon of English literature.

• Its familiar theme of *carpe diem*, or *seize the day* (remember *Dead Poets Society*?), as having a long and noble tradition in Western culture and

• Its consequent universal significance: we must inevitably confront and come to terms with our mortality in order that we may live most profitably in the time that we have.

• That it imparts an essential truth about human existence, its greatness coming from the unique and masterly way it does this.

Such a reading is to be found in the essay The Poetry of Andrew Marvell in B. Ford (ed) *The* *Pelican Guide to English Literature Vol. 3* (1961) which you might find in your school library. The author of this essay describes the poem’s central concern, a belief in the virtue of enjoying yourself while you are young, as being classical in nature, dating back to the Latin poet Catullus. We need look no further than advertising geared towards teenagers and young adults — Coca Cola being an example that springs to mind — to see that this belief has well and truly moved beyond the realm of the literature and remains dominant in popular culture today.

**An alternative reading** of the poem might suggest that beyond its thematic concerns, the poem reflects the power relations evident in all forms of social interaction between men and women in Marvell’s time but more particularly in romantic relationships. Such a reading might highlight

• The manner in which the male persona takes the lead, actively attempting to persuade the woman to submit to his advances and entreaties: *Had we but world enough and time, This coyness, lady, were no crime.*

• The absence of the woman’s voice, reflecting the status of her gender within her society at that time. The reader is denied her voice by Marvell and as such he relegates her as his creation to the role of being the passive object of his male personas gaze: two hundred to adore each breast.

**A resistant reading** may develop from the alternative reading, pointing out how:

• the representation of gender in the poem furthers the notion of gender as binary oppositions (e.g. male is active, female is passive; male is powerful, female is marginalized) and, as such, will be read by readers who share feminist views of the world as perpetuating gender inequality and discrimination against women.

For example:

• Marvell’s representation of heterosexuality in the poem may be read as being exploitative, based as it is on the persona psychologically terrorizing the woman.

Marvell depicts his persona as attempting to have the woman submit as a result of the fear he seeks to instill within her; Marvell’s vivid and confronting imagery is most significant and not accidental: *Nor, in thy marble vault shall sound My echoing song; then worms shall try that long — preserved virginity*. Modern readers must ask themselves whether this is a view of social relations between men and women that they are willing to accept as appropriate.

For the author of the essay mentioned above it was not even an issue. Within the social, historical and cultural contexts of his reading, the quoted lines from the poem are described as witty:

Marvell treats this theme (*carpe diem*) rather lightly. He is mainly concerned with death as a means of frightening his mistress. The incongruity of a light treatment of a theme being conveyed through images of death designed to provoke fear does not occur to the essayist. In keeping with the dominant reading practices of his time, this writer’s reading privileges theme over ideology. The power relations represented in the poem were not even conceptualized in the early 1960s by a white, middle class and male academic as something to be commented upon. To a later reader who is familiar with feminist thinking, this dominant reading represents male exploitation of women as every day and, as such, endorses it by default.

Reading for meaning, then, is not a neutral activity. It is value laden and an ongoing process. Any text will be continually reinterpreted as it is read by different people and it will be held to have diverse meanings. The exciting thing for you as a student is that you are participating in this process, responding both to the text and to the responses of other readers. In the process you will be generating new meanings as you read a particular text, making the text come alive in a new way.

**How could you intervene in the poem’s structure by rewriting it, with the purpose of repositioning readers?**

**How could you make the text more socially just and equitable, more politically correct? You would need to change the discourses and the ideology. To achieve this, you may need to change the genre. For example, write a short front page newspaper article which achieves a ‘discursive shift’.**