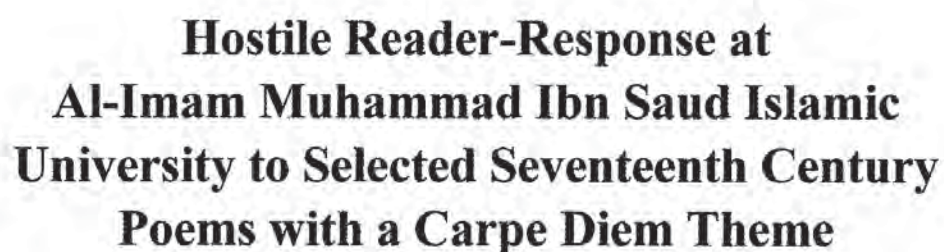

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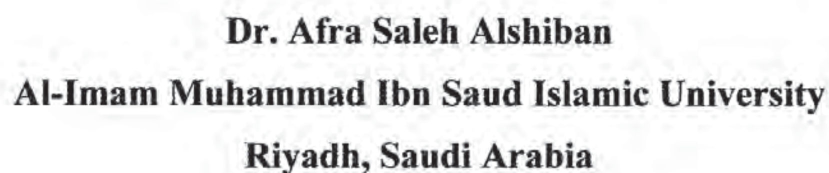

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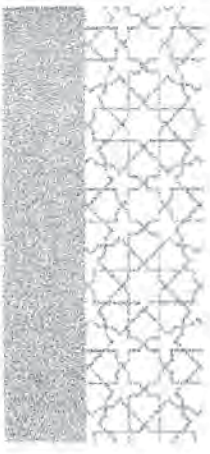

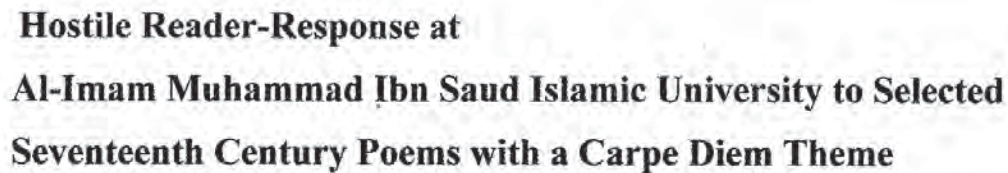

Hostile Reader-Response at Al-Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University to Selected Seventeenth Century Poems with a Carpe Diem Theme

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Abstract

Using reader-response theory in general, Hans Robert Jauss' "horizons of expectations" theory in particular, this study examines the uniform responses of Saudi female students at an Islamic Saudi University to carpe diem poems of seduction, particularly lyric poems that centre on love and the male/female relationship. Two seventeenth century poems introduced in the "Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century Poetry" course will be the primary focus: John Donne's "The Flea" and Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress." These two poems were selected particularly because both project an essentially pagan view of love: the physical rather than the spiritual is emphasized. Carnal delight is what speakers in both poems find appealing. It is precisely this attitude toward love which prompts a hostile reader-response at Al-Imam University. The study is highly significant because it gives voice to the Saudi female reader. More importantly, it raises awareness to moral and religious codes which must be taken into consideration when introducing poems of the sort.

Keywords: reader-response, carpe diem, seduction poems, Islamic teachings, pagan ideas.

ملخص بحث:

استخدام نظرية "ردة فعل القارئ" في جامعة الإمام محمد بن سعود الإسلامية لمختارات شعرية من القرن السابع عشر المبنية على المبدأ الوثني "استمتع باللحظة" _ "*carpe diem*"

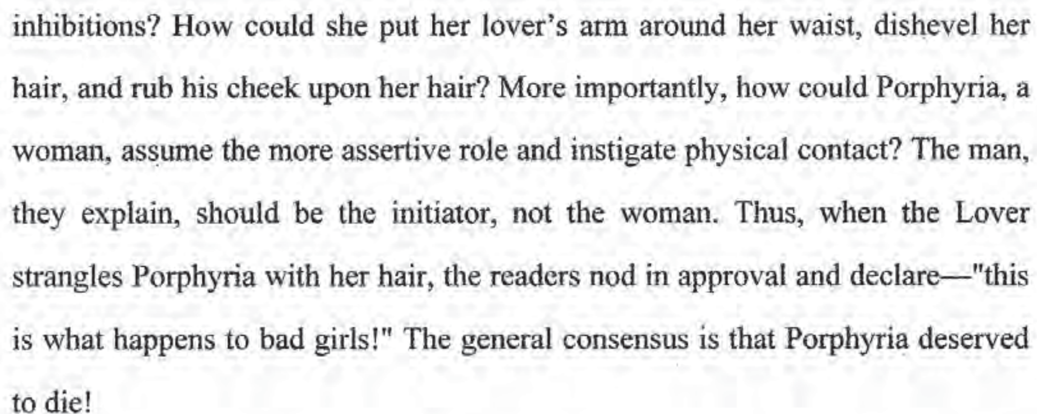
تستخدم هذه الدراسة أسلوب "ردة فعل القارئ" (Reader-Response Theory) بشكل عام ونظرية هانس روبرت جاس بشكل خاص، لدراسة ردود الأفعال المتشابهة لطالبات سعوديات في جامعة إسلامية تجاه قصائد الإغواء المبنية على المبدأ الوثني "استمتع باللحظة" (carpe *diem*) وخصوصا القصائد الغنائية التي تتمحور حول العلاقة بين الرجل والمرأة. وقد تم اختيار قصيدتين تعكسان النظرة الوثنية للحب. وهي نظرة تركز على الجانب الجسدي أكثر من الجانب الروحي. وتكمن أهمية الدراسة ليس فقط لتسليطها للضوء على ردود فعل طالبات جامعة الامام المعارضة والمستهجنة لقصائد الإغواء، وإنما لأنها أيضا تبين نظريا كيفية تدريس ومناقشة مثل تلك القصائد متبعة بذلك خطى أفلاطون في الربط بين الأدب والوعظ، آخذة بعين الاعتبار الأسس الدينية التي ترتكز عليها الجامعة. والأهم من ذلك كله هو تقديم الدراسة لحلول تساعد على فهم وتقدير للأدب الانجليزي وخاصة الشعر بشكل يتماشى مع العادات والتقاليد الإسلامية.

Introduction

As part of the "Introduction to Literature" course at Al-Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University, undergraduates are introduced to Robert Browning's "Porphyria's Lover" as exemplar of the dramatic monologue. The poem, about a deranged killer who strangles his beloved to death evokes identical responses from readers. There is no sympathy for Porphyria, but much for the Lover! To Saudi female students at an Islamic University, Porphyria "was asking for it," so to speak. A good girl, they contend, would not "come through wind and rain" (30), leave a "gay feast" (27), presumably held at her family's house, to meet a man. Good girls, they stress, do not meet strange men without the consent of their parents. The mental image the Lover presents of Porphyria causes more alarm:

- She put my arm about her waist,
- And made her smooth white shoulder bare,
- And all her yellow hair displaced,
- And, stooping, made my cheek lie there,
- And spread, o'er all, her yellow hair,
- Murmuring how she loved me—she
- Too weak, for all her heart's endeavor,
- To set its struggling passion free
- From pride, and vainer ties dissever,
- And give herself to me forever. (16-25)

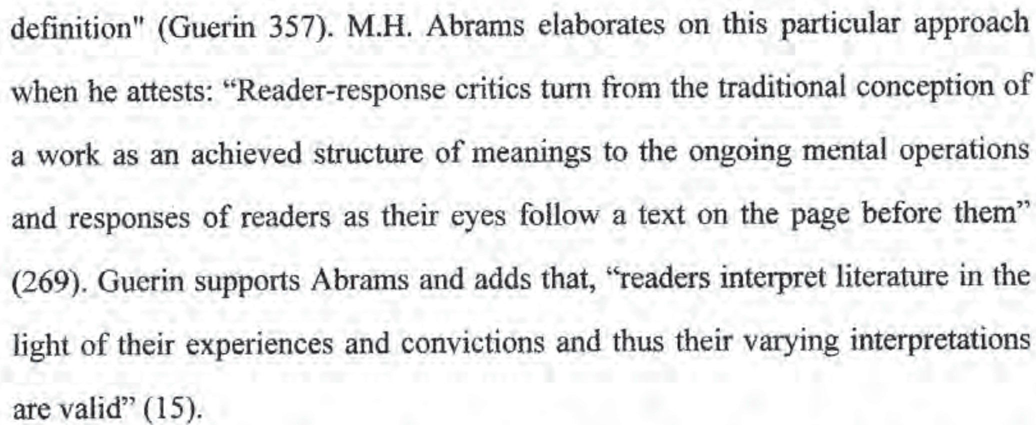
Students are appalled by Porphyria's nonchalant attitude to dating. The questions asked in class with regards to the poem reflect their disapproval. For, they inquire vehemently: How could a woman flaunt herself in the manner that Porphyria does? How could she expose her shoulder so shamelessly, with no



inhibitions? How could she put her lover's arm around her waist, dishevel her hair, and rub his cheek upon her hair? More importantly, how could Porphyria, a woman, assume the more assertive role and instigate physical contact? The man, they explain, should be the initiator, not the woman. Thus, when the Lover strangles Porphyria with her hair, the readers nod in approval and declare—"this is what happens to bad girls!" The general consensus is that Porphyria deserved to die!

The students assume a fairly uniform response to the poem without any interference or influence from the professor. Merely asking their thoughts on the poem when read aloud in class brings out subjective, less rational responses. This is because "readers 'respond' on the basis of their identity and their experience" (Guerin 13). They view the poem from their personal world view. The students use their own value system, social experiences, and religious beliefs to interpret the poem, and thus adopt their own "horizons of expectations," a term coined by German critic Hans Robert Jauss in Toward an Aesthetic of Reception (a book which proves highly useful to the study in hand). Thus, their reception of the poem is hostile because their "horizons of expectations" are shaped by an Islamic culture that prohibits pre-marital relationships. They are therefore conditioned to accept only what is moral, wholesome, and good. The students' reaction in general typifies reader-response theory, which places much emphasis on the reader and the interpretive processes that derive from the act of reading.

Reader-response criticism contends that readers interpret literary pieces in light of their cultural and personal norms and prejudices. Moreover, the approach is "subjective and relative, whereas earlier theories sought for as much objectivity as possible in a field of study that has a high degree of subjectivity by



definition" (Guerin 357). M.H. Abrams elaborates on this particular approach when he attests: "Reader-response critics turn from the traditional conception of a work as an achieved structure of meanings to the ongoing mental operations and responses of readers as their eyes follow a text on the page before them" (269). Guerin supports Abrams and adds that, "readers interpret literature in the light of their experiences and convictions and thus their varying interpretations are valid" (15).

If the reader's opinion is valid as both Abrams and Guerin contend, then, what happens when the reader is conservative to the extreme, or, deeply religious? How does a reader raised in a home with strong religious convictions respond to certain literary pieces particularly ones that urge a reluctant virgin to change her state? Young girls in Saudi Arabia are taught at a very early age to protect their honour at whatever cost. So, what happens when students are told otherwise via seduction poems?

This study will follow in the footsteps of David Bleich, Wolfgang Iser, Hans Robert Jauss, Stanley Fish, Norman Holland, Judith Fetterley, and others, who all agree that, "the meanings of a text are the 'production' or 'creation' of an individual reader" (Abrams 269). For these critics, the reader's opinion matters and thus should be taken into account when examining texts. Hans Robert Jauss in particular is of great interest to this study since he acknowledges that "readers from any given historical period devise for themselves the criteria whereby they will judge a text" (Bressler 65). Thus, a text differs in its evaluation process from one historical period to the next. The German critic's theory regarding the "horizons of expectations" will be employed here since it describes the criteria readers use to assess a literary text. Jauss states in relation to his theory that "since each historical period establishes its own horizons of expectations, the

overall value and meaning of any text can never become fixed or universal." This is followed by more insight: "A text, then, does not have one and only one correct interpretation because its supposed meaning changes from one historical period to another. A final assessment about any literary work thus becomes impossible"
(Bressler 66).

Guerin clarifies this point by providing two examples of classics deemed offensive by contemporary readers of certain racial and social groups because their "horizons of expectations" had changed in light of modern contemporary thought. The first is Twain's Huckleberry Finn, and the second is Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress." Of the former, Guerin explains:

- [Huckleberry Finn] became the target of harsh and
- misguided criticism on the grounds that it contained racial
- slurs in the form of epithets like 'nigger' and demeaning
- portraits of Negroes. Schools were in some instances
- required to remove the book from curriculums or reading
- lists of approved books and in extreme cases from library
- shelves. In like manner, feminists have resented what they
- considered male-chauvinist philosophy and attitudes in
- Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress." The horizons of
- expectations of these readers incorporated hot partisanship
- on contemporary issues into their literary analyses of earlier
- works. (361)

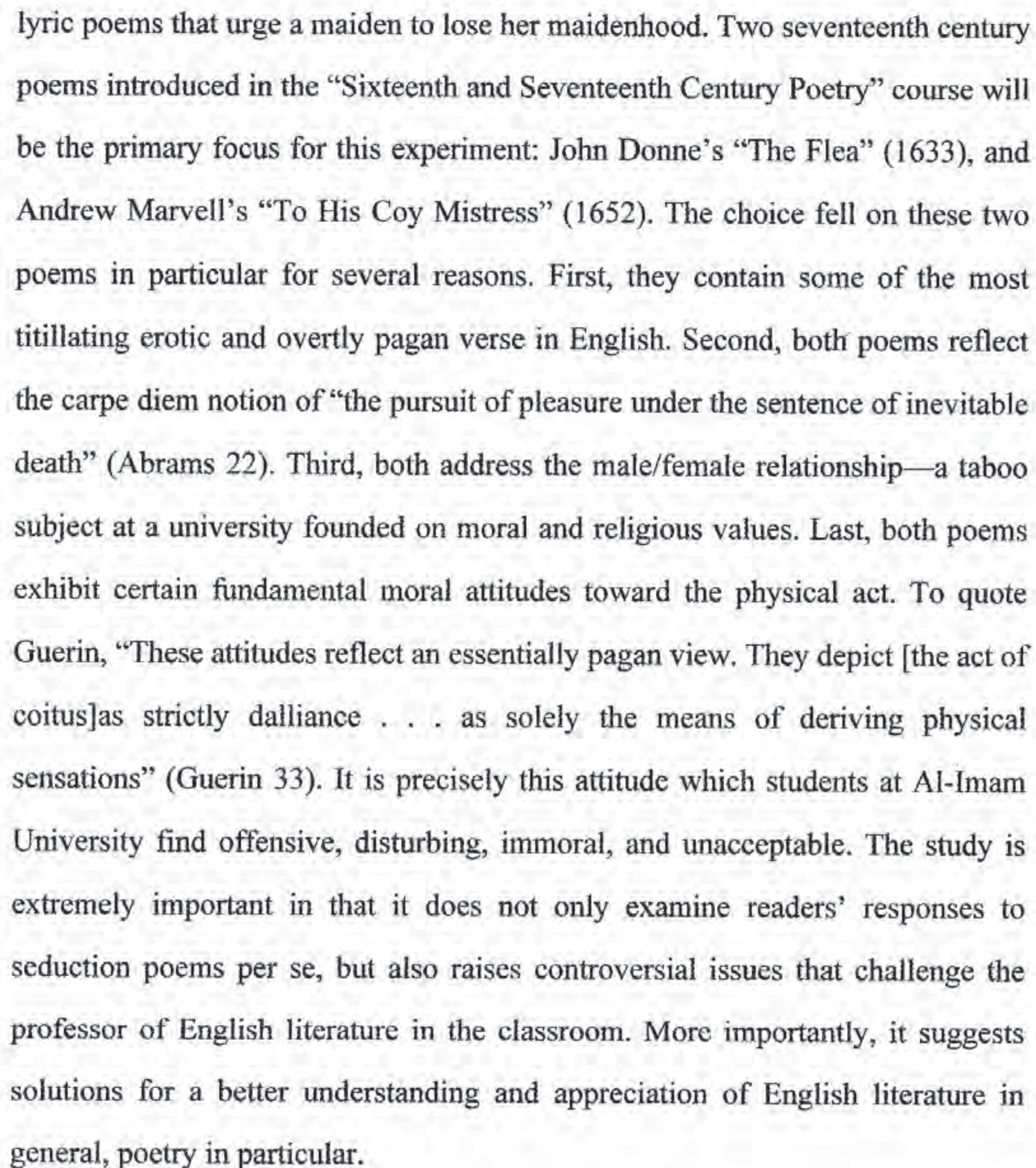
Similarly, the "horizons of expectations" of Saudi female students at Al-Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University had conditioned them to reject certain literary texts which oppose social and religious norms. The students observed for

this study were not influenced in any way by the professor to shape their responses. Instead, they were left to formulate their own opinions on the works introduced in class, and to voice them, before a legitimate interpretation of any given text was provided by the professor. Critic, Louise Rosenblatt in Literature as Exploration argues that teachers of literature play a pivotal role in influencing how students perform in response to a text. However, this does not appear to be the case at Al-Imam University where students come to class shaped by social and religious codes which condemn any behaviour considered immoral. Still, what Rosenblatt states of the readers' processes of engagement and involvement in the text is worthy of mention. Rosenblatt believes:

- The reader brings to the work personality traits, memories of
- past events, present needs and preoccupations, a particular
- mood of the moment, and a particular physical condition.
- These and many other elements in a never-to-be-duplicated
- combination determine his response to the peculiar
- contribution to the text. (31)

More can be added to Rosenblatt's list particularly in relation to students at Al-Imam University. Most students at the university have been raised in God-fearing, prayerful, conservative households. They are conscious of their absolute reliance on the religion of Islam for salvation. Some students denounce all forms of pleasure including watching television, listening to music, and surfing the internet solely for entertainment purposes. Such knowledge is noteworthy since it plays a pivotal role in understanding the reasons behind students' rejection of certain literary texts and their acceptance of others.

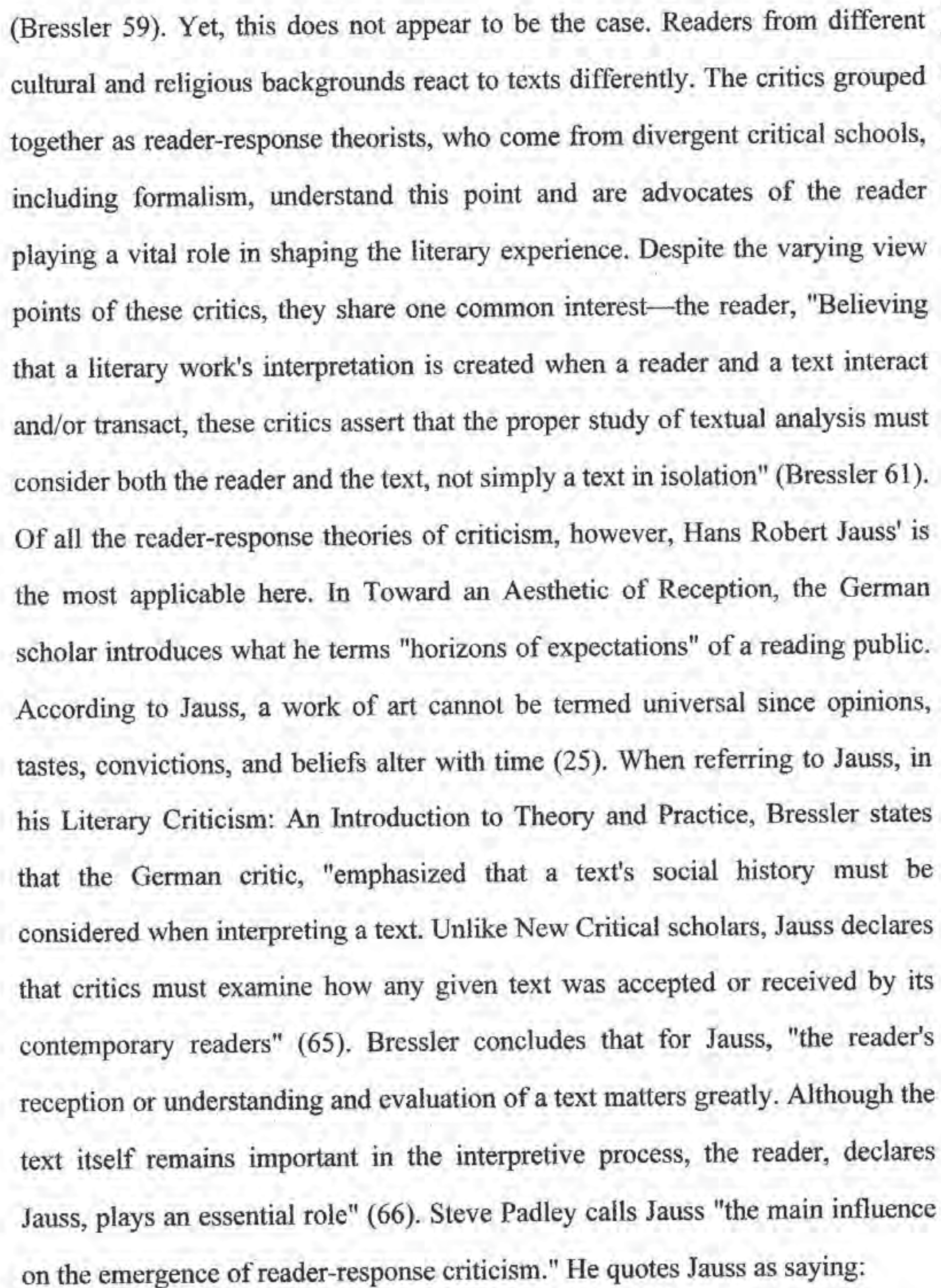
This study however is only concerned with the responses of Saudi female students at an Islamic University to carpe diem poems of seduction, particularly



lyric poems that urge a maiden to lose her maidenhood. Two seventeenth century poems introduced in the "Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century Poetry" course will be the primary focus for this experiment: John Donne's "The Flea" (1633), and Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" (1652). The choice fell on these two poems in particular for several reasons. First, they contain some of the most titillating erotic and overtly pagan verse in English. Second, both poems reflect the carpe diem notion of "the pursuit of pleasure under the sentence of inevitable death" (Abrams 22). Third, both address the male/female relationship—a taboo subject at a university founded on moral and religious values. Last, both poems exhibit certain fundamental moral attitudes toward the physical act. To quote Guerin, "These attitudes reflect an essentially pagan view. They depict [the act of coitus]as strictly dalliance . . . as solely the means of deriving physical sensations" (Guerin 33). It is precisely this attitude which students at Al-Imam University find offensive, disturbing, immoral, and unacceptable. The study is extremely important in that it does not only examine readers' responses to seduction poems per se, but also raises controversial issues that challenge the professor of English literature in the classroom. More importantly, it suggests solutions for a better understanding and appreciation of English literature in general, poetry in particular.

Reader-Response Theory

Text-oriented critics believe that one can appreciate a text regardless of one's own culture, background, personality, upbringing, and so on. And, although there have been text-oriented critics namely I. A. Richards, who employed a reader-response approach to textual analysis, still, the general consensus of such critics is that "a reader can arrive at a better (more correct) interpretation of a poem than one derived from personal responses to a text"



(Bressler 59). Yet, this does not appear to be the case. Readers from different cultural and religious backgrounds react to texts differently. The critics grouped together as reader-response theorists, who come from divergent critical schools, including formalism, understand this point and are advocates of the reader playing a vital role in shaping the literary experience. Despite the varying view points of these critics, they share one common interest—the reader, "Believing that a literary work's interpretation is created when a reader and a text interact and/or transact, these critics assert that the proper study of textual analysis must consider both the reader and the text, not simply a text in isolation" (Bressler 61). Of all the reader-response theories of criticism, however, Hans Robert Jauss' is the most applicable here. In Toward an Aesthetic of Reception, the German scholar introduces what he terms "horizons of expectations" of a reading public. According to Jauss, a work of art cannot be termed universal since opinions, tastes, convictions, and beliefs alter with time (25). When referring to Jauss, in his Literary Criticism: An Introduction to Theory and Practice, Bressler states that the German critic, "emphasized that a text's social history must be considered when interpreting a text. Unlike New Critical scholars, Jauss declares that critics must examine how any given text was accepted or received by its contemporary readers" (65). Bressler concludes that for Jauss, "the reader's reception or understanding and evaluation of a text matters greatly. Although the text itself remains important in the interpretive process, the reader, declares Jauss, plays an essential role" (66). Steve Padley calls Jauss "the main influence on the emergence of reader-response criticism." He quotes Jauss as saying:

- The interpretative process was one that clearly emerged
- Only through a historical perspective: the reader and the
- Text are always located in history, and the act of reading

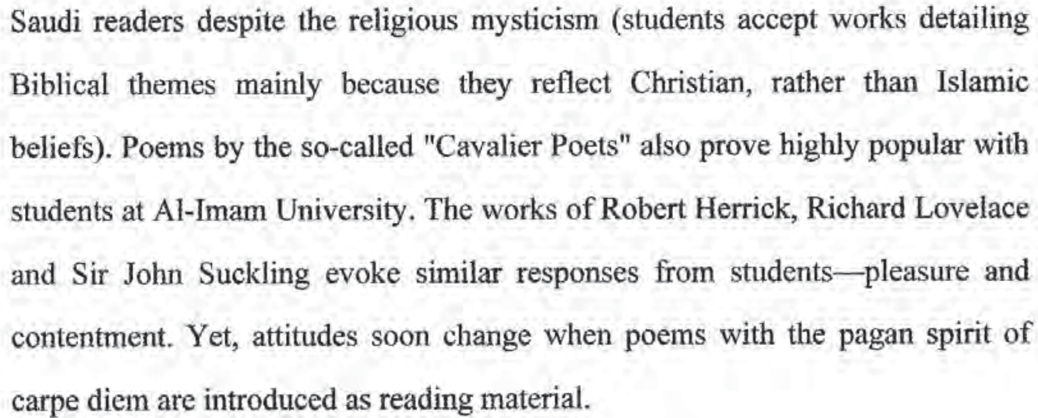
- In any historical period is informed by the conventions
- And expectations of that period, as well as social and
- Cultural influences surrounding the reader and helping
- him or her to make sense of the wider world. (187)

This is witnessed first-hand at Al-Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University where students/readers are shaped by "social and cultural influences."

"Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century Poetry"

Students enrolling in the "Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century Poetry" course at Al-Imam University are informed very early on that, "'The history of English literature' was a fairly stereotyped affair of movements and periods, each illustrated by its own 'characteristic' group of writers" (Daiches 314). Whereas, much enthusiasm is noted throughout the course over Elizabethan, Jacobean, Caroline and Cromwellian poetry in general, this enthusiasm wanes when poems with a carpe diem theme are introduced, regardless of the period. Students are more than keen to read Shakespeare's sonnets either aloud or in the comfort of their own homes in preparation for future class discussions. They are in awe over "Sonnet 18" with its famous lines: "Shall I compare thee to a mid-summer's day? / Thou art more lovely and more temperate" (1-2). The sonnet allows them to anticipate similar romantic declarations from their future husbands.

Shakespeare is not the only literary figure whose poetic works are applauded by Saudi female students. Edmund Spenser's The Faerie Queene, Philip Sidney's Arcadia, and the poetry of Walter Raleigh, Thomas Wyatt, and Thomas Nashe, are also highly valued. Moreover, poems by high profile poets of the seventeenth century are also enjoyed by readers. John Milton's "On Shakespeare," "When I Consider How My Light Is Spent," "Methought I Saw My Late Espoused Saint," and excerpts from Paradise Lost, are embraced by



Saudi readers despite the religious mysticism (students accept works detailing Biblical themes mainly because they reflect Christian, rather than Islamic beliefs). Poems by the so-called "Cavalier Poets" also prove highly popular with students at Al-Imam University. The works of Robert Herrick, Richard Lovelace and Sir John Suckling evoke similar responses from students—pleasure and contentment. Yet, attitudes soon change when poems with the pagan spirit of carpe diem are introduced as reading material.

Carpe Diem Poems

In seventeenth century England a group of poets reacted against "the saccharine conventions of Elizabethan love poetry" by resurrecting the pagan spirit of carpe diem (Guerin 32). For these rebellious poets the Elizabethan notion of pure, idealized love was rejected, in favour of the carnal and physical. They produced lyrics which marked a transition away from the sonnet "usually used for love poetry and more particularly for that semi-Platonic and semi-religious devotion to the Lady or Donna" (Cuddon 896). It was tedious to simply indulge in the spiritual aspect of love and neglect the physical. Hence, the appeal of the pagan notion of carpe diem, a term defined by M.H. Abrams as:

- A Latin phrase from one of Horace's Odes (I. xi) which has
- become the name for a very common literary motif,
- especially in lyric poetry. The speaker in a carpe diem
- poem emphasizes that life is short and time is fleeting in
- order to enjoin his auditor—who is often represented as
- a virgin reluctant to change her state—to make the most
- of present pleasures. (22)

Poems of the carpe diem motif place much emphasis on the brevity of life and the certainty of death. Thomas Jordan's "Coronemus Nos Rosis Antequam

Marcescant" which translates to "Let Us Drink and be Merry" (1637) best expresses this attitude. The poem begins with:

- Let us drink and be merry, dance, joke, and rejoice,
- With claret and sherry, theorbo [sic] and voice!
- The changeable world to our joy is unjust,
    - All treasure's uncertain,
    - Then down with your dust!
- In frolics dispose your pounds, shillings, and pence,
- For we shall be nothing a hundred years hence. (1-7)

The awareness of mortality is strongly felt in the aforementioned lines as the speaker urges all to "eat, drink, and be merry." This urgency to live life to the fullest typifies the conventional carpe diem theme. Furthermore, it emphasizes the passage of time—a fundamental motif in carpe diem poems. Time brings with it death, decay, and physical extinction. More importantly, time, devours physical beauty which is the essence of love poems of the sort. A carpe diem poem about love is never without mention of the lady's beauty. Nonetheless, poems of this genre do not praise beauty as much as exploit it. The reader is repeatedly told that beauty is short-lived and thus should be indulged. The third stanza of Jordan's poem demonstrates this point:

- Your most beautiful bride who with garlands is crown'd
- And kills with each glance as she treads on the ground,
- Whose lightness and brightness doth shine in such splendour
    - That none but the stars
    - Are thought fit to attend her,

Though now she be pleasant and sweet to the sense,

Will be damnable mouldy a hundred years hence. (15-21)

Beauty is temporary, time is short, and life is futile. Nothing awaits man but the grave and the worms that are so eager to feast on his remains:

- Let's eat, drink, and play till the worms do corrupt us,
- 'Tis certain, post mortem Nullavoluptas.
- For health, wealth and beauty, wit, learning and sense,
- Must all come to nothing a hundred years hence. (24-28)

Thomas Jordan's poem is the archetypal carpe diem poem with its message to seize the moment and put no trust in tomorrow. The message the poem conveys offends Saudi female students at Al-Imam University because it goes against their Islamic teachings which stress the importance of living life in servitude, in pursuit of the afterlife. Still, the students attempt to explain the poem away as a Western way of life. To them, pagan and Christian beliefs are no different. It is this misconception which leads most readers at the university to misread texts.

Students are surprised to learn that not everyone welcomed the carpe diem motif in Europe. Christian scholars reacted with much hostility towards the notion of living life solely in the pursuit of pleasure. However, instead of rejecting the idea altogether, men of religion decided to embrace the motif and use it in their religious sermons to awaken lethargic souls. J.A. Cuddon confirms this point:

- The carpe diem motif, in more specifically Christian and
- didactic writings, appears in many sermons and much
- devotional literature during the Middle Ages and
- thereafter, but the import tends to be admonitory: life is
- short—prepare to meet thy doom. However, it is the
- more pagan and epicurean spirit of the motif that has
- made the greatest appeal to writers. (122)

When this is pointed out to novice students at Al-Imam University, the reaction is enlightening. The students are pleased to learn that East and West share commonalities.

Thomas Jordan's "Let Us Drink and be Merry" receives a cold reception at Al-Imam University because it promotes anti-Islamic behaviour such as drinking, dancing, and indulging in carnal pleasures. Students take much offence at the message conveyed through the poem. Yet, their response never reaches the point of indignation. This attitude, however, is reserved for John Donne's "The Flea" and Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress," respectively. When students are requested to read both poems at home and return with their feedback, they return with much hostility. This is due to the fact that in both poems the seduction is intense. Male sexual imaginings play a considerable part in both poems. Wanton love, burning lust, predominate.

The speakers in both carpe diem poems make no effort whatsoever to conceal their sensual appetites. They urge a woman, presumably in the bloom of her beauty to yield to them and in doing so, trivialize virtue. The spiritual aspect of love is notably absent in both poems. It is the physical which is emphasized. Coined "seduction poems," by Terence Dawson in his annotated anthology, Seventeenth-Century English Poetry, "The Flea" and "To His Coy Mistress" are all about carnal love and its appeal to the speaker (36). Although both poems received a warm reception by the scholarly elite in the century in which they had been written, at Al-Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University, their reception is not so warm. This is in accordance with Jauss' theory regarding the "horizons of expectations" where the German scholar recognizes "the general response to literature in terms of reception-aesthetics rather than the individual's response." He "suggests that literary work should be studied in terms of the

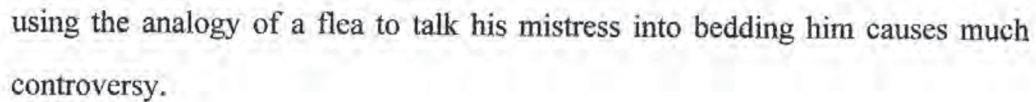
impression or impact it makes on its contemporary audience, and that literary value is judged according to how much the view of a text alters over time" (Cuddon 777). In Toward an Aesthetic of Reception, Jauss writes:

- For the quality and rank of a literary work result neither
- from the biographical or historical conditions of its origin,
- nor from its place in the sequence of the development of
- a genre alone, but rather from the criteria of influence,
- reception, and posthumous fame, criteria that are more
- difficult to grasp. (5)

Still, not everyone agrees with Jauss. Paul De Man, in the introduction to the German scholar's text, contends that:

- Some writers, not very remote from Jauss in time and
- Place, have denied the efficacy of a theory of
- interpretation based on the public reception of a work of
- literature and have discarded it as a mere side-effect
- devoid of hermeneutic interest. (xv)

De Man, elaborates on this point by quoting an excerpt from Walter Benjamin's essay "The Task of the Translator," where Benjamin writes: "Nowhere does a concern for the reception of a work of art or of an artform aver itself fruitful for its understanding. . . . No poem is addressed to a reader, no painting to its beholder, no symphony to its listeners" (xv). This is refutable since hostile reader-response noted at Al-Imam University in relation to carpe diem poems of seduction, proves Jauss correct. It is often a struggle on the part of the professor at Al-Imam University to engage students in particular works of art due to their content. John Donne's "The Flea" exemplifies this point. The poem about a lover



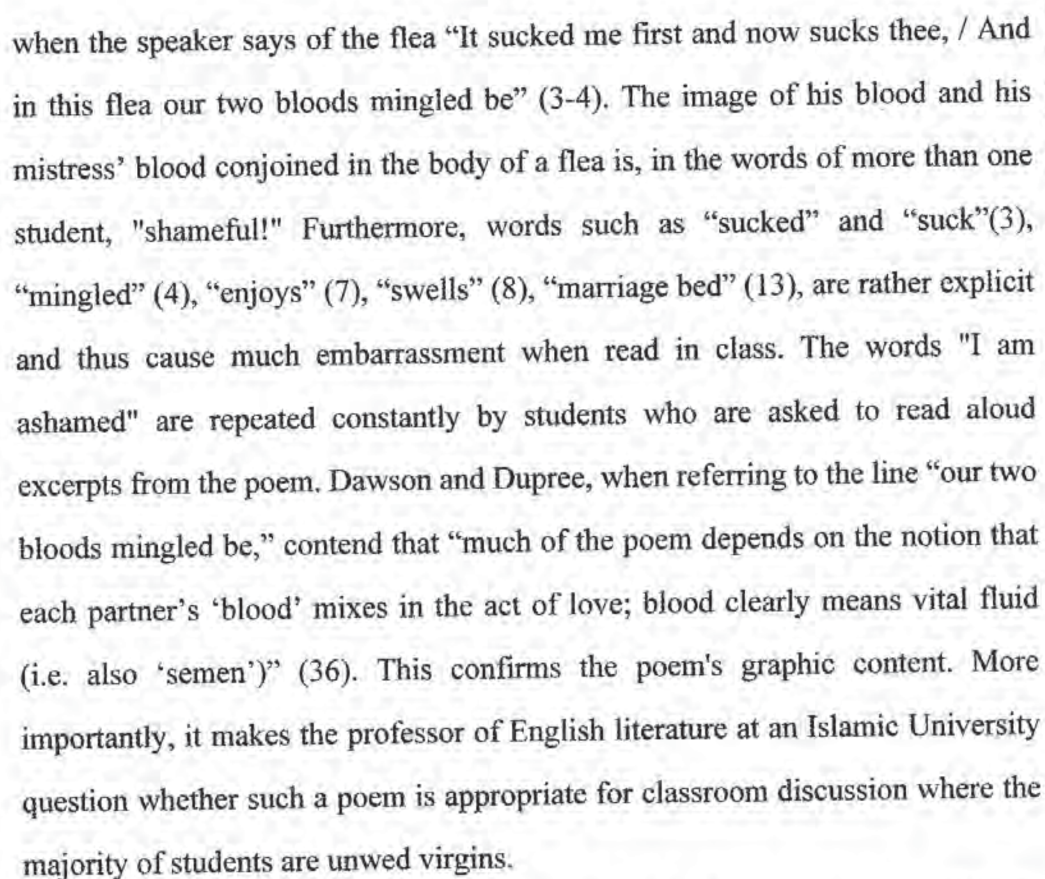
using the analogy of a flea to talk his mistress into bedding him causes much controversy.

"The Flea"

"The Flea" typifies the carpe diem mode of poetry with its witty charm, presentation of a logical argument, and its mockery of sentimental, romantic love. The poem begins with the speaker pointing out a harmless flea and declaring:

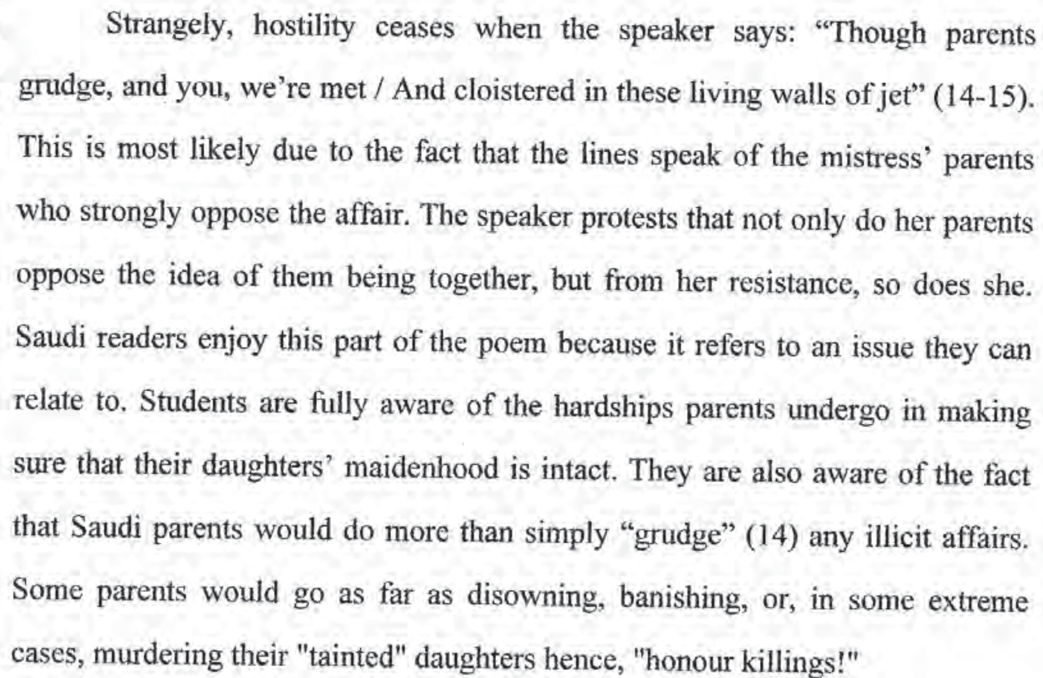
> Mark but this flea, and mark in this,
> How little that which thou deny'st me is.
> It sucked me first and now sucks thee,
> And in this flea our two bloods mingled be:
> Thou know'st that this cannot be said
> A sin, nor shame, nor loss of maidenhead.
> Yet this enjoys before it woo,
> And, pampered swells with one blood made of two:
> And this, alas, is more than we would do. (1-9)

The aforementioned lines are extremely graphic with obvious innuendos. Although, the analogy used should add wit to the lover's seduction and make it less offensive, with Saudi female readers, it does not. In truth, what the readers find most offensive is the speaker's nonchalant attitude towards chastity. Saying "Mark but this flea, and mark in this, / How little that which thou deny'st me is," shows that the speaker has very little consideration for virginity (1-2). The image of the flea which is very "little" suggests that the issue of his mistress' virtue is of no greater value. For a Saudi reader, particularly one who is still a virgin, this is unacceptable. To trivialize a state of maidenhood is a crime since society condemns any unwed female who is not chaste. Further discomfort is caused



when the speaker says of the flea "It sucked me first and now sucks thee, / And in this flea our two bloods mingled be" (3-4). The image of his blood and his mistress' blood conjoined in the body of a flea is, in the words of more than one student, "shameful!" Furthermore, words such as "sucked" and "suck"(3), "mingled" (4), "enjoys" (7), "swells" (8), "marriage bed" (13), are rather explicit and thus cause much embarrassment when read in class. The words "I am ashamed" are repeated constantly by students who are asked to read aloud excerpts from the poem. Dawson and Dupree, when referring to the line "our two bloods mingled be," contend that "much of the poem depends on the notion that each partner's 'blood' mixes in the act of love; blood clearly means vital fluid (i.e. also 'semen')" (36). This confirms the poem's graphic content. More importantly, it makes the professor of English literature at an Islamic University question whether such a poem is appropriate for classroom discussion where the majority of students are unwed virgins.

Although the general emotion noted in the classroom is hostility in relation to Donne's "The Flea," this hostility lessens when Christian allusions are pointed out. For example, in the second stanza, the speaker pleads with his lady to spare the life of the flea, and in doing so, refers to the Holy Trinity. For, he says, "This flea is you and I, and this / Our marriage bed and marriage temple" (12-13). Students appear unfazed by the Christian mysticism. It is the speaker's allusion to the act of coitus which disturbs. Age, most likely plays a major role in this reaction. The majority of students are not yet nubile. Regardless, they are ready for marriage. This is due to the fact that Saudi society promotes early marriages. Any girl who remains unwed by the time she reaches her mid-to-late twenties will bear the label of "spinster." This perhaps explains the students' fixation on the male/female relationship.



Strangely, hostility ceases when the speaker says: "Though parents grudge, and you, we're met / And cloistered in these living walls of jet" (14-15). This is most likely due to the fact that the lines speak of the mistress' parents who strongly oppose the affair. The speaker protests that not only do her parents oppose the idea of them being together, but from her resistance, so does she. Saudi readers enjoy this part of the poem because it refers to an issue they can relate to. Students are fully aware of the hardships parents undergo in making sure that their daughters' maidenhood is intact. They are also aware of the fact that Saudi parents would do more than simply "grudge" (14) any illicit affairs. Some parents would go as far as disowning, banishing, or, in some extreme cases, murdering their "tainted" daughters hence, "honour killings!"

The third and final stanza of the poem brings much relief to the Saudi female reader at Al-Imam University as the lady kills the flea. Through the gesture of purpling her nail "in blood of innocence" (20), the mistress demonstrates to the reader that she did not succumb to her lover's plea. Her virginity is still intact thus earning her the label of "cruel" (20) by her pleading lover.

Parfitt in English Poetry of the Seventeenth Century raises an interesting point when he states: "It has often been noted that Donne's lyrics do not provide much sense of the physical nature of the woman . . . whereas the Elizabethan tendency is to present a picture in terms of conventional courtly ideas of female beauty" (25). In "The Flea," the female is denied autonomy. Her physical beauty, although implied, is not dwelt upon. Parfitt continues: "The question then arises of how a reader does or should respond. The rhetoric of the poems demands a reader's cooperation, but a feminist (of either sex) is likely to resist such demands, whereby the reading process is less a dialogue than a power-struggle."

He concludes: "The result is the view that Donne's love poetry is valuable primarily as a sustained explication of male attitudes to women" (25). What Parfitt says is highly significant. Feminist critics, for example, perceive the poem as belittling to women. They are offended that the auditor in the poem is denied autonomy. Saudi female readers at Al-Imam University share the same sentiments. The reduction of the female to a sexual object causes much offence.

"To His Coy Mistress"

Hostile reader-response continues with students at Al-Imam University as a poem with a similar theme is introduced. "To His Coy Mistress," presents an almost identical situation to that of "The Flea"—a male lover urging his mistress to give-in to his amorous desires before she loses her beauty. The poem was written in the late 1640s, and hailed as "one of the most celebrated erotic poems in English literature"

(Guerin 150). Dawson and Dupree point out that "Marvell's best-known poem is based on the classical theme of carpe diem" (463). S. K. Heninger also agrees that, "To His Coy Mistress" is a carpe diem poem. He writes "'To His Coy Mistress,' as Donne's love poems, puts love in pawn to time" (65). The speaker in Marvell's poem makes his auditor fully aware of the futility of life. He uses a convincing three-part argument to raise the issue of death, decay, and empty eternity.

Marvell's poem is rich with allusions to the Bible, Greek mythology, courtly love, and Metaphysical poetry. Nonetheless, the concern here is solely with the erotic allusions. "To His Coy Mistress" emphasizes the sensual. This is clearly evident in the lover's reference to his mistress' breasts which are worthy of adoration as well as to the rest of her body. Furthermore, the image of the

lovers rolled up into one ball in the concluding lines of the poem alludes, without a doubt, to the act of coitus.

The speaker in Marvell's poem is the archetypal male seducer. He uses charm in the manner of a Don Juan or a Casanova to tell his mistress of the slow state with which their wooing should be conducted, if only time was in their favour. He begins his seduction with a very convincing argument: "Had we but world enough, and time, / This coyness, Lady, were no crime" (1-2). If there was enough time to court, then he would court her forever: "I would / Love you ten years before the Flood, / And you should, if you please, refuse / Till the conversion of the Jews" (7-10). The lover proclaims his love to be sincere, so sincere that if only he had enough time, he would "serve her through praise, adoration, and faithful devotion from the fourth millennium B.C. (the alleged time of Noah's flood) to the conversion of the Jews to Christianity, an event prophesied to take place just before the end of the world" (Guerin 30). This is simply because his lady is worthy of such slow seduction. Dawson and Dupree elaborate:

> soon after the initial Creation, God angered by the sinful ways of humankind, caused such heavy rain to fall that all the inhabitants of the earth were drowned in the resulting flood, except Noah, who was ordered to build an 'ark' in which he, his family, and a male and female of every species of animal and bird survived [Genesis 6-9]. (464)

Saudi readers understand this allusion in the poem since the story of Noah and his Ark also has its place in the Holy Quran. Yet, they do not understand what the speaker means by "Till the conversion of the Jews" (10). Dawson and

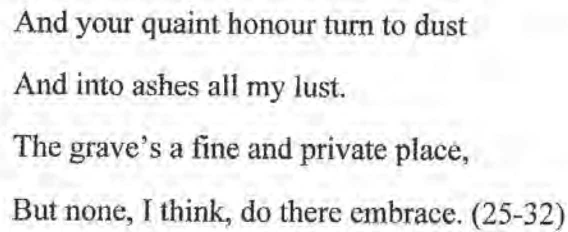
Dupree provide the necessary elaboration regarding this point when they write, "according to Christian belief, a remote and improbable event in the distant future, usually thought of as the end of time" (465). Although the Biblical allusions in "To His Coy Mistress" are plentiful, the response noted is similar, if not identical, to the response noted earlier in relation to the Biblical allusion in Donne's "The Flea"—nonchalance.

Christian mysticism produces little or no response from the readers at Al-Imam University. It is the physical aspect of the poem which evokes a response. Hostile reader-response is observed when lines such as: "An hundred years should go to praise / Thine eyes and on thy forehead gaze" are read aloud in class (13-14). The hostility festers with what the speaker says next:

> 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. (15-18)

The second part of the argument brings no relief to the reader since it shows the speaker growing impatient with his mistress' coyness. The speaker declares that if he had all the time in the world, the act of coitus could be delayed. However, he does not. This becomes his argument in the second stanza where a sense of urgency is detected in his tone thus typifying the archetypal male seducer. He tells his lady that if she continues to be coy, then, her beauty will eventually fade and the only living organisms that will indulge her will be the worms:

> 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. (25-32)

The phallic image of worms violating the lady's corpse in a manner he is denied is too graphic and extreme. Patrides writes:"The bland persuasive reasonableness of the tone contrasts ironically with the images of force"(65). Students cannot fathom why the lover must resort to images of terror and violence in order to frighten his mistress into submission. The protest noted in the classroom centres not only on the image of worms penetrating the mistress' corpse per se, but also on the use of the word "quaint" in relation to his lady's honour. Again, like the speaker in Donne's poem, this speaker too, places little value on virtue. Students are outraged that a girl's honour means nothing to the speaker. Further outrage is caused over the word "embrace" (32). They protest that only husbands and wives should have that privilege.

According to Marvell's speaker, death is inevitable, therefore, they should make the most of the present. This brings the reader to the final stage of the argument— seizing the moment. The climax is reached with the following lines:

Now, therefore, while the youthful glue

Sits on thy skin like morning dew,

And while thy willing soul transpires

At every pore with instant fires,

. . . .

Let us roll all our Strength, and all

Our sweetness, up into one Ball:

And tear our Pleasures with rough strife,

Thorough the Iron gates of Life. (33-44)

The advice to abandon coyness and instead behave with recklessness does not go well with the students. Neither do words such as "fires," "devour," and "pleasures" which are highly suggestive. Miner in The Cavalier Mode: From Jonson to Cotton states that "even at a later period of the century [the seventeenth century] a girl was thought ready for love at fifteen" (207). In Saudi Arabia, past and present, a girl is thought ready for love the day she weds—not before!

It is important to note that Saudi female students at Al-Imam University are not the only addressees who have a problem with the contents of "To His Coy Mistress." Feminists, also oppose the way in which the lover "cheapens" love, so to speak. The male seducer appears bereft of emotion. He toys with love and the emotions of women. To him, women are objects to be used and discarded. Thus, a feminist reading of "To His Coy Mistress" would undoubtedly label the male a manipulator who violates the female body through highly graphic words. Guerin supports this point when he declares, "the speaker offers the traditional adoration of the various parts of her body, effectively dismembering her identity into discrete sexual objects, including her eyes, her forehead, her breasts, 'the rest,' and 'every part,' culminating in a wish for her to 'show' her heart" (215). Feminist critics see the poem as an assault on the female body. The woman is "subject to being 'devoured' by her amorous admirer and by time itself" (216). Guerin concludes, "The repellent quality of his [the speaker's] images of women—like a bad dream—haunts us long after his [the speaker's] artful invention and his own coy sense of humour fade" (217). Interestingly enough, both the feminist reading of the poem, as well as the reading of the poem by Saudi female students at an Islamic University,

exemplify Jauss' "horizons of expectations" theory. Throughout his text, the German scholar stresses:

> A literary work is not an object that stands by itself and that offers the same view to each reader in each period. It is not a monument that monologically reveals its timeless essence. It is much more like an orchestration that strikes ever new resonances among its readers and that frees the text from the material of the words and brings it to contemporary existence. . . . History of literature is a process of aesthetic reception and production that takes place in the realization of literary texts on the part of the receptive reader, the reflective critic, and the author in his continuing productivity. (Toward an Aesthetic of Reception 21)

"To the Virgins, To Make Much of Time"

Whereas, "The Flea" and "To His Coy Mistress" result in hostile reader-response at an all-female Islamic University, Robert Herrick's "To the Virgins, To Make Much of Time" (1648), receives a more than welcome reception. The poem is also a carpe diem poem of the same period and included in the course syllabus. Yet, it differs in that it is not a seduction poem. The speaker in Herrick's poem addresses all young, unwed girls, urging them to marry before it is too late. The poem is very short, and ends with sound advice for girls not yet nubile:

> Then be not coy, but use your time,
> And while ye may, go marry;
> For having lost but once your prime,

You may for ever tarry. (13-16)

Herrick, unlike Marvell and Donne, has a very different view of the carpe diem motif. His poem speaks of virtue. There is nothing to lose in seizing the present moment, if the love is meant to be innocent, pure, and not tainted. This is in stark contrast to the message conveyed through both, "The Flea" and "To His Coy Mistress," respectively, where the message is clear from the very beginning—love ends with death, chastity must be given up. The physical imagery in both poems is overt, aggressive, and extremely graphic. Moreover, promiscuity is encouraged. On the other hand, Herrick's poem shows a contempt for behaviour of the sort. This explains why the poem receives a warm reception at Al-Imam University. The poem's message is in accordance with Islamic law, thought, and beliefs—Promoting Marriage!

Conclusion

Saudi female students at Al-Imam University should not be mocked, condemned, or considered backward simply because they reject the secular and embrace the sacred. They reject carpe diem poems of seduction because they conflict with Islamic teachings. This hostile response to pagan teachings is not new. A similar occurrence took place centuries ago in Europe where much conflict was noted in relation to pagan beliefs and influence. Dawson and Dupree in their anthology entitled: Seventeenth-Century English Poetry speak of the conflict between "the two major strains of European culture: Judaeo-Christian and Graeco-Roman." They elaborate:

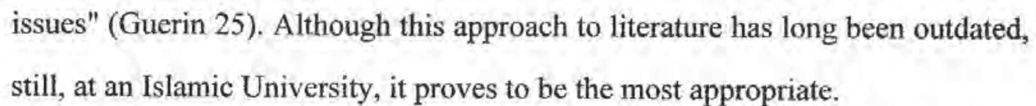
> The conflict between pagan learning and Christian beliefs troubled many early Christian intellectuals, such as St Jerome or St Augustine. This tension between the two was still being felt as late as the fourteenth century when

> Petrarch, the great Italian poet, intellectual and man of letters, had qualms about his irresistible attraction to the literature of the pagan past. Yet throughout the Middle Ages, pagan Roman authors such as Virgil, Horace and Ovid had continued to be read and appreciated. By the time of the High Renaissance in the sixteenth century, few were troubled by the apparent contradiction between the two traditions of learning. It remained for a great poet like Milton to demonstrate not only that they could be reconciled but that the tension between them was fruitful and had, indeed, been responsible for the peculiar character of European culture and civilization. (15)

Christian intellectuals did not only oppose pagan learning per se, but also frowned upon anything considered immoral, blasphemous, or sinful. Catharine Arnold in The Sexual History of London contends that: "The Commonwealth's attitude [in the seventeenth century] towards 'sin' was decidedly intolerant" (88). She adds that the "Puritans set about the destruction not only of London's brothels but of all other forms of pleasure. . . . Parliament closed all the theatres and gaming houses and the actors were whipped at the cart's arse" (88-89). Jauss in Toward an Aesthetic of Reception also brings up the topic of public uproar and the prosecution of certain poetic pieces in the name of morality. Jauss uses Baudelaire's Les Fleurs du mal, as exemplar (176). Thus, it should come as no surprise when Muslim readers at an Islamic university display a similar uproar towards works deemed "classic" by the rest of the world. Students' "horizons of

expectations," to use Jauss' term, have conditioned them to accept only works which moralize and philosophize.

In sum, if the readers play an active role in the reception of literary pieces as Jauss and his disciples contend, then, how does a professor at an Islamic University deal with the resisting reader? How can the professor make certain poetic pieces acceptable to the conservative reader? Students' responses to poems with a carpe diem theme are affected by their education, culture, religion, home-life, and the attitudes of a conservative and sacred society. As a result, they are inclined to settle for the traditional and the typical, and reject the novel and the particular. David Daiches is not mistaken when he declares that "Literature is one of the most difficult of subjects to teach" (315). The professor of English literature is under some moral and aesthetic obligation to instruct and delight. Thus, the only way to make poems such as "The Flea" and "To His Coy Mistress" acceptable at an Islamic based university is to moralize and philosophize. This approach to literature is not new. Plato, had been so concerned with the content of literature and its negative influence on young minds that he chose to exclude all poets from The Republic. After much consideration and deliberation, however, he chose to include only those poets with a high level of morality and ethics. Bressler confirms this point when he declares, "literary criticism's concern with morality began with Plato" (18). Horace, also stressed the importance of moralism in relation to literary pieces. "Literature's ultimate aim, declares Horace, is 'dulce et utile,' to be 'sweet and useful'; the best writings, he argues, both teach and delight" (Bressler 22). Advocates of this approach to literature, moral-philosophical critics, believe that, "the larger function of literature is to teach morality and to probe philosophical



issues" (Guerin 25). Although this approach to literature has long been outdated, still, at an Islamic University, it proves to be the most appropriate.

Thus, when poems such as "The Flea" and "To His Coy Mistress" are met with hostile reader-response, the only way to pacify the students is to moralize. Students are repeatedly told that the women in both poems assert their independence by denying their speakers. They are highly intelligent women, otherwise their men "would not bother with such vaulting metaphysics" (Guerin 215). Guerin in his analysis of "To His Coy Mistress" elaborates on the poem by explaining that: "The woman addressed is goddess-like: capricious and cruel. Both the speaker's flattery and his verbal attacks mask his fear of her. To him the feminine is enclosed and unattainable—tomblike as well as womblike." This he follows with the most insightful commentary of all, "the woman's power is exercised in continued refusal. . . . It is a poem about power, and the power may be with the silent female" (216). When Guerin's statement is read aloud to a mob of indignant students, the result is overwhelming. Students are pleased to learn that the resisting female triumphs in the end. This implies that what Saudi society, their parents, and the religion of Islam had been preaching all along about remaining chaste holds much truth. They smile and nod in approval. A sense of female empowerment is detected on every smiling face. They are now convinced that strong, confident women are those who resist temptation, who deny all propositions.

Louis Simpson in An Introduction to Poetry contends that "poems that set out to teach a lesson are bad poetry" (Simpson 13). He adds:

> many people still believe . . . that poetry should be
> functional, a kind of moral chair, and they search out
> poems that have a "message" that can be applied. The

> effect of this on the young is disastrous, for children regard poetry as a task, and when they grow up they will not read it. Not only are moralizing poems boring, but if poems are only messages about how to be "good," that is, how to get along with people and succeed in life, then children can learn more from textbooks or from experience. (14)

Baudelaire voices a similar opinion when he provides an explanation of Poe's essay "The Poetic Principle." The French poet raises awareness to the dangers of didacticism in poetry by declaring: "Poetry cannot, under penalty of death or failure, be assimilated to science or morality," adding, "it does not have Truth as its object, it has only itself. The means for demonstrating truth are other and are elsewhere." He concludes by stressing: "Truth has nothing to do with songs" (qtd. in Simpson 14).

From what has been demonstrated so far, both Simpson's and Baudelaire's comments are refutable. At Islamic Universities in general, Al-Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud University in particular, every literary piece should carry a moral message. This is in keeping with Islamic teachings, culture, tradition, and society. Bressler writes: "Critics continually debate literature's chief function. Tracing their arguments to Plato, many contend that literature's primary function is moral, its chief value being its usefulness for cultural or societal purposes." He goes on to discuss Aristotle's perception of a work of art and asks: "In its most simple terms, the debate centers around two concerns: Is literature's chief function to teach (extrinsic) or to entertain (intrinsic)?" (13). At Al-Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University, the answer is plain and simple—Both!

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