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Implications of Reader- Response Theory

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Abstract:

Reader-Response literary theory (also known as *transactional theory*) is a theory that focuses on how readers make knowledge when reading a text. A text can be of any genre - short story, novel, poem, etc. Reader-response theory promotes a reader-oriented approach to responding to text, marking a shift from a text-centered to a reader-oriented focus on reading. In this theory, readers respond to the text by generating their own meaning to what they are reading. The approach encourages the transaction between the reader and the text. Each individual reader extracts his or her own distinctive meaning out of the text. The theory promotes critical thinking in readers and boosts multiple perspectives and associations with past experiences. Various thinkers argue that Reader-Response offers benefits beyond the classroom, enhancing the open-mindedness that is the base of a democratic society. The present paper is an attempt to explore various aspects, stages, strategies and application of reader response theory.

Keywords: Romantic Theory, New Criticism, Structural Analysis, Transaction, Reader Response.

Historically there have been, and still exist, three major approaches to making meaning through texts. Romantic theory was the leading theory in the 19th century to the 1940's, as every critic attempted to explicate the intentions of the writer. This theory supports the obsession with the author and his or her message; the literary work is seen as a manifestation of the writer's biography and historical background. The general supposition of this theory is that capable readers learn to interpret the text, looking for the author's proposed message or meaning. The author's intention is the key to determining what the work is really all about, i.e., its meaning. Only through close examination and investigation of the structure and techniques of the author, can a reader reach the one meaning that is the only meaning that the author meant the text to articulate. Typically in the classroom where formal analysis is the focus, the instructor lectures, presenting an analysis of the literary work and the author's background.

In the 1940's, the major theory that explained the creation of meaning shifted as readers focused on a close reading of the language in a text. This theory is called New Criticism. In New

Criticism, the reader focuses on a close reading of the text, with a formal analysis of the setting, character, plot, language theme, etc. The reader's job is to watchfully recognize the major literary elements of what he or she is reading. Teachers teach close, concise analysis of the text. Those who teach through this theory are critical of the reader's attempt to make his or her own feelings important in the reading of any text. Readers are not motivated to respond to their own personal associations with the text.

The emergence of theoretical framework of Reader-Response occurred during the 1960's to 1980's, with a marked shift of attention on the reader. This reaction challenged New Criticism as educators attempted to focus away from structural analysis of the texts. Instead, teachers who encourage reader-response help their students develop the quality of their reading. In Reader-Response theory, readers are taught to validate their responses by providing textual support, as a means of avoiding inappropriate, unsuitable or random interpretations. The teacher's role is to make a community that cultivates individuality of response.

There are three elements to reader-response: the reader, the text, and the context. Frank Rosenblatt, an American psychologist who is well known for his theories of perception and also known for his work in artificial intelligence viewed that reading is not a passive act. When readers read, they bring their own experiences to the selection. There is no one factual interpretation, as the reader is the active creator of responses. Readers re-create the text for themselves. They do this by bringing forward their own understandings about how texts work as well as their own beliefs and expectations. A reader creates his or her own meanings, not one particular meaning that the author of the text may want the reader to attain.

Reader-response is a transaction between the reader and the text. For a transaction to happen, the text must be comprehensible and within the developmental range of the reader. The reader also must be encouraged to read; inattentiveness blocks one's ability to respond. Younger children's responses are more liberal than those of more mature readers, whose responses tend to be more interpretative. Besides producing their own individual responses, readers work in small groups to further improve their understanding about the text.

It is also well accepted fact that no two readers experience the same poem in the same way. By comparing responses, the readers may find out further /possibilities in the text and in their own writing, and move into conversation that will supplementary for their understanding of the text and their own responses.

Reader-response can divided further into five theoretical perspectives. Reader-response theorists have assessed readers' processes of reading and have identified ways in which the reader creates meaning, through textual, experiential, psychological, social and cultural means. Theorists study certain characteristics of readers in order to decide how they make meaning through reading of a text.

Textual theorists focus on knowledge of text conventions, what students know about genre conventions to respond to specific parts of the text. Readers apply this knowledge to help them understand what they are reading and are encouraged to look for links between several texts, perhaps defining similarities between stories. Through each new experience, readers modify their knowledge of the conventions of a genre and use this knowledge in their approach to the next text. For example, in the classroom, readers may compare two texts and look at similarities and differences in terms of language and style.

Experiential reader-response theorists focus on the nature of the readers' engagement with the text, the ways in which students identify with characters, visualize images, etc. When students engage with the text, they become involved emotionally, empathizing or identifying with the characters. They construct substitute worlds through their reading, conceptualizing the characters, the setting, the events, etc. and create visual images. They make connections with the text and their own lives, and reflect upon the quality of their own experiences with the text. For example, in the classroom, readers are often given optional activities that they choose, based on their learning styles. After readers have explored their personal responses, efferent responses follow, with a focus more on analysis. Reader-response does not prevent the literary examination of the text; this often develops through the writing of ongoing responses. But with either aesthetic or efferent responses, students must always return to the text to authenticate their responses.

Psychological reader-response theorists look at the psychological aspects of readers, focusing on their personalities and development levels and how they affect reading response. Readers' responses are shaped by a host of psychological dimensions; the reader may engage in a fantasy world, vicariously experiencing the romantic quests of characters, adopting the characters' perspectives. The reader may respond as a thinker, reflecting on the underlying meanings linked with the characters' actions. Readers may become interpreters of texts, as they grapple with the contradictions within the text. In the classroom, teachers consider developmental levels and abilities to problem-solve in encouraging strategies for responding to texts.

Social reader-response theorists establish how social settings or contexts impact responses, such as ways in which book clubs or literature circles encourage reader-response. Students work in small groups so that all their voices can be heard; they are jointly dependent on one another for sharing responses. They draw parallels between their own social experiences with other members of the group, as well as characters in the texts.

Cultural theorists determine how readers' cultural roles, attitudes and values shape responses. Readers' identities can also be shaped by texts. In the classroom, readers write about their own families and backgrounds, which have shaped their lives and self-concepts.

Applications

Activities used in Reader-Response theory can be applied to any genre, poem, short story, novel or play. The method can offer a forum whereby readers can react to text from their own distinctive perspective, providing them with an opportunity to engage in in-depth and thought-provoking dialogue with other readers.

Appleyard, a well known British journalist and novelist presents multiple strategies for promoting reader-response. He invites students to provide an emotional or intellectual response to a reading, giving them time to form their responses. He then finds links between responses, or similarities that emphasize a shared experience. Through use of small groups, he then invites a discussion about the responses, as students connect with other texts.

Another guiding practice to encourage reader response is to give support without directing. Students read the text, recording what is happening in their thoughts as they read: What do they remember? What is their sense of the text? Teachers can then go on to ask: What did they see in the text? Upon what did they focus most intensely as they read? What words, phrases, images, and ideas? The teacher then groups students to respond to one another's responses: Did the text call to mind different memories, etc.? Students then reflect on the process: How did they change in their own understandings through this process.

Romantic theory, Reader-Response and New Criticism methodologies are all used in today's classrooms, in varying degrees. The implementation of any of these methods depends upon the kind of relationship teachers want their readers to have with the text. When teachers use New Criticism or Romantic theory as a literary approach, they are maintaining an objective distance from the text and the students. Those implementing Reader-Response are drawing out readers' experiences with the text. Most reading occurs along a range of aesthetic and efferent responses; proponents of reader-response theory are challenging the traditional methods of literature teaching as being too restrictive and leading to inadequate views.

Stages in Reader - Response

Rosenblatt presents stages to fostering reader /response in the classroom. Teachers follow these stages by promoting four aspects: awareness of past experiences with a text; a revision of any previous interpretations; a sharing of reader-responses in small groups; and, taking a closer look at the text after reflecting on others' responses.

Response Strategies

Many theorists have identified a wide range of response strategies that readers can use to gain understanding of a text: engaging, conceiving, connecting, explaining, interpreting, and judging.

These can be enhanced through written or discussion responses, oral interpretations, role-playing, artwork, rewriting texts, or creating new ones. There are several types of transactions that readers make when reacting. These include: making literary judgments, whereby readers make more informed assessment after reading; writing narration and associational responses, as readers retell stories and depart from the text into personal experience; and, making self-involvement responses, where the reader makes responses of association with the actions and feelings of characters.

Response Groups

Literature Circles and Book Clubs are prearranged sessions whereby readers are collaboratively occupied in reading and responding to texts. Within these groups are free expressions of readers' opinions, promoting critical thinking among the group members.

Journals

Journals encourage opportunities to support growth in responses. Through responding in journals, students take time to think about what they have read. Dialogue journals are response journals whereby the teacher responds to the reader's writing. This creates a joint sharing of both personal, or affective and cognitive responses on any given character or plot.

Response Prompts

Response prompts are opened-ended prompts that move students from initial retellings of stories and summaries to more analytical reactions and greater emotional participation.

Influences on Reader-Responses

N.Karolides, a well known researcher of reader response theory lists many influences that impact reader-responses. Responses are influenced by readers' past experiences and current circumstances; readers' reasons for reading; the recursive nature of responses; readers' depth of involvement in reading and the maturity of readers; and the selective attention which causes readers to focus on singular elements of the text.

Determining Validity of Reader-Responses

Reader-response theory is based on the belief that /there is no single correct interpretation or meaning to a literary work, that the text does not hold the one right answer to meaning, and that there is a consistent set of criteria that identifies valid responses to text.

Teachers can use these three questions to shape their evaluation of responses: To what degree does the reader-response include the various features of the text and the shades of the

language? To what degree does the response include aspects that do not reflect the text? To what degree has the reading evoked a coherent work?

Viewpoints

What Teachers Need to Consider

Karolides suggests the use of certain strategies and principles for teachers interested in promoting reader-response theory in their classrooms. They must:

- Understand that transaction between the text and the reader must be at the center of the classroom.
- Start discussion where the readers are, focusing on initial reactions and understandings of texts before they can focus on perceptions.
- Support and validate responses.
- Provide guidance by using thoughtful questions, personal responses, and compelling information.
- Promote personal growth and allow readers ownership of their reading.

Cultural Texts - Extended Reader Response

Cultural texts are an extension of reader-response. Cultural texts are generally used in urban classrooms with those students who have little exposure to literary texts that connect with their lives. In this model, teachers identify texts and authors whose ideological stances are familiar and appealing to readers. The responses that result from these readings become the cultural texts, the readers' own work. These personal stories reflect the particular aspirations, struggles and realities of urban experiences. These reader-responses become the vehicle for discussion and exploration.

There are four major interrelated points that teachers must consider when implementing cultural texts. They must:

- Encourage students' desire to understand and feel empathy for different people, times, and dilemmas.
- Promote the use of students' own cultural resources to make connections, not only to a text, but with themselves and others.

- Promote responses to other students' writings so that students can interpret stereotypical characters.
- Promote the articulation of critical responses to their own texts, so that they become critical of other texts and learn to challenge racism and sexism their own and societal stances and beliefs.

The teachers can use the following activities of depending upon the availability of the time and the strength of the class.

Book Clubs: Book Clubs are student-led discussion groups, heterogeneously grouped by reading level. Members of the group may all read the same book or different books within the same shared theme. Students discuss ideas that emerged from their reader-response logs, airing their questions, confusions, and related personal experiences. Students are also taught group dynamics for book club discussions, such as listening with respect, building on others' ideas, debating and critiquing ideas, assuming leadership, and following another's lead.

Literature Circles: Literature Circles are student-centered reading activities for a group of four to six students at any grade level. Each member is responsible for reading the title chosen by the group; they meet in the group to share their thoughts, concerns and understandings about the literary works. Reader-response journals are often used to foster conversation about the plot, the characters, etc. Each member of the Circle is responsible for bringing information about the text to the group; this information could include discussion about characters, vocabulary, etc.

It can be observed that Reader response theorists give importance to the process of transaction between the literary text and the reader. The concept of transaction emphasizes the reader's relationship with, and continuing awareness of, the text as one can observe that there exists a special relationship between the reader and the text during the reading process.

To sum up it can be noticed that Reader-Response theorists evaluate readers' processes of reading, and identify ways in which the reader creates meaning, through textual, experiential, psychological, social and cultural means.

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