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One Text, Many Meanings: Reader-Response Theory Applied

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Abstract:

Reader-response theory privileges a reader's interpretation of a text over authorial intentions behind writing the text. This paper is an attempt to apply the reader-response theory to Emily Dickinson's poem, 'This is My Letter to the World.' The study has been performed by administering questionnaires and analysing readers' responses to them. Results show that readers respond differently to the text. They analyse by looking at the poem's themes, its technical aspects, its historical information, poet's style and even associate it with personal experiences.

Keywords: Reader-response theory, Dickinson, poem, text, Barthes, Iser, Rosenblatt, author

1. Introduction

Roland Barthes propounds the "death of the author" with the "birth of the reader," giving the reader all authority to interpret a text, keeping at bay the author's biographical context and intentions (224). For Barthes, there is no true reading of any text, but only interpretations. While he negates authorial role in the reading of a text, for Wolfgang Iser, the reading process is an "interaction" between the text and the reader's imagination, through which she/he fills the gaps in the text that have been deliberately left by the author (279). The "text only takes on life when it is realised," which depends on the "individual disposition of the reader... acted on by the different patterns of the text" (Iser, 279). Iser also says that a literary work brings change in the reader (296). Louise M. Rosenblatt posits that the reader has a "dynamic reading transaction" with the text, and the reading experience is based on the reader's context, knowledge and beliefs (43). By making personal connections to a text, their cultural background and individuality are revealed, and they are not separate from the text any longer (Moutray, et al. 30). Although reader-response theorists vary in their theoretical explanations of the reading process, all of them assert the active role of a reader and that a text cannot be isolated from its effects, or responses, which are essential to meaning-making (Tompkins ix).

The written response allows readers to understand and interpret texts in personally important ways if the individuality of their responses is welcome (Pantaleo 78). My study, therefore, seeks to apply the reader-response theory by collecting and analysing written

responses to Emily Dickinson's poem, 'This is My Letter to the World.' According to Culler, literary works possess a structure and meaning as they are read "in a particular way, because these potential properties, latent in the object itself, are actualized by the theory of discourse applied in the act of reading" (Culler 102). For my purpose, a poem was chosen because reading a poem is less time-consuming for the participants than reading a story or a book. The choice of the poet stems from her popularity in the field of literature, and some familiarity to Dickinson's work is expected of the readers from English literature background. Also, Dickinson is known for her unique writing style and use of punctuation. This particular poem was chosen because of its short-length and the wide interpretive range it offers, while being typically 'Dickinsonian' in style. The name of the poet and year of the poem are mentioned to the readers so that they can, if they want to, connect their interpretation to the authorial and historical background.

2. Objective

The objective of this paper is to apply reader-response theory by analyzing collected responses to Emily Dickinson's poem, 'This is My Letter to the World,' written in 1862, in order to observe the different ways in which different readers respond to a given text. It further observes the extent to which the theories of Roland Barthes, Wolfgang Iser and Louise M. Rosenblatt are applicable to the analysis.

3. Methodology

Sample: Sample size of the study was 10, out of which 9 were females and 1 was male. The sample comprised of those having an educational background in English literature; so the participants were well-versed to critically analyze the poem. Mean age of the participants was 22.4 years. Non-probability, convenience sampling was used.

Measures: A questionnaire, consisting of the poem's text, year of writing, and poet's name was constructed, asking one open-ended question. It was kept as simplified and open-ended as possible to eliminate any possibility of bias and to welcome diversity of interpretations. It has been attached in the Appendix.

Procedure: To apply reader-response theory, the constructed questionnaire was administered online to people having an educational background in English literature. The participants were supposed to respond to the given poem by giving their original interpretation, without aid from external sources like internet. An approximate word-range of 150-250 was prescribed.

Demographic information like Name, Gender, Age and Occupation was also asked in the beginning.

Analysis: The data was qualitative, of which a textual analysis has been done.

4. Results

While analyzing the responses, nine broad categories were identified, into which most of the data could fit. These nine categories are: title, themes, form or structure, word-choice, punctuation, impact of personal background/ experience, learning derived, connection with the poet and historical context. However, responses are not focused equally on all the categories; for instance, while only one response out of ten deals with punctuation, almost all the participants have identified some theme in their response. Category-wise textual analysis of each response has been done to make inferences as follows:

Title: None of the respondents have talked about the title of the poem, ‘This is my Letter to the World.’ However, many comments have been made about the letter that forms the subject of the first line of the poem, which is same as the title. This has been elaborated under themes.

Themes: Many responses have emphasised the anonymity of the recipients of “the letter” and the unknown contents of “the letter”. However, they focus more on deciphering the reason behind writing “the letter”. The poet seems to be seeking an audience to validate her decision to write. The letter might also have been written to deliver her message to the whole world of the present and the future or as an “exchange for poet’s personal ideologies” with the social and cultural environment. The poet being “out of the league, ”is perhaps striving to speak her heart out to someone unknown. One response mentions that the poet could also be giving some “religious or spiritual message”. Another finds “a sense of complain” in the words, "that never wrote to me" and the lines after that seem to be the poet’s plea on her part to not be judged harshly on what she has written. Responses identify much apprehension, concern and insecurity in the poet about her judgement by the world.

One of the responses mention that the poem is about the poet’s failed attempt to establish a correspondence with the reader, which has been followed by an attempt at reasoning it out and hoping to hold to the correspondence right. Another response says that the poem is trying to foster understanding instead of harsh judgement, and a need for balancing of minds.

Respondents have also pointed out the significance of Nature, and that the poet seems to give preference to Nature over materialism. She feels more connected to Nature than the world because it is “a work of art and absolute creativity.”Nature has also been interpreted as the “biggest teacher” who teaches independently, but a keen eye is needed to grasp her messages.

Responses also underline Feminism in the poem, linking their interpretation to the isolation of women in a male-centric world, women’s subjugation as unnatural, and disregard for women as well as their work. Respondents feel that the poem stems from the woman poet’s yearning for recognition and remembrance from her audience. In fact, Nature has also been interpreted as a female goddess. The poem could be “a sort of defiance against the poet’s actions that stemmed from the circumstances of her being a woman,” hence emphasising her own isolation or in general, any woman writer’s position during the American Renaissance. She is therefore writing a letter to the world as an effort to be

recognized and read. She is calling people “to make bold choices in life” and to choose their companions with care.

One of the respondents also feels that the message is being hidden and addressed to an unknown audience, who still managed to recognize and appreciate her, and made her famous. The poem, therefore, could be a sort of thank-you note from the poet to the readers for appreciating her writing.

Structure/form: Not many participants have commented specifically on the structure or form of the poem. However, one respondent mentions the innovative writing style, and short, concise manner of the poetry of Dickinson. To another respondent, the beginning and ending are important for meaning-making.

Attention has been paid to the form of poetry utilized for correspondence by Dickinson to establish a two-way transitive communication between the reader and the author. The use of the form of letter in the poem is crucial to the respondent – “important and poignant,” acting as a “polite request to the future generation to judge her tenderly.”

Word-choice: Dickinson’s choice of words is important to the respondents for meaning-making. For instance, the fact that the poet uses “her” for Nature is referred to by one of the respondents. Nature is interpreted as “an embodied female goddess,” “tender majesty” implies creativity, while “hands I cannot see” is interpreted as people of the future. Keeping in mind that the poet is a woman, responses associate “judge tenderly of me” with the speaker’s concern and insecurity of being judged harshly, her effort to be read, a sense of complain to the biased world and the fear of being a woman writer. A respondent has also tried to derive meaning of the poem by looking at meaning of individual words; but at the same time, he says that we are “independent to take our calls” and can “manipulate, reconstruct and enhance” the poet’s words further.

Certain emotions are also evoked from Dickinson’s word-choice, such as “initial reluctance”, “apprehension”, “appeal” and “persuasion”. For another respondent, “authoritarian indulgence” is evident in the poem, and the poem evokes mixed emotions. One respondent also comments on the lyrical quality of the poet as evident in the use of phrases like ‘tender majesty’ that serves as a contrast against the simplicity of the news that has been articulated by Nature. Another response says that word choice contributes towards making the poem “cryptic” beyond its seemingly simple appearance.

Punctuation: Not many participants have focussed on the special punctuation used in the poem that is one of the distinguishing features of Dickinson’s poetry. Although one respondent does mention it in the very beginning of her response making a connection to the innovative writing style of Dickinson that involves the use of hyphens, its analysis with respect to the poem in consideration has not been done in the response.

Impact of personal background/experience: Many responses to the poem seem to be impacted by the respondent’s personal background and experience. They appear to carry a personal touch, even though it is not explicitly stated by them. For instance, one respondent, a

woman, seems to empathize with the poet's feelings and gives it a Feminist stance. The response talks about honour, respect, empowerment and worth of women in a male-centric world – these connections have been made by the respondent herself as none of these words are mentioned in the poem. Another response says about the speaker in the poem, “she is a woman who has lived a life of actions which were a result of circumstances which were not under her control.” Such an interpretation carries a personal touch, the respondent being a woman herself.

Many respondents also mention what the poem or specific phrases or lines mean to them, rather than what the poem actually is or what the poet meant. One response, for example states, “the poem for me is a choice that the poet makes... about making bold choices in life... about choosing your companions with care.” In another response, a personal connection is implicit in the fact that the reader got “the feeling of fear with determination.”

However, some responses seem to be very objective and detached from any personal experience.

Learning derived: Very few responses imply any learning experience for the reader. One response hints at the poem having meant something to the respondent – “the poem makes me think of the poet as a tender person like Nature, but she/he is also someone who knows how to speak up for him/herself when the need arises and be bold like the people of this world.” Another response sees Nature as a teacher, imparting understanding in all people.

Connection with the poet: Quite a few responses have paid attention to the poet's identity and took her into account while responding to the poem. Many responses begin by linking the work to the poet and her background. In one of them, Dickinson's Feminism is referred to at the very onset, and the entire response continues to deal with it. There is no speaker/narrator according to the reader; instead the poet is established as the speaker and is referred to using feminine pronouns. The respondent begins by mentioning how Dickinson's poetry was never published and approved of, and she links her entire interpretation to it – that the poet felt isolated and unmotivated and hence, her letter is a request to the world to approve of her work and judge her tenderly. Yet another respondent links the poem with a “woman writer's position during the American Renaissance,” connecting the response to the fear of being a woman writer, thereby associating the gender of the poet to the interpretation of the entire poem.

While one of the respondents takes into account the gender of the poet, which influences the interpretation, another one refers to the narrator/speaker using female pronouns without making any explicit connection between the poet and the poem. Similarly, more responses begin with a reference to the poet; however, without it having implications on the response. For instance, one of them starts with a mention of the poet and her writing style; however, that does not seem to have any impact on the thematic interpretation of the poem. In fact, even though the response repeatedly mentions “the poet,” the obvious connection to her gender is disrupted. Another one comments on the poet's utilization of poetry as a form of correspondence. However, it is specific to the poem and not a general comment on her

poetry. Hence, there seems no explicit connection between the author and thematic interpretation. Nevertheless, the response does comment on Dickinson's lyrical quality and how it surfaces in this poem.

Historical context: Some participants have taken into account the historical context in interpretation. One of them immediately connects the poem to its date, and the position of a female poet at that time: "she is writing of her isolation in a world that, in 1862, still disregarded women's work." Along similar lines, another one mentions a woman writer's position during the American Renaissance, and the male contemporaries she was working with, like Whitman, Thoreau, Emerson. While they look at her desolation, another response asserts how she stood out despite the circumstances: "She is also among the few female poets of her time, who have received the amount of appreciation and attention she did."

5. Discussion

Although Barthes argues against reading that takes into account author's identity and historical context, a few respondents have made a connection between their interpretation and Dickinson's style and her historical position as a woman writer. The responses that look at aspects that are more technical in nature, such as structure/form, word-choice, punctuation, relate to Wolfgang Iser's theory that employs "mechanistic language," and according to which texts control readers' responses through structures created during reading (Flynn 108). Various themes emerge as the readers' imagination fills the "gaps" in the text, and in some responses learning is also evident, thereby implying a change in the reader - both these are points that Iser makes. On the other hand, Rosenblatt focuses more on the influence of personal background and experience on the response, and the context in which the poem is read, all of which are markedly clear in many responses. In "Writing and Reading: The Transactional Theory," she makes a distinction between efferent and aesthetic response, which is also clear - while some responses give a mere summary of the poem (efferent response), a few others live through the poem and experience it by relating them to their own ideas and experiences (aesthetic response), thereby promoting "transactional" learning experiences (5).

6. Conclusion and Future Directions

From the study, it can be concluded that different readers interpret the same text in different ways. While few take into account the author's intentions and historical background, many prefer to interpret using personal ideas and experiences. If most pay attention towards deciphering the meaning of the poem and pointing out the main themes, some also look at the text's technical aspects.

Future research must do a comparative analysis of collected responses with the existing critical responses to the poem. It can also look at how responses vary with gender and age. Observing responses of the same reader at different points in time will also be useful to see if Iser's claim that second reading produces a different impression from the first actually holds true. Lastly, a comparative study with this one can be conducted with only the poem's text in the questionnaire, without title, year or poet's name.

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Appendix 1

Demographic Information

Name:

Gender:

Age:

Occupation:

Response Questionnaire

Please read the given poem by **Emily Dickinson** and respond to it in **150-250 words**. You can be as flexible as you want with your answer, and consider any aspect(s) you wish to. Please ensure that you give your **own interpretation** and do not use internet. The response provided by you shall remain *completely confidential* and will be used only for *research purposes*.

This is My Letter to the World (1862)

This is my letter to the World
That never wrote to Me—
The simple News that Nature told—
With tender Majesty

Her Message is committed
To Hands I cannot see—
For love of Her—Sweet—countrymen—
Judge tenderly—of Me

Your response: