Reader Response Theory: An Efficacious Tool to Children's Literature

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Abstract

The reader's mental construction of the fictional realms garners special attention, since Children's literary spectrum is essentially defined by its readership. Evidently, among the theories, Reader response theory seems to be associated with this aspect and particularly active while engaging the children as readers. All the Reader-response theories offer insights regarding the reading process, and can be productively applied to the readers of children's literature. To contemporary readers, it seems self-evident that engagement with a text involves personal thought patterns, background knowledge, cultural and reading contexts, and purposes for the readings. As active agents on a quest for meaning, readers endorse, condemn, and question texts. Until the development of Reader-response theories in the 1970s, mainstream literary theories ignored the reader, focusing on either the author (Historicism) or the text (New Criticism) as the source of meaning. In contrast, Reader-response researchers and theorists investigate the experience of reading, and the complex interplay of reader/text/context, especially concerning texts that are identified as literary, imaginative or fictional. Thus, the present paper proposes to explore Reader Response Theory as an efficacious tool to analyse the readers mind in the alluring spectrum of Children's Literature.

Keywords: Children's Literature, Reader Response Theory, Iser's theory

In essence, Reader-response theories reject New Criticism, the dominant literary theory and criticism from the late 1930s through the 1950s. New Criticism assumes that texts are central, and that readers are controlled by the structures, tropes, and language of the written word. For proponents of New Criticism, meaning resides solely in the text, and can be accessed and understood only through the trained eyes of literary critics. Untrained readers are passive recipients of the texts, and therefore need to learn the skills of close, concise, attentive analysis before they are able to glean understanding.

In the 1960s and 1970s, during the heyday of post structuralism, there was a paradigm shift in literary theory from viewing the text as authority to viewing the reader and the text in a dynamic relationship. In 1980, Jane Tompkins edited the volume *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post Structuralism*. In her introductory remarks, she observes,

"Reader-Response criticism is not a conceptually unified critical position, but a term that has come to be associated with the work of critics who use the words reader, the reading process, and response to mark out an area for investigation" (xi). Reader-response investigations that arose in antipathy to New Criticism ushered in a radical change in the way critical theorists formulate conversations in disciplines well beyond literary theory.

Reader-response theories focus on interpretive strategies among different readers, and even though the theories differ in their explanations, the net result of the discussions that opened up in the 1960s to the 1980s is the contemporary examination of the context of reading, and how factors such as gender, race, social class, and history are interwoven with the activity of reading. These days, many of the concepts of Reader-response theories are assumed semi-explicitly in cultural studies, feminist, performance, post-colonial, and queer theories, and a host of other scholarly endeavours. In order to appreciate the significance of Reader-response theories it is necessary to have a reasonable understanding of the primary theorists and the concepts that congregate in this school of thought. It is the operational processes of the dynamic author-reader-text relationship that are the bases of the differences among Reader-response theorists, who can be loosely grouped under three umbrellas: experiential (Louise Rosenblatt, Wolgang Iser, Hans Robert Jauss); psychological (Norman Holland, David Bleich); and cultural/social (Stanley Fish).

In short, Reader-response theories bring the reader into focus. Rosenblatt, Iser and Jauss consider both text and reader, Holland and Bleich direct their energies to the reader's psychology, and Fish concentrates on the reader within a socio-cultural context. Despite their common preoccupation with reader-response, the theories and methods of reader-response critics differ greatly. Some, such as Gerald Prince, Michael Riffaterre, and Jonathan Culler take a structuralist approach that examines the effect of textual structure, signs, and signifiers on the reader; while others like Norman Holland and David Bleich use psychoanalytical theory to explore how the reader's sense of identity influences their experience of texts. Stanley Fish presents yet another approach, his controversial post-structuralist theory claiming that a text and its meaning *only* exist within the mind of a reader. Fish approaches texts by asking what they do, not what they mean, and his method involves an analysis of the developing responses of the reader in relation to the words as they succeed one another in time. While the ideas and approaches of these psychoanalytical, structuralist, and post-structuralist reader-response critics offer valuable insights into the nature of the reader's experience, the most relevant to the study of setting in fantasy appear to be the ideas of phenomenological reader-response critics.

The theories of phenomenological reader-response critics, such as Roman Ingarden, Georges Poulet, and Wolfgang Iser, focus on the role the reader plays in imagining and experiencing the world of the literary work, including how the reader experiences imaginary place. Fantasy and science fiction critic William Touponce argues that only the phenomenological account is capable of treating adequately the irreducible nature of fantastic worlds by describing precisely how such worlds are built up in the reading process. The work of this particular group of reader-response theorists is arguably most relevant to the study of setting in fantasy. Wolfgang Iser believes that the world provided by the author is incomplete, and the reading process brings the literary work into existence. His theory, which draws heavily on the ideas of German philosopher Roman Ingarden, centers on the concept that the

unwritten elements of the work must be 'concretized' by the reader. Iser is also inspired by Georges Poulet, who like Iser, believes that the literary text is actualised by the reader. However, in Poulet's analysis of the reading process, the reader is trapped in the consciousness of the author and acts out a passive role, whereas Iser sees the reader as cognitively active and creative. Iser's theory is the most developed and widely recognised in the phenomenological field, and his methods for determining how literary works successfully engage the reader could prove useful to writers, and more specifically to writers of fantasy fiction.

Reader-response theory and the practice of the writer may seem to be at opposite ends of the spectrum, but the reader and the writer work together to generate experience and meaning – to make a shared world. If the satisfaction of the reader is reliant on how a text engages their consciousness and creativity, then an understanding of the ways in which readers interpret texts is vital to writers in their practice. When writing, a writer will know what is going to happen next and will have a clear view of how their imaginary world looks and feels. However, this state of being removes them from the unknowing and alien perspective of the reader, and writers are engaged in the constant game of trying to imagine and re-read their work from the perspective of a potential readership. When writing they envision not only the journey and world of their plot, but the emotional and imaginative journey they wish to take the reader on. Alternatively, the function of a critic is not only to offer readers a way to view or interpret a text, but also to place a value on texts. Reader-response critics centre this valuing of the text on how the reader engages with it. Although they are generally concerned with picking apart a reader's experience of a text after the fact, they create understandings of what makes a text engaging to a reader, and these insights may be useful to the creative writer.

When examining how a reader engages with fantasy settings and what they want from a writer, the most appropriate interpretive community would be one that is familiar with the conventions of the fantasy genre as it circulates in contemporary western writing in English. An understanding of this reader could be gleaned from studies of the expectations and desires associated with the fantasy genre. To some degree writers are already guided by an understanding of the reader's experience. Many writers of both fantasy and literary fiction have stressed the importance of the reader in filling in the unwritten elements in their work. However, the element of setting has not been extensively examined from this perspective, and the critical methods to assess value that have been painstakingly considered by reader-response theorists have not been directly linked to the creation of setting in fantasy fiction. Their application to writing practice would provide benefits to the fantasy writer.

There are many reader-response critics with different theories about the way readers respond to texts, and many of these theories could potentially offer insights for the fantasy writer. However, Iser's theory is arguably the most likely of these to provide a comprehensive conceptual framework for the practice of communicating fantasy worlds, one that could potentially be built upon and adapted in future. The fantasy stories can be examined through Iser's suppositions. As the creators' intended task is to enlighten the reading minds, his approach appropriately suitable to evaluate the response of the readers. This is because his theory, as a phenomenological one, focuses on the reader's experience of the text and the world of the text, and views the reader as actively cognitively engaged in the

world creation process. Iser's methods of analysis look at every text as a dormant temporal experience that is brought to life in the reader's mind, examining reader-response not only on a sentence by sentence level, but also by looking at the effect of the work in its entirety and the overall world of the text. Thus, as Maria Nikolajeva claims in "Narrative theory and children's literature":

> Every theoretical direction is only legitimate if it allows us to disclose dimensions in literary texts that we would not be able to discover with other methods. Narrative theory has given us tools to analyse in detail how texts are constructed, on both macro and micro levels, and to come closer to understanding why certain devices work more or less successfully in children's literature. (176)

True to her statement, the narratological tools help, not only to unravel the intricate temporal structures, but also to divulge about the purpose and effect of the texts.

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