

Reader Response Theory

Reader response theory has been recognized as a distinct critical movement since the early 1970s. Its many advocates include Kenneth Burke, Wayne Booth, Stanley Fish, Louise Rosenblatt, and Walker Gibson. Although these thinkers disagree on many of the features of reader response criticism, they agree that reader response criticism should pay attention to the areas of psychology, history, and sociology. In so doing, these critics make reading an interdisciplinary activity. They also weaken notions of "expert readers," for reader response criticism adheres to the principle that everyday readers can produce, if not "right" interpretations, then at least interpretations that make sense for them. Reader response criticism develops open-ended problem solving strategies, or *heuristics*, intended to assist readers with the work of interpretation. Reader response criticism operates on the following premises:

- Texts affect readers in unique and subjective ways.
- Readers participate in determining the meaning of literary works.
- Anything that contributes to the development of a reader influences his/her interpretation of a reading selection.
- An individual's social class, racial background, ethnicity, gender, nationality, age, physical condition, employment, vocational interests, and so on, make a profound impact on how that person sees and understands the world.

Just because reader response theory validates the interpretive powers of the reader does not mean that "anything goes" in interpretation. Readers are expected to support their interpretations with sound references and inferences, combining their understanding of the text with their knowledge of the world.

Sample Reader Response Paper

The following sample, written from the perspective of a female college student, is based on Richard Wright's short story "The Man Who Was Almost a Man."

As I began the story, I was jolted by Dave's use of the word "nigger," even before I understood that the character was an African American. I have always been conditioned not to use that word, and to think that people who do so are morally confused. Later, after I gathered that he was black, I reconsidered. However, I'm still doubtful of that whole cultural thing that says people who belong to a certain group can use whatever language they like to describe themselves. Just because I'm female, I wouldn't call other women "bitches" or "hos."

As I continued to read, I got over my language hang-up, because I saw that the whole piece is written in a rough country dialect. None of the characters in the story have much of a vocabulary. Actually, I enjoyed the dialect. My grandparents were tenant land farmers, and they spoke a country dialect. Once I realized that the people in the story are much like the people in my own hardworking, close-knit family, I began to sympathize with the characters. I wanted good things to happen for Dave.

I also wanted some opportunity to present itself that would enable Dave to feel good about himself. I felt sorry for Dave because of the way other men on the farm treated him, and I wondered if his problems are peculiar to African American males, or applicable to all. I tend to think that most men endure this treatment. I've listened to the conversations of some young men, and I know how cruel they can be to each other, and how much pressure they put on themselves

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to feel like men—the whole male angst thing. Not that females aren't guilty of similar stuff, but... this story is about a guy.

At the same time, I understand that, sometimes, people treat others poorly because they themselves suffer from low self-esteem. I've been mistreated in similar ways. For instance, I once happened to win a special college award. At a party shortly afterward, I overheard two girls saying to each other, "What did she do to win that award? She's not so hot." I was a little stung by their remarks. I had worked very hard to qualify for that award, and I had not pulled any strings in order to get it. After thinking about it, I thought that they might suffer from low self-esteem. Tearing me down, and suggesting that I won the award through secret channels, made them feel better about themselves. So, I tossed the whole thing off, and wished them both much happiness. Perhaps the older men in the story also felt bad about themselves, and talking down to Dave made them feel bigger and stronger.

After the shooting accident and the death of the mule, I knew Dave was in serious trouble. He couldn't possibly stay on the farm and endure an endless round of ribbing from the other men. As much as he loved his mom, he couldn't put up with more insults to his self-esteem. It was bad enough to be poor and to have nothing to look forward to but another day of backbreaking work. So, although I did not agree with his running away in the end, I understood why he did it. If it were my decision to make, I probably would have stayed, even though it would mean more or less constant humiliation for awhile. Eventually, though, people would forget about the mule and chalk up the whole incident to youthful high jinks. Perhaps the story would have become something to laugh about. Growing up is hard. Sometimes I've been so embarrassed that I've felt tempted to run away, but I never have, because I know that running away doesn't make problems disappear; it only creates a set of new problems. Dave's decision must have created more problems for him. Who would have supper waiting for him at the end of the train ride? No-one.

Dave's story makes me think about young people in the world who are desperate for some shred of human dignity. I believe that lots of teens think that drugs, sex, and violence will provide them a way out of a life of loneliness and deprivation. I'll have to think about this problem, because I don't have any good answers for it yet. As this story shows, family love is not enough, for, even though Dave's mother loved him, she couldn't help him. A more broadly cultural solution must be needed.

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