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READER RESPONSE THEORY: SOME PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS FOR THE HIGH SCHOOL LITERATURE CLASSROOM

Diana Mitchell

English teachers love literature. They love to read it, think about it, and talk about it. They eagerly share their opinions and interpretations of it. They love to feel they've mastered a text and know all the subtle ins and outs of it. In short, they glory in being experts when it comes to literature.

So what's wrong with that?

Since we are the ones who know a lot about literature, what's wrong with just telling students what it means? What's wrong with lecturing students about the symbolism and imagery present in a selection? Why should we have to involve students?

To answer these questions we must look at what literature teaching is all about. We need to think about who we are trying to empower, instead of getting carried away with our own infatuation with a piece of literature. In our desire to make students love literature as much as we do, we try to impart our enthusiasm for a piece by telling them what it means to us. Unfortunately, too often this turns students away from literature, and they view novels and poems as pieces of content to be learned. This "telling" approach also short-circuits two of the essentials of education—to help students become involved with their own education and to help them think critically.

If that is what we are all about, how can we involve students and get them thinking? Enter reader response theory.

Reader response theory asks the teacher to begin the study of literature with the students' response. Instead of telling about literature, our job becomes helping students discover what a piece of literature can mean.

To use this approach successfully we must truly believe that there is not one right interpretation for a piece of literature, but instead, many possibilities.

Teachers who have not used this approach envision chaos in the classroom with students shouting, "But it's right because that's the way I see it." They wonder if using a reader response approach means that anything goes and that their classrooms will become a loosey-goosey mess. Of course, no approach guarantees orderly classrooms, but students discussing in small groups are still orderly—although probably loud. Just because students sit passively in the teacher-dominated classroom does not necessarily mean they are involved and learning.

Another worry teachers have is that students will miss some of the essential elements they believe are in a piece of literature. But the reader response approach asks students not only to respond to what they are reading, but puts the burden on them to find support for their interpretations in the piece read. As they are doing this, the elements of literature have a way of slipping in. Students often use these elements in their discussions.

Also, using the reader response approach encourages students to think about what it is that they bring to the piece that elicits their reaction. Even if teachers don't formalize this step and talk about reactions, students still do react. If their responses are not discussed, these reactions can often interfere with an understanding of the story. For example, when my class read "The Worn Path" by Eudora Welty, some students viewed the old woman as doddering and stupid while others saw her as the perfect grandmother. After sorting out, through discussion, *why* students reacted to the story as they did, we found out that they based their impressions of the old woman on relationships they had mainly with their own grandmothers. Once students were aware of why they reacted as they did, we worked at looking at how the character was portrayed by going back into the story.

In addition to making students more aware of the "whys" of their reactions, there are many other sound reasons for using this approach. First of all, this approach empowers students by showing them that what they have to say is valued. Because students perceive that they are among many people working equally toward an understanding of a piece of literature, they become more ready to look at the possibilities the teacher may wish to contribute to the discussion.

Second, because students are trying to make sense of a piece of literature and are using all the clues they can in the piece itself, the elements the teacher is concerned about are often brought up by the students because they are interested in understanding the piece. For instance, in my sophomore American Literature class, when students were brainstorming motifs present in *The Great Gatsby*, they became very concerned with symbolism and offered several ways they believed it was used.

Third, our simply "covering" such elements as characterization and theme does not guarantee that the student really absorbs the concepts. This is partly true because, as English teachers, we usually teach literature that we know well. Little by little we have uncovered different layers of meaning through rereading the text. It makes sense to us and stays with us because we were part of the process of uncovering. When we impose our ideas on students who are still grappling with such things as the motivations of characters, they cannot absorb the ready-made interpretations we would like to give them.

Fourth, part of what we are about as educators is to involve students in their own learning and to push them to use their heads. Students in classes using the reader response approach are often asked to formulate their own generalizations about what the themes of a story could be instead of simply reacting to teacher-selected themes. Students also can analyze characters by selecting quotes they believe illustrate important beliefs or views of those characters. If asked to do such assignments as writing story extensions, students must synthesize all they know and go beyond the text when they create new pieces of literature about the texts read. Critical thinking has been at the top of the list of educational objectives for years, and applying the reader response theory in our classes is one of the best ways to encourage the critical thinking we say is so important.

Fifth, using the reader response approach is fun for both the teacher and the students. It is fun for the teacher because the students will come up with ideas and interpretations that the teacher has never thought of. It is fun for the students because they are part of the process of making meaning out of a piece of literature. It is also enjoyable because the process is active; students are not sitting passively taking notes.

Sixth, using this approach is a surefire way to integrate reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Students read and respond to a piece, share

that response in groups, listen to other students' interpretations, synthesize what they have heard, and write in response to the whole process.

When trying to elicit such "reader responses" from students, it is best to begin slowly by asking questions such as these as students read:

- What struck you about the story/poem?
- What kinds of things did you notice?
- What would you like to talk about after reading this?
- What issues did it raise for you?
- Were there parts that confused you?
- What questions would you like to ask?
- Did anything upset you or make you angry?
- Is there anything you want to ask any of the characters?
- How did you feel after you read the poem/story?
- What made you feel this way?

Note that evaluative questions such as "Did you like or dislike this piece and why?" are not part of this list. Evaluation and judgment can come after after students have been involved with the piece for awhile and have discussed a variety of points of view regarding it. Asking students questions that force them to make a judgment about a piece before such discussions often commits them to a point of view. They then are reluctant to listen to other evidence that disagrees with their assessment and are even more reluctant to change their minds. Described below are some classroom strategies that avoid such closure while still beginning with the students' responses.

1. After assigning a story or a poem and having students read it, ask each student to bring to class three issues or questions for discussion. Collect the questions and begin a whole class discussion based on student questions.
2. Ask each student to write down two or three issues or questions before coming to class. Let students work in groups of four, sharing their questions with the group and discussing them. Each group can report the highlights of its discussion to the class.

3. Ask each student to write down three words which he or she feels best describes a character. In groups, students share their words and their reasons for selecting these words. Each group decides which three or more words best fit the character. They share their conclusions with the class.
4. Ask students to begin to explicate a poem on their own. Give them guidelines such as having them look at line length, rhyme scheme, versification, hard and soft sounds, and literary devices and then discuss how all these things contribute to the meaning of the poem. The next day they turn in their comments or lists. If time permits, type up their comments and the following day, in groups, have them read all the comments of other classmates as they try to agree on some common understanding of the poem. Be prepared for diametrically opposed interpretations but keep sending them back to the poem to find support for their positions.
5. When asking students to think about motifs, have them generate a list of things that occur or are shown over and over again in the novel. Put all the motifs the students come up with on the board. (Student example: ashes, cars, eggs, etc. from *The Great Gatsby*). The next day they each write down associations for those words. (Student example: ashes—death, waste, remains, fire, gloom). If time permits, type up the list of associations. For the next day each group is assigned four or five of the words. After reading all of the associations, they are assigned the task of coming up with ideas about why the author may have included the motif in the novel and what the author might be trying to show through the use of the motif. (Student example: "Ashes were used frequently to show how the rich used what they wanted of people and then tossed what was left of them aside.")
6. Have students list all the issues they can think of that are raised in the work. In a group, they discuss the

issues such as materialism, wanting others' approval, racism, alcoholism, lying, and integrity, and then they rank the issues from the most important to the least important. If time permits, they can pick a character and rank the issues as that character would rank them.

7. Have students dig back into the book to find ten quotations or sentences that reveal the character they've been assigned or have chosen and that show what the character is like. Students then explain what these quotes tell or show about their characters. Another way to use the quotations is to scramble them as you type them. The next day, in groups, students must try to identify who said what quote. This really gets them talking about characterization and why one quote sounds more like one character than another.

Activities such as those described above provide excellent preparation for more elaborate written responses to literature. Student writing about literature can take a variety of forms in our classrooms. Whenever possible, I try to give students choices in writing assignments so they have the chance to write something in response to a novel or story or poem that means a lot to them. Once again, it makes sense to begin with assignments that center on the students' own responses to the literature. This is also true when the whole class is engaged in the same assignment. Described below are a number of writing activities that begin with students' responses and allow for a good deal of student choice.

1. After students have read all or part of a novel, invite students to write and then perform a talk show. One student can be Arsenio Hall or Oprah Winfrey or Phil Donahue and question characters about their actions, motivations, or feelings on an issue from the novel.
2. Bring a large selection of poetry into the classroom or take students to the library so students have access to lots of poetry books. Invite students to browse through the books looking for poems that specific characters might like. For instance, my students picked out poems

they thought Maniac in *Maniac Magee* would like. Some students picked poems about racial harmony because that was important to him. Others picked poems about having a home since Maniac didn't have one or poems about baseball because Maniac was so good at that sport. Students can also pick out poems that say something about the theme or setting of a book. When students turn in copies of the poems, they write on the back who they think the poems would be important to and why. The teacher can read these poems aloud and have students write down who or what the poem speaks to and why. After reading two or three, discuss student answers. This is another easy way to get students thinking about the piece of literature and to engage them in lively discussions.

3. Awards. After reading a novel or a group of short stories, students brainstorm categories for awards such as "most ignorant" or "most caring." Students then decide which character fits each award the best and briefly writes up why that character should get that award. Sharing these with the class promotes lots of thinking and sharing of ideas.
4. To encourage students to think about what is important about specific chapters, have them turn a chapter or a scene from a chapter into a script. This can be done in groups. Explain that when they need to describe setting or make introductory remarks, they can use a narrator. The scripts should focus on capturing the essence of the chapter. Scripts are then read aloud. Sometimes it is interesting if more than one group is assigned to script the same chapter; then, when the scripts are read, the class can comment on thoroughness, tone, and impact.
5. If students become upset about something that happens in a novel, let them organize a protest campaign. In response to *Don't Care High* by Gordon Korman, my students were upset that the principal in the novel would

not let the student body have a president. In groups, students spent two days writing a speech to rally other students, composing a letter that would be read to the principal, and making posters and buttons in favor of the deposed president. On the third day, each group delivered their speech to the rest of the class and tried to rally them to the cause, read their letters to the novel's principal, and shared any other work they had done on the campaign.

6. Have students go through the comics for several weeks looking for comic strips that specific characters would like. Have them mount the comic strips on paper and write their explanation of why this comic would appeal to or speak to the character. Post these in the room. Students love to read the comics and try to see the connection a fellow student made.
7. Ask students to write additional scenes for the story or to write a new ending. This works especially well in novels such as *Of Mice and Men* where so many events are only alluded to but not developed. Curley's courting of his wife is one example. Other examples are included in the section on assignments later in this article.

Appendix A describes a number of sample assignments that embody the principles of the reader-response approach: students have options, students have the freedom to discover what the piece of literature means, students see that their responses are valued because the assignments are based on their response, and students think and create rather than regurgitate. Most of these assignments begin with students' responses and ask them to analyze and synthesize what they know and then make generalizations about such things as the characters. Students then can go beyond the book when they begin these writing assignments. Again, higher level thinking skills are being used.

While all of this is going on with individual students, they are talking with other students to share their sense of what they've read; they are listening to other students as these students also try to make meaning in

small groups; and they are writing in response to what they've read. Students benefit from this integration of reading, writing, speaking, and listening because they are using skills in a complete context. They are not being asked to speak for the sake of making a speech. They are not simply doing a listening exercise. They are not writing to see if they know how to paragraph. They are not reading just to be tested on content. Instead, all of these language arts blend together naturally and successfully because students are involved in real learning in which they grapple with meaning and try to create something of their own .

The reader response approach reinforces this natural integration. Students usually come away from these kinds of classroom experiences feeling very positive because the talk and the product is theirs. They are no longer using their energy to guess what the teacher wants them to think; instead, they are spending energy on creating something that they have a stake in.

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Appendix A

After reading Edward Arlington Robinson's "Miniver Cheevy," "Richard Cory," and "Mr. Flood's Party," students choose one of the following to write on:

1. Create Richard Cory's background in story or poetic form so we can understand his actions.
2. Write a poem or a story on loneliness.
3. Create a story, poem, or essay explaining why Miniver Cheevy or Mr. Flood turned to alcohol.
4. Write in "stream-of-conscious" from the point of view of one of the three characters.

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5. Write a serious or humorous essay on ways to cure loneliness or on how deceiving appearances can be.
6. Create your own writing option around the ideas of loneliness, depression, alcoholism, suicide, old age, or any other theme you found in any of these three poems.
7. Write a story from the point of view of a very old person.
8. Write epitaphs in the style of Edgar Lee Masters for Richard Cory, Miniver Cheevy, or Mr. Flood, telling people what they would like to say to them after their deaths.

After reading "The Open Boat" by Stephen Crane, students choose one of the following or create an assignment of their own in response to this short story:

1. Write a newspaper article about the experience, including quotations from characters.
2. Write a poem about the "sea" experience of the characters.
3. Write a story explaining how the wreck occurred and how the four characters happened to be together.
4. Write a story from the point of view of the people on the shore or from the seagull's point of view.
5. Write an essay about what this experience has to say about the human condition and about life.

After reading Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Devil and Tom Walker," students choose one of the following to write about:

1. Make up the story of why the little men appear every twenty years.
2. Write up a story from Mrs. Van Winkle's point of view, showing us what it's like to be married to Rip.

3. Your job is to fill Rip in politically on everything that's happened in the last twenty years. Do it so he'll understand it.
4. Write up the scene or the story of the beginnings of the unpleasantness between Rip and his wife.
5. Imagine that Rip Van Winkle woke up in our times and met a modern woman of the 90s. How might she respond to his complaints about his wife? Let us hear it.
6. In "The Devil and Tom Walker" we read that Mrs. Walker and the devil had quite a fight. Write the scene or story of that happening.
7. Imagine Rip and wife or Tom and wife at a marriage counselor. Give us the session in living color, remembering to keep the language appropriate to the times.
8. The place where the devil appears in the woods is very descriptive. Using that as your setting, create another kind of story such as a family camping trip and show how this group reacts differently to the same surroundings.
9. Become a newspaper reporter who was present either when Rip came back home or when Tom Walker was whisked away by the devil. Write it either as a news story or a feature but do it in newspaper style.
10. Irving's descriptions of nature are vivid and detailed. If you have a place that means a lot to you, write it up descriptively so we feel we're there.
11. Analyze Washington Irving psychologically. Using his words as clues, create the background in his life to explain why he had the views on women, marriage, work, etc. that he had.

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After reading *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck, students select one of the following activities. If they choose to do an oral presentation, they may work with two other people.

ORAL PRESENTATION

Do this in either a newscast or talk show format. If you do the newscast, there must be news stories based on incidents in the book, weather, features in which a person from the book is interviewed, sports, etc. If you do a talk show format, you should probably organize it thematically. Issues of poverty, racism, lack of security for the old and handicapped, society's expectations for women, mercy killing, etc. could be explored. Include at least some of the characters as guests.

WRITING ASSIGNMENT

Write a scene or chapter for *Of Mice and Men* that is suggested by the story. Write it as a short story or as a play. Use Steinbeck's style as much as possible—uncomplicated words, lots of dialogue, repetition, etc. Also begin the chapter or scene with a description of the setting. Some suggestions:

1. Lennie living at Aunt Clara's.
2. What happened in Weed.
3. Slim and George at the bar after Lennie's death.
4. Back at the ranch after Lennie's death.
5. How Crooks came to live at the ranch.
6. Candy and his accident.
7. Curley going to the doctor to get his hand fixed.
8. Curley's wife's life, such as when she met Curley, her interactions with her mother, her dealings with the men who promised her things.

9. Write a sequel about George and Curley.
10. Tell part of the story from the viewpoint of the misfits, Lennie, Crooks, Candy, or Curley's wife.
11. The sheriff arrives to interview everyone, including George.

POETRY OPTIONS:

1. Write a series of poems to different characters or about them.
2. Write a series of poems to one character from several other characters.
3. Write several poems on themes in this novel such as loneliness, compassion, caring, the oppressed.