
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Undergraduate Students' Responses to Literature for Children and Young Adults

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| ABSTRACT

Literature for Children and Young Adults (LCYA) has flourished and developed, especially in the past fifty years. However, its existence does not seem to have a place in the world of general literature. It is not very often analysed as a text and is often used as a tool in education. In this paper, I would like to find out if LCYA books are responded similarly as general literature in order to show that LCYA is also worthy of being analysed as a text. This research was conducted by comparing responses from undergraduate students discussing general literature and LCYA to see whether there are differences in how the two types of literature evoke responses. The undergraduate students in both groups, the one discussing canon/adult books and the one discussing children's and young adult books, responded in quite the same way; it did not matter the level of the books that they responded to. In order to 'give meaning' to the books, students related the books with the things that they knew before or the ones they experienced before.

| KEYWORDS

LCYA (Literature for Children and Young Adults), Reader Response, Response to Literature

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1. Introduction

I have been teaching English to undergraduate students for about 15 years now in Indonesia. In my experience teaching and my observation in some other English Departments in Indonesia (through visiting, exchanging curriculum and syllabus, and conferences), I noticed that what is taught mostly is what is called 'mainstream literature' and 'canonical works' as the works of Shakespeare, Jane Austen, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Ernest Hemingway, Mark Twain, H.G. Wells, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and the like.

When I took my master's degree, I was introduced to various kinds of literary works classified as children's and young adult literature. This classification covers various forms of books which include counting books, abc books, picture books, poetry books, and varieties of chapter books: from fantasy, science-fiction, to realistic books. Most of these books were never introduced to me and are not recognized in my country. After reading and analyzing some books, I found that these books were not as simple as they looked, though intended for younger people to read. Some of the books had complicated plots, the others had round characters, and even some of the picture books could create questions when people read them. Seeing this fact, I was wondering why these kinds of books, although similarly challenging as the mainstream ones, are never discussed in the English department.

Moreover, some of the articles I read also indicate the same thing. One written by Enciso (et al. 2009: p. 3) states that "Professors of English often have an uneasy relationship with children's texts. After all, children's literature is the only kind of literature we study that is defined by its audience and not its authors or its forms." Another one by Coats (2001) is also supporting what Enciso et al. has mentioned. She states

Teaching children's literature in a university English department is an enterprise fraught with personal and professional risk. No matter how sophisticated your theoretical commitments, no matter how learned you are in and beyond your subject area, you suffer the bemused and patronizing smiles of peers who find the aesthetic

virtues of Dr. Seuss less worthy of study than those of, say, Thomas Hardy or Emily Dickinson. Undergraduates, as well, are not generally predisposed to see the study of children's literature as a rigorous mental exercise. (p. 405)

Rosenblatt, in her book *Literature as Exploration*, mentions that "A novel or poem or play remains merely inkspots on paper until a reader transforms them into a set of meaningful symbols." (1995, p. 25). She also mentions that because readers bring their own personal experiences and background knowledge, reading literature is a personal experience. Work can be read by different persons, and the effect will be different. And the same book can be read by the same reader at a different time with a different result because the reader might have additional experience or knowledge. Rosenblatt states, "The same text will have a very different meaning and value to us at different times or under different circumstances." (p. 35). This is what she calls the 'transaction between the reader and the text.' (p. 35). In Rosenblatt's idea, then, children's and young adult literature (CYAL) can be read by anybody as long as the readers are willing to bring meaning to the text.

In relation to the idea stated above, I am interested in finding out how older students (undergraduate students) can give meaning when responding to literary works. What kind of background is brought by the students when reading, and whether the response they give is similarly worthy when reading adult and CYAL books. In order to do that, I would compare classes of undergraduate students discussing canons/adult literature and the one discussing children's and young adult literature. I would like to find out if they would be able to respond in more or less the same way despite the level of literature given.

2. Literature Review

In their article, Sipe and Ghiso (2004) argue that "Although ethnographic research at times forefronts the notion of letting data 'speak' and categories 'emerge,' we do not approach sites or data as blank slates, but influenced by our prior theoretical readings and life experiences." (2004: 473). When I was doing my observation, I had not read any sources on grounded theory yet. That was why I was basing my observation on particular theoretical readings and was trying to categorize students' responses based on the theories that I read.

There were some theories I used, and those will be summarized a little. It is not possible to discuss reader responses to literature without mentioning Louise Rosenblatt. In 1938 she wrote a book entitled *Literature as Exploration*, discussing what was going on when students read literary works. Rosenblatt argues that once leaving the author's hands, a work belongs to the readers. She states that "A novel or poem or play remains merely inkspots on paper until a reader transforms them into a set of meaningful symbols." (1995, p. 25). Thus, it is the readers who give meaning to the texts. When reading literary works, readers blend their own experiences and relate them to the work which is read so that the work becomes meaningful to the readers. And because of that, she also mentions that reading literary work is somewhat personal because each reader will bring his/her experience to be mixed with the literary works.

In her later publication, *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work*, Rosenblatt (Rosenblatt L. M., 1994) emphasizes further the importance of readers in reading literary works. She states that it is not the author who is dominant when discussing the work, but the readers are also important. She also rejects the idea of New Criticism which believes that a literary work can stand by itself, separated from the author and the readers. Further, she also discusses that reading literary work is different from reading other texts since reading other texts like informational books does not involve feeling, and readers will receive similar information when reading such texts. That is not true with literary reading since readers will bring their experiences when reading a text, and that is where the transaction takes place. However, she also mentions that to become an experienced reader, someone needs to practice to become more informed about the pattern of the text and of life itself. Thus, Rosenblatt's idea has become the ground of my belief that CYAL can also be given meaning by adults who read it.

Based on Rosenblatt's idea, some other authors continue to improve it in a more practical way. For example, Richard Beach (Beach, 1993), in his book *A Teacher's Introduction to Reader-Response Theories*, classifies the response/transaction into five categories. The first one discussed is textual theories of response which focus on the readers' understanding of the text itself, the elements and the genre conventions of the text. The second one is Experiential theories of response focusing on the relation of readers' experiences with what happens in the text. The third one is Psychological theories of response, focusing on the readers' cognitive and subconscious processes in responding to literature. The fourth one is Social theories of response which focus on the influence of the social context on the readers when responding to literature. The last one is Cultural theories of response, discussing how the role of the readers in a particular culture might influence their response to reading a literary work. What is proposed by the beach is again supporting the idea that it is the readers who give meaning to the literature, and the response will depend on their knowledge or their emphasis when reading it.

Bressler (2010) states further that those who believe in this approach share a view that a text does not stand by itself. Readers are active when reading the text and create a new meaning which Rosenblatt (1994) called 'the poem'. In his article, Tyson (2006)

identifies various versions of reader response theory, i.e. transactional, affective stylistics, subjective, psychological, and social reader-response.

3. Methodology

This research was conducted using Reader Response as the approach, which believes that it was the readers who gave meaning to the literary works and carried their experience and background while responding to literature. Two types of courses will be chosen in order to find out whether there are similarities in the types of responses of general literature and LCYA. The first one was a course teaching general literature and the second one was the one teaching LCYA. The focus of the data collection will be the responses of the students.

The data would be analyzed by categorizing them based on the type of knowledge that was brought by the students when responding to literature. The five categories of responses classified by Tyson (2006) would be used since these categories seem to summarize the other theories of responses in a more clear way. It would be transactional when readers brought their feelings, associations, and memories. Affective stylistics would be related to the readers' reading experiences as texts would form a pattern in readers. A subjective theory focused on how each individual's responses based on their memories, interests, personal experiences, and issues in the world contribute to a group response. The psychological response would be based on the readers' motives when reading the texts based on their psychological experiences. The social response would be based on the individual's response which was basically based on the particular society to which the individual belonged as a member. Most often, the readers were not aware that the response was not purely subjective but social because society's view was blended into the readers' minds. Some of the classifications overlapped in a way; thus, to simplify, the responses would be classified into; Personal experiences (including memories, interests, feelings, psychological experiences), relation to other texts (including other literary texts readers had read before and informational texts), understanding of up-to-date issues (world or local), social experiences (readers' experiences as part or member of particular society or group). Thus, when doing the observation, the focus of the observation will be on students' responses to literature based on the categories discussed above.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Undergraduate Responses to General Literature

In the first course, the classroom setting was U-shape, and it allowed a lot of interaction between the professor and the students and among students. The professor discussed the books mostly by asking students their opinions. Thus, they could share their opinions about the books. At first, the data will be collected from the discussion in class when the professor and the students were discussing the books that they read. Discussion involving a group of students can become a good medium to find their responses and opinions about the books that they read. Students were free to speak, and the size of the class with about twenty students would allow discussions to be lively. They would be able to argue with each other and respond to each other. However, if the classroom setting and instruction did not allow discussion and students' expressing opinions to happen, other types of response will be used, such as written response. Below are some examples of data found when observing the class.

When discussing one of Gwendolyn Brooks' poems, "a song in the front yard", one student is also relating the poem to her experience with someone she knows. The poem itself is about a little girl from a big, nice house who envies her friends who are street girls. She is envious because those street girls can go anywhere anytime they want, but she has to be in the house because her parents care for her. It seems that the street girls have more fun. To understand this, one student relates it to her friend's experiences. She said that not every parent is like the little girl's parents. This student's friend has parents that have a curfew, but she herself does not. When a curfew exists in a household, it seems that breaking the curfew is more fun, just like the little girl in the poem. In this case, this student was relating the work with her personal experience.

Some students give meaning to work discussed by relating it to other stories they have ever read or informational background that they have read previously. One example is when the class discusses Harriet E Wilson's book *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, in a Two-Story White House, North*. The class was discussing why Mrs. B. punished the main character, a little girl who is in her custody, by blackening her face because it did not make any sense. Usually, someone is punished by being whipped or beaten, not by blackening the face. To understand the event, one student relates this event with the Cinderella character in other literary works. He said, "It is like in Cinderella's story because although she is half black, she is almost white and becomes the prettiest in the house. So Mrs. B. doesn't want that to happen and punishing her by blackening her face so that she will look ugly." Thus this student is making sense of the story by relating it with other stories that she knows.

Discussing James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, this class talked about water and why water was important in this book; in this case, because the main character's important journey was on a ship through the water, and it changed his life. One student said that water was important in African American lives. This student then related it to another book, *Middle Passage*, which talked about the movement of the Africans to other continents by ship, and a lot of people died during the

passage in the ship on the water. That was how the student found the importance of water as a symbol or representation in Johnson's book. Again, this student is relating the literary work they were discussing with another book that he had read previously. He did not really discuss the importance of water as a symbol, though, which would be interesting to discuss, too.

At a different time, when this class was discussing Paul Laurence Dunbar's poems, they focused on the language used by the poet. Some of Dunbar's poems use Standard English, while some others use African American vernacular English. In trying to understand this phenomenon and trying to understand Dunbar's reason for doing this, one student compared it with a musician, Sugar Ray. He said that in Ray's album, there were one or two songs that were different from the rest of the songs. He said that probably most of the songs were for commercial needs, while these two songs were purely made for art's sake. He thought that probably that was what Dunbar was trying to do in a way. The poems using Standard English were made for a particular purpose, while the ones using African American vernacular English were made for a different purpose. This student was relating the literary work with other media, in this case, music. He indicated that there are similarities (maybe) between literature and music production.

4.2. Undergraduate Responses to Children's and Young Adult Literature

The second course is teaching Children's and Young Adult (CYA) literature to undergraduate students. There are 8 rectangular tables set in two rows, and each table is set diagonally against the front of the class. There are 4 or 3 chairs at each table. I was sitting on a chair without any table at the front corner of the class, near the entrance to the room, so that I could see the whole room and all the activities done by the students. What I cannot see clearly is just the screen for PowerPoint and the projector. However, since my focus will be the response to literature, this does not really bother me.

As the title of the class suggested, these undergraduate students in this class were asked to read children's and young adult books. From observing this class, I found some findings in response to the literature. On the first day of observation in this class, the instructor was reading a children's poem called "What is real loneliness." This poem listed different kinds of loneliness usually felt by children. After reading it, the instructor asked the students to write their own list of loneliness and make their own poems based on the poem just read. The students immediately picked up this task and made their own poems by listing what they thought was their own loneliness. Thus students were inserting their personal experiences when responding to the poem by writing their own poems.

Still, on the same day, she read a picture book called *Scaredy Squirrel*, which talked about a squirrel who was scared to leave his tree because he was afraid something bad might happen outside his tree. This squirrel even had his emergency kit in case something bad happened. The instructor asked the students to respond to the book by making their own emergency kit and what would be in their kits based on their own fear. Again, the students could easily relate to this book by mentioning their own fear and what would be in their kits based on their own fears. For example, one student said that she was 'afraid' of sour cream and dip, and her safety kit would include a dip detector so that she did not have to encounter it. Another student, who said that she was always worried about whether her doors were locked or not, wished that she could have a magic lock in her kit that could lock a door automatically or just by saying the word 'lock.' This was an example of a response to a book in relation to the readers' experience. It turned out that even adults had their own fears, not just kids. Thus, this children's book resonated with everybody. Again, the students related the book to their personal experiences when responding.

On the second day of observation, the instructor asked the students to mention their favorite readings from the list she gave them. They mentioned a lot of different books, for example, *Harry Potter*, *When You Reach Me*, *Nation*, *Number the Stars*, *Joey Pigza Swallow the Key*, *I am Legend*, *Book Thief*, *I am the Messenger*, and *Last Night I Sang to the Monster*. One thing that was interesting was this one student said that she had read *Number the Stars* when she was in fifth grade, and she was reading it again this time, and she said she liked it more. This was in line with what Rosenblatt said in her book that readers might read the same book at different times and would have different responses or experiences because the readers' background or experience changed. Thus readers would always carry their experience and background whenever they read a book. In this case, it was also proven that a children's or young adult book could be read at different times when a reader reached different ages, and they could still respond to it based on the experience and background that they had at a given time.

Also, on the second day, she read some other picture books for the students; they were *Rainbow Fish*, *Swimmy*, and *Arlene Sardine*. The first book was talking about a beautiful fish with rainbow color scales on her body which made her different from other fish in the ocean. The rainbow fish was beautiful, but she was not happy until she gave away all her beautiful scales except one to the fish around her, and she could be happy after that because she was no longer different. The second book was talking about a small black fish which was different from other fish because the other small fishes were red. This group of small fish survived being eaten by bigger fish because they pretended to be a very big fish by forming a pretend fish where the black one became the eye of the pretend fish. The third book was about a small fish who wanted to sacrifice herself to become a sardine so that people could eat her.

After reading the books, she asked her students to find any message or ideology in the books for children, and with her guidance, they came up with a lot of different ideologies that children probably would not get. Some of the ideologies mentioned were about beauty, friendship, sharing, conformity, belonging, differences, happiness, sacrifice, death and so on. In *Rainbow Fish*, for example, the ideology was that being different was not good. It would not make you happy, so you had to share what you had until you were the same with the rest of the population, and then they could accept you, and you would be happy. In *Swimmy*, on the other hand, it was suggested that being different was ok and people were different from each other so that they could fulfill different tasks. Thus, even a picture book can be read by adults deeply because adults have different 'tools' from children. Children might read the books and are not bothered by the ideology because they are just looking for the surface stuff. Adults read in a different way because they have already had a lot of experience and background when they grow up.

Another form of response to literature in this class was when the instructor assigned the students to read *The Tale of Despereaux*, a novel. After reading the novel, the students were assigned to write a found poem (a poem based on the book which was made from the words in the novel). Students could use any words from the novel that they liked or they found meaningful. I did not have a chance to look at their works, but I assumed that each student would have different words for their found poems. This would prove that each student responded differently to the same book, based on their interests, their experiences and their backgrounds.

On the third day of observation, the instructor again read a children's poem collection called *Misery is...* Each poem in the collection started with the phrase 'misery is...', and then the content was about what children thought to be misery; some were funny, some were serious. After reading the book, she asked the students to write their own misery poems. Each student could easily write their poems and the reason, in my opinion, was because everybody had their own misery. Thus, in literature, there was almost always something universal that everybody could relate to and made them able to respond to.

5. Conclusion

Discussion about the response to literature so far was almost always related to age-intended literary work, meaning that the study would relate the literature to readers or students to which the books were intended. An example of this would be finding a response to literature in fifth graders using the books intended for fifth graders. However, some scholars, as mentioned in the theory above, believed that readers respond to literature based on their own capacity, which can be anything such as experience, the background of life, to knowledge. Thus a ten-year-old child might read a book for a ten-year-old or a book for an adult and respond to them, but the response would be as deep or as shallow as his/her understanding of both books because the response was based on the reader, not the book. He/she might enjoy the book differently, though, because one was specially written for his/her age, but his/her depth of the response might be similar. That was why in this paper, I tried to compare undergraduate students' responses to canon/adult literature and to children's and young adult books.

From the observation discussed above, undergraduate students in both groups, the one discussing canon/adult books and the one discussing children's and young adult books, were responding in quite the same way; it did not matter the level of the books that they responded to. In order to 'give the meaning' to the books, students related the books with the things that they knew before or the ones they experienced before. In responding, they tried to find this relation or something universal because that was what literature offered. Seeing the fact above, it can be concluded that children's and young adult literature can be included in the discussion in the English department and can be discussed just like other texts, not just as pedagogical tools in K-12 classes.

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