

Understanding Children's Literature and the Dynamics of Responding to Literature

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Abstract: Response to literature is a generally ignored aspect in classroom because of the mechanical focus on language in most classrooms. This paper seeks to delve into the minutiae of how reader's response perspective enables a unique engagement of the reader with the text. The significance of the same increases manifold when a reference is made to children's engagement with literary texts. The paper also seeks to delve into the concerns of what is accepted and qualified as children's literature because a vast body of work is included within the ambit of the same. The attempt has been made to bring to light how the selection of children's literature/literature for children is crucial to generate a meaningful engagement with the text. Dwelling on these concerns is important because it has multiple ramifications for creating an enriching learning environment for students.

Keywords: reader response, children's literature, engagement.

INTRODUCTION

Responding to literature, given the fluidity and the variety possible, is often the source of bringing in diversity of experience as it enables a heterogeneous participation. Determined and influenced by temporal and spatial contexts, this is rendered even more significant with reference to literature specifically meant for children. In light of the same, this paper attempts to reflect upon that aspect of the reader's engagement where the experiential coalesces with the character, image, situation, illustration etc. within a text or the text as a whole. The paper briefly seeks to delve upon the term children's literature followed by an exploration of the dynamics of response. This is essential as the term resonates a wide variety of contexts and conceptualisations. The inherent dynamism is hard to overlook as there are a wide body of texts that are classified and contained within this ambit. Particularly taken into consideration here is the reader response perspective which generates the possibility of bringing the lived space into a language classroom. This initiates a strain of thought which has been oft emphasised and argued in the field of education that the experience of literature/literary experience enriches, enlivens, captivates imagination and generates a milieu whereby which learning occurs in a pleasurable way.

LITERATURE FOR CHILDREN/ CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Children's literature can be described as a "uniquely focussed lens through which children and

young people are asked to look at the images of themselves made for them by their societies" [1]. Reading experiences are often said to address the function of familiarization with the mores and manners of the society, but not in a linear and imposing framework. It can be said to be placed on the continuum of being confirmatory to being challenging or subversive. It brings to light an important concern that refers to the role of children's literature in tending to encourage readers to subscribe to view/s of childhood and society. However implicitly it may be done, the ideological assumptions that are forwarded by means of fictional narratives cannot be negated [1].

An exploration of the analytical frameworks that characterize the domain of children's literature requires taking into purview the range of understandings that contribute to the fluidity of meaning of the term. It may be argued that providing a single definition or assigning certain identifiable descriptors is reductive in intent but nevertheless it is essential in order to explore the concerns that children's literature seeks to address. Also the necessity to look into the same emanates from another related idea - what books are/can be classified as 'good' for children. There are a variety of assumptions that underlie the simplistic definition of the term - children's literature - as a "category of books the existence of which absolutely depends on supposed relationships with particular reading audience: children" [2].

Lesnik-Orenstein [2] in the essay *Defining Children's Literature* analyses the indefiniteness which characterizes the genre, beginning with central idea or the central question - what does it mean writing for children. This arises from the concern that the reader is often generalised as a unified, objective and observable entity, often tending to operate on assumed differences between the twin categories of children's literature and adult literature.

Oberstein [2] explores the problematic by looking at the twin constituent terms - 'children' and 'literature' - whether they are separable and independent ideas or are they related to each other. The former idea refers to specialized ideas of children and literature, emerging from disciplinary orientations such as that of education, sociology, history, art and literature etc. The latter encapsulates the understanding that "within the label the two terms totally qualify each other and transform each other's meaning(the) field of tension (is) established by the contradictions and gaps between the assumption that 'children' and 'literature' have self-evident, consistent or logically derived meanings, and the actual use of 'children' and 'literature' within 'children's literature' in very specific, variable and inconsistent ways" [2].

This is further explained by the argument when some work is qualified as good for children there are implicit within this assertion several assumptions about "what the reading child is" and "how it reads" [2]. Identification for the reader involves building emotional ties to the text by recognizing himself/herself within the text or as an escape into a different world, offering vicarious pleasure and thrills [2]. Thus, the development or the charting out of a set of conventions based on this idea for the children's literature is a self-defeating enterprise. Another pertinent and related concern highlighted in the essay is that while analysing children's literature inevitably the focus is on whether the child will like the book and is discussed in terms of emotional responses generated. Though the centrality of the reader - in this case the child - is acknowledged and given valence but equally significant is the concern of looking at the construction of the idea of the child and the phase of childhood which is contingent upon the variance of time, space and culture. Childhood as a phase cannot be extracted and seen in isolation from its "function within cultural and social frameworks as carriers of changeable social, moral and ethical values and motives" [1].

The term children's literature can be described as encompassing a vast domain. It includes exploration of themes and genres in myriad forms and can be described as the dynamic part of a culture. There are no borders or boundaries that can limit the understanding of the term children's literature. The encounters with

books are significant for readers in shaping and developing attitudes, perceptions and developing an understanding of the self and the operational dynamism of the world around. Not only the content but the presentation of the content, with variations like illustrated picture books to graphic novels, is instrumental in contributing to not only the aesthetics but the imaginative universe and the coordinates of 'realities' that it seeks to negotiate with [1].

A PERSPECTIVE ON READER RESPONSE

Multiple perspectives on reading conceptualize reading as a "constructive and contextualized process" [3]. Significant to consider is the idea that the term 'response' is indicative of the "readers' complex engagement with the text, particularly with literature" [3] where the focus is on the reader's subjective interpretation of the text. The central premise is that "they do not believe that the meaning solely resides in the text: rather the reader actively constructs meaning using prior knowledge and experience." And a work of fiction is described as a "two-way relationship, transaction, between reader and text" [3].

Rosenblatt's argument that the reader infuses meaning into the visual signs is much more starkly evidenced when one delves into the distinction between efferent and aesthetic reading. While the former is referred to as focusing only on the "desired referents", the information that is to be retained after reading the text, the latter involves or refers to the blending together of sound, rhythm, associations and sense into an "experienced meaning" [4]. Rosenblatt [5] highlights that in the experience of a poem, sound and rhythm are equally significant, besides drawing on the sheer literal sense of the written text. Of particular consideration is the idea that 'sense' here is an integral element. There are no simplistic false dichotomies that polarize sense and emotion or cognition and affect in her conceptualization. Rather aesthetic reading is described as the fusion of the "cognitive and affective elements of consciousness - sensations, images, feelings, ideas - into a personally lived through poem or story" [5].

Thus, the focus is on the reader's activities or rather the reader's focus is of paramount importance and that differentiates the reading of the texts. This involves attending to the conventions that alerts the reader to the idea that a poem, story etc. is intended and to the "sensations and feelings and associations triggered by the ideas, images, people, and places that we conjure up under the guidance of the text" [5].

It involves making choices on the part of the reader as to which stance to adopt - consciously and unconsciously adopting and switching to the efferent and the aesthetic stance while reading. This brings to fore a crucial understanding of the reader's contribution

to the reading event – that is, the impact of purpose on the process. Viewing reading as a relationship between human and the text, Rosenblatt explicates, the attempt should be to explore how the texts are brought into a “life beyond life”. Thus reading here is conceptualized in a manner where “reading is always a particular event, involving a particular reader, a particular item of the environment – a text, at a particular time, under particular circumstances” [4]. Here the uniqueness and the variedness of how meaning is generated by virtue of the particularized reading experiences for each individual are emphasized. However, important to note is the idea that Rosenblatt while doing away with the extreme objectivity does not seek to venture into the polarised opposite of making it an absolutely disconnected subjective experience.

The conceptualization of the relationship between the readers and the text witnessed a momentous shift with the advent of reader response criticism. Reader response critics accorded significance to the readers in the construction of meaning. It places the reader at the centre and the act of reading and reader’s experience becomes the focus of the reading. Tracing the emergence of this perspective, Benton [6] in the essay, *Reader Response Criticism in Children’s Literature*, states that there are a number of underlying principles which characterize this critical stance and the foremost among the same is the dismissal of idea that critical judgement by the reader is merely affective fallacy or can be labelled as mere impressionism and relativism. Using the analogy of an archaeological dig, Benton differentiates reading only being an act of finding or discovering meaning from within the text to the construction of meaning or its creation. This perspective acknowledges the extra literary experience as decisive in the act of reading. Thus “(i) nterpretation is not an act of construing but the art of constructing” [7].

Recognizing the fluidity and effervescent nature of the literary experience, it can asserted the internal experience of a literary text can only be partially traced and analysed through manifest observable responses such as that of speech, gesture and expression of the reader. Further even the act of articulating transforms the experience and expands the meaning exponentially. Also the role of the interpersonal contexts in shaping the nature of the response or rather filtering of the experience cannot be disregarded [4].

The aforementioned concerns bring into perspective the variability that can be encountered in the responses to texts, particularly how children respond to texts. Gamble and Yates [7] in the book, *Exploring Children’s Literature*, highlight that though the significance of the reader in the construction of

meaning and generating an understanding of the text has been widely recognized; but there is a divergence of opinion on the role of the reader in the meaning assignation process. This is illustrated by drawing on different theoretical perspectives. Wolfgang Iser [7] attributes equal importance to the reader and the text in his notion of the two poles: ‘the artistic,’ which is the author’s text and ‘the aesthetic’, which is the response of an accomplished reader.

No longer is the understanding dependent on the authorial point of view but rather it is based on the interpretation emerging from an independent reader. This happens in several forms, with readers tending to ‘rewrite’ the text in their heads, express preferences, mentally alter events, reading vicariously and reading becoming a mode of construction of a reality for self - providing them experiences hitherto unencountered and unexplored. Here the role of text as a ‘socializer’ - even more critical and crucial – comes to fore as the focus shifts on the *real* reader, not the *implied* reader. The differentiation refers to the generation of meaning by former’s reading and interpretation of the text, mediated by the social and cultural experience. This accounts for the different understandings of the text each time it is read and revisited, even by the same reader. The central concern is that the *meaning does not remain a static entity* lying within the domain of the text.

A fundamental facet that contributes to the variation of interpretation is that of the role played by the prior knowledge that the reader brings to the text in order to help create sense of what is read. Stephens describes that this prior knowledge is primarily of two kinds – knowledge of story conventions and books and knowledge of the world, also known as the experiential knowledge. He elaborates further by stating that the kind of knowledge that children bring in while reading the text is varies from that of the adults. Not only this contributes to the multiplicity of meanings but it is a vital determinant of the literary devices and language used in books for children as they function as signifying clues for the adult/child reader. Thus the basic challenge of the text is the interpretative demands that it makes on the reader with respect to its comprehensibility and complexity.

Here Barthes [8] distinction between the ‘readerly’ and ‘writerly’ texts is essential to consider; while the former refers to the idea that the reader is passive and is led by the author through the text the latter refers to an active reader, participating in the process of generating meaning from the text. “The writerly text allows room for interpretation: gaps are left in the texts by the author for the reader to fill” [7]. Quoting Bruner, Gamble and Yates [7] describe that “texts which require readers to fill in gaps by forcing “meaning performance on the reader – will on the

whole be better stories (that is higher quality visits to narrative worlds)” (21). This is described as qualitatively enriching as the reader is bringing in prior knowledge and attempting to communicate with the text to build the bridges of understanding and interpretation. It is no longer limited to the precincts of the meaning at the surface level but instead extends beyond.

Variantly the position of the reader vis-à-vis the response to the text has been described as that of the position of an ‘onlooker’ [7], placed somewhere between being the actual witness of the events and being a listener, hearing the recounting of events. This attending is said to be succeeded by an evaluation and the attending in itself serves as an indicator of the interest which leads to a response, however positively or negatively inclined it may be. Gamble and Yates [7] describe Harding’s theoretical perspective as a foreshadowing or a precursor to the reader-response theory.

The fundamental commonality observed between the two is the significance given to the point of view of the onlooker – “what the onlooker perceives is coloured by his or her own cultural attitudes and beliefs.” Another position is that of Tucker [7] who criticizes the Freudian perspective to take into account the socio-cultural contexts within which children are reading. Also with respect to the positioning of the reader, Appleyard describes roles that readers take while engaging with the text. Of these, three are seen as particularly relevant to the context of children – reader as player, reader as hero or heroine and reader as thinker. These encompass the concerns of how for the young reader, basically a child, reading becomes a space where the dynamics of moral and social order are worked out in identifiably simple terms, helping him/her in encountering his/her own fears, learning through ‘cognitive dissonance’ with maturity etc.

Tucker [7] uses the metaphor of a perpetual journey to describe reading experiences, from childhood onwards; a journey on which the child’s beliefs, perceptions, ways of thinking are reinforced, refined and rejected. An example of the same is the child’s notion of truth, which may be contested by the presentation of different shades of grey. Thus reading fiction provides information but so allows the child to focus on issues of identity, exploring an inner world.

CONCLUSION

Literature dissipates or diffuses the nuanced instances that characterize reality. Literature has the added advantage in that, it represents the kaleidoscopic nature of social relations through various modes – be it poetry, novels, novellas, drama etc. It mirrors social realities through sensitive portrayals. By etching characters against the backdrop of diverse social

contours it brings to fore the numerous factors that contribute in shaping individual identities. These factors strike an inevitable chord with the concerns such as the mind and consciousness of individuals. And when these individuals are children the space for engagement is widened if the young minds are given the freedom to engage with a text on their terms. This creative space is often given a backseat in the classroom in the favour for more rationalistic drills of questions, dealing with vocabulary with unfamiliar contexts, memorisation and translation. Drawing from the potential that the literary experience seeks to offer it is quintessential that there is this is not withheld in the classroom in favour of drab and ritualistic curricular arrangements.

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