

RESPONDING TO LITERARY TEXTS THROUGH POETRY WRITING

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Abstract

There are various ways in which readers respond to literature. This article discusses how readers (students in particular) can express their ideas and thoughts about the literary texts they have read through poetry writing. It begins with an overview of reader response theory and the field of literary response research, followed by a discussion of oral and written forms of readers' responses to literature and a classroom activity that requires students to express their thoughts about literary characters in poetic forms. The article also highlights students' proficiency, and literacy and literary skills as some of the factors that need to be considered when using poetry writing as a way of responding to literature.

Keywords: reader response theory, literary response research, poetry writing, literary text

Introduction

There is a substantial body of research that investigates readers' responses to literature. Louis M Rosenblatt (1978), David Bleich (1978), Stanley Fish (1970), Norman Holland and Wolfgang Iser (cited in Tompkins, 1980) are some of the prominent scholars in this field of study. These scholars are the key proponents of the reader response theory that champions readers' subjective rather than objective response to literary texts.¹ They believe that the reader, the text, and a wide range of factors all play a major role in the process of responding to literature.

There are, as Beach and Hynds (1991) posit, at least three points to consider when one thinks about the process of responding to literary texts:

- Readers can respond to texts in various ways (e.g., symbolic interpretation, asking questions, problem solving)
- Readers can bring different attitudes and values to their reading (e.g., personal attitudes (like/dislike; negative/positive), personal orientations and reasons for reading (self or information-driven))
- Readers' responses are influenced by a variety of factors (e.g., gender, experience, knowledge, curricular, teacher and the environment)

Moss (2003) categorises the different ways in which readers respond to literature into two main types: oral and written forms. Discussion, questioning strategies and dramatic activities make up the oral form of literary response while writing response journal and written retelling of stories are examples of written form of literary response.

Moss's (2003) view is consistent with Bleeker and Bleeker's (1996) claim that students can respond to literature (particularly fiction) through writing poetry. "Poetic forms," as

Bleeker and Bleeker assert, “provide a framework for students’ responses and allow them freedom to respond independently and creatively to a given text” (para. 3). For instance, students can express their understanding of a novel or a play they have read by writing poems. This can be done by allowing students to express their ideas on, for instance, the characters, conflicts, themes, and symbols and write these ideas in a variety of poetic forms (e.g., simple, complex, close, open). Here is an activity that can be carried out with students in a poetry or creative writing class.

1. Divide students into groups of five and ask them to choose one main character in a short story or a novel they have read.
2. Allow students to express their thoughts about the character, particularly the conflict(s) the character experiences and write all these thoughts on a piece of paper.
3. Next, ask students to summarise their thoughts in a short paragraph (by highlighting the key ideas and words) and turn this paragraph into a simple poem.
4. Depending on their level, provide students with a pre-created poem template for organising their ideas and words or give them the freedom to write the poem using a poetic form of their choice. Students may either choose the character’s voice or their own to be the voice of the poem.

Text read: Frank O’Connor’s *My Oedipus Complex*

Students’ level of proficiency: Intermediate to upper-intermediate

Character identified: Larry

Thoughts and ideas about the character’s conflict:

Pre-created poem template

Students write about Larry’s conflict with his father who has just returned from the war. Students explain how his father’s presence has affected his life, particularly his close relationship with his mother. Students also write about the birth of Sonny, Larry’s younger brother, who complicates further Larry’s relationship with their parents.

Daddy,
Why do you have to _____

Mummy,
Why do you have to _____

Sonny,
Why do you have to _____

The following are examples of poems that were written based on a creative writing student's response to the main characters (and their conflicts) in Ian Worthington's (2004) *Alexander the Great: Man and God*, William Shakespeare's (1957) *The Tragical History of Hamlet Prince of Denmark* and Ernest Hemmingway's (1952) *Old Man and the Sea* and Oscar Wilde's (1992) *The Picture of Dorian Gray*².

The Great

Was it because of
Your love for
Hephaestion
That undying
Unswerving
Love
For a fellow brother or
Lover
Were you really
Poisoned or
killed
At the hands of your fellow
Comrades for
Power
Pure jealousy or
Unrequited love
From the great man

Ophelia's Lover

You are peeling
 away
layers upon layers
of mysteries
aching for the answers to
your questions.

You are
 awful
in making decision
The rashness
stupidity
clumsiness.

You are
 useless
in love
Mother, father die
friends and lover too.

Are you
the royal Dane
or the prince of Death?
Gloom and mysteries
besiege you.
Sadness and paranoia
are your garb
 concealing
layers upon layers
of your flaccid existence

Santiago

It is, they say
an existential battle
between the old man and
the giant fish
amidst the violent sea
under the sunlit sky
It is a battle of the
body and mind they say;
A big catch but
a big loss
The old man wills the battle,
but nature refuses to resign
They say that
there are forces
beyond the old man's knowledge and
control.
Nature where he comes
And to her he must return.

‘So what?’ you might ask
I say, Can't you see?

Portrait

You are not yourself tonight
your gaze stretches to the far flung
horizon
where the evening sun sets in
illuminating the darkening sky

Unstirred
The drowsy breeze
pulls down the long silky hair
that now blocks your view
I seize the moment!
on this drawing canvas
charcoaling your temperament
outlining your fragile beauty
charcoal smudging your innocence

Here I replicate an image that
would cause riots in the hearts
of thousands of those who
are enchanted by your looks
and a thousand more who are
envious of your curious charm

May this piece of art preserve you
your time in space and the moment
that captures your callous indifference
and your immortal youth
But never will it be a reminder of
your sins in this world

It is important to mention that there are a couple of aspects to consider before allowing students to express their thoughts about the texts they have read through poetry writing.

- Students must have read the said texts and discussed them thoroughly with their instructors
- Students must have a good knowledge of literary elements and devices, and must have adequate exposure to reading and writing poetry

There are also other important factors to be considered including students' proficiency, literacy (e.g. reading and writing) and literary skills (i.e. the ability to read, understand and interpret literary texts), the texts used (e.g., language use, cultural references, content and context) and the subject taught in the classroom (e.g., poetry, creative writing, basic English). But despite all these reservations, it is not impossible to encourage students and readers in general to respond to literature through writing poetry. It would be interesting to see how the above mentioned factors intersect with one another in the process of responding to literature.

Notes

1. The proponents of New Criticism such as John Crowe Ransom believe that readers must interpret literary texts objectively and should not bring, for instance, their own experiences and expectations to the whole process. This is because New Criticism "is a literary criticism which concerns itself with the interpretation and evaluation of the 'words on the page' rather than with the study of source and social-cultural background" (Kumar, 2005, p. 24).
2. The poems I have quoted here were written entirely by me when I was a student of an advanced creative writing class at Universiti Putra Malaysia in 2000.

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