

## Implementation of Reader-Response Theory in Teaching Short Story

Dilek Inan<sup>1</sup>

Merve Nur Boldan<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Balıkesir University, Turkey / Contact: [inan@balikesir.edu.tr](mailto:inan@balikesir.edu.tr) 

<sup>2</sup> National Defense University, Turkey / Contact: [mervenurboldan94@gmail.com](mailto:mervenurboldan94@gmail.com) 

### Abstract

Reader-response theorists such as I. A. Richards (1974), L. Rosenblatt (1993), S. Fish (1970), and W. Iser (1978) argue that reading is an act which is actualized in the form of a “transaction” between the text and the reader. They observe that each reading activity is a unique experience in which the reader is involved in ethical, intellectual, social and aesthetic terms as a whole. In this paper we share our experiences of using Graham Greene’s short story, *The Destroyers*, in “literature and language teaching” course as a sample. Indeed, the students are asked to write response papers for different short stories for twelve weeks. The data is analyzed qualitatively and thematically by using the tools suggested in reader-response theory. To collect personal response, we asked the students to read the short story as out-of-class assignment and write personal responses focusing mainly on the three approaches as “literature as content”, “language-based” and “literature for personal enrichment” elaborated and categorized by G. Lazar (1993). Students’ responses suggested that they treated the short story as transaction, and that they produced aesthetic readings rather than efferent. Producing response papers regularly during term-time contributed to the students’ critical and creative reading skills. It is observed that eventually the students become mature and confident readers and learn how to go beyond the written text by adding their individual aesthetic judgments.

### Keywords

English language teaching, Literature, Reader-Response Theory

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## Introduction and background

Reader-response theory emerges as a reaction to New Criticism. While New Criticism considers readers as passive recipients/agents and emphasizes a close engagement with the text, Reader-response Theory highlights the importance of active participation of readers in the production of meaning of the text. Another significant distinction between these two theories is their focal points as reader-response theory shows a reader-centred approach whilst New Criticism displays a textual-centred approach.

Reader-response theory is pioneered by Louise Rosenblatt (1993), an American professor emeritus and researcher. Rosenblatt (1982) describes reading as a transaction and a two-way process with the involvement of text and reader at a specific time under certain conditions. The term transaction is adopted by Dewey and in his epistemological scripts, he emphasizes the flexibility of readers and the text throughout the reading process (1938). Connell presents Dewey's epistemology with "the process of coming-to-know, the tentativeness of all knowledge claims, the active role of the knower, and the need for communication and agreement among inquirers" (1996, p. 396).

According to Rosenblatt with the mutual contribution of text and reader, the written words trigger consciousness and readers convey previous experience of language (Rosenblatt, 1982, p. 268). He also mentions that "regardless of being a listener, writer, speaker, or a reader, every person forms an interaction by their own linguistic-experiential resource and remains of previous transactions in life and language" (Rosenblatt, 1993, p. 381). Throughout this transaction multiple interpretations of text are probable and for that reason Rosenblatt and other reader-response theorists reject to attach one restricted/limited meaning to a text. Similarly, Iser highlights numerous interpretations of a text as a result of the readers' efforts in the meaning-making process while trying to fill in the gaps that the writer provides in the text (1978, cited in Park, 2012).

Both Rosenblatt (1982, 1993) and Iser (1978) emphasize active participation of readers and their conveying of past experiences, information, and convictions. Karolides also stresses the active involvement of readers in the reading process stating that "without a reader, the text does not come into existence" (Karolides, 2000, p. 5).

Karolides underlines once more that reading is a transaction between the reader and the text. He proposes certain prerequisites for the occurrence of reading transaction: In the first place, the text is supposed to be comprehensible in terms of its language, characters, situations, and stated topics. Secondly, the readers should have the necessary competence in terms of linguistic and experiential background. The readers are also supposed to be enthusiastic for both emotional and intellectual engagement with the text. According to Karolides, fulfilment of the above-mentioned prerequisites is significant or else the reading act might be short-circuited.

The accomplishment of more critical and analytical engagement with the text can be achievable with the transition from *interpretation* to *reading* which is elucidated by Stockwell: *interpretation* of a text can be seen as a recognition or initial comprehension; however, this encountering is generally unexpressed until readers become conscious of their action (Stockwell, 2005, p. 31). After the phase of recognition, the readers proceed to a more analytical phase of acknowledgment and this stage may be distinguished as *reading*. Fish states that capability of interpretation is not an acquisition but “a constitutive of human beings” (Fish, 1980, p. 172); on the contrary, reading is considered as a learned behaviour rather than a natural ability.

Given that reading is a learned and complicated behaviour, readers are expected to be productive, analytical, critical, and creative, and this expectation is succeeded with “the reader’s past experience, reading ability, expectations for reading, reading preferences, and concepts about the text” (Applebee, 1978). Active participation of the reader is required for construction of meaning and Beach proposes five theoretical perspectives as a response: “these perspectives are the “textual”, “experiential”, “psychological”, “social”, and “cultural” (1993, p. 8). To summarize Beach’s perspective, one can deduce that textual perspective is reader's knowledge of conventions, experiential perspective is reader’s engagement or experience, psychological perspective is reader's cognitive or subconscious processes, social perspective is reader’s social role and perceptions of the social context, and cultural perspective is reader's cultural role, and perceptions of attitudes and contexts. All of these perspectives focus on the meaning-making process of readers and each of them attempts to clarify the relation between reader, text, and context (Beach, 1993, p. 8).

The features in readers, texts, and contexts interrelate with each other to affect reading and respond to literature (Galda, 1990, p. 261). According to Galda the text does not represent meaning, it only leads to active creation of meaning by the reader and once again the transaction between the reader and the text in a specific social context is underlined (1990, p. 261). In parallel terms with Galda's assumptions, Straw suggests a shift from a text-based meaning-getting approach to a reader-centred meaning making approach (1990, p. 131).

The best-known reader-response theorists such as Richards (1974), Rosenblatt (1993), Fish (1970), and Iser (1978) argue that reading is an act which is actualized in the form of a "transaction" between the text and the reader. They observe that each reading activity is a unique experience in which the reader is involved in ethical, intellectual, social and aesthetic terms a whole. Rosenblatt clarifies that "a certain self-awareness, a certain perspective on his (the reader's) own preoccupations, and his own system of values" can be achievable with the reader's comprehension and reflection on the world of any literary work (1994, pp. 145, 146). This consideration highlights the significance of the reader's unique experience and transaction throughout the reading process. Similarly, Salvatori recommends that to achieve this self-awareness, literature is supposed to be taught as exploration, comprehension and reflection for generating meaning (1983, p. 659).

Transaction procedure between the text and the reader is described by Iser as an event generated and controlled by the reader's connection with the text and this connection is attained in two conflicting and reciprocally supervising activities involving "consistency building" and the "wandering viewpoint" (cited in Salvatori 1983, p. 661). As a term "consistency building" is the stabilization of vagueness and selection of parts from a text proving acquainted meanings; as a result, the reader's revision of perspectives is avoided by consistency building. On the other hand, in "wandering viewpoint" meanings proposed by a text is amplified, reproduced, and rearranged and therefore the reader's revision of previous perspectives is engendered. When a literary work implies diverse meanings rather than simply saying it, consistency building is utilized by readers to fill the "blanks" and "gaps" in the text. With the intention of monitoring the stabilizing and possibly reductive predisposition of consistency building, wandering viewpoint activities are utilized when the gaps in a

text become abundant. By utilizing these activities, readers may become more reflexive about reading and they can enhance their reading arrangements (Iser, cited in Salvatori 1983, p. 661)

Rosenblatt defines two types of reading: aesthetic and efferent reading; and readers/learners should choose one of them that is suitable to the situation and purpose (Rosenblatt, 1993, p. 378). According to Rosenblatt, aesthetic reading readers focus on “experiencing what is being evoked, lived through, during the reading”. Aesthetic reading mainly involves individual’s feelings, attitudes, thoughts, and impressions. On the other hand, efferent reading is described as “analyzing, abstracting, and accumulating what will be retained after the reading”. In efferent reading, readers focus on chiefly intellectual aspects of meaning.

In summary, reader-response theory suggests that readers are active participants throughout the reading process and they bring their background information, affective and mental intelligence, beliefs, and attitudes to the reading action. For reader-response theorists no meaning-making is possible without reader’s interaction with the text; therefore, the reader must be seen as valuable and significant as the author and the text.

Through the years of teaching English Literature in the English Language Teaching Department, I have come to realize that ELT preservice teachers carry certain hesitations when they are exposed to literary texts. They have prejudices against literature and find it hard to deal with it. Lazar illuminates “literature as content” as making literature itself the content of lesson and this approach is directly related to the examination of chronicle and features of literary movements (Lazar, 1993, p. 35). These features include the life of author, the relevance between the author and his/her writings, the genre of the text, and communal, political, and chronological surroundings of a text (Lazar, 1993, p. 35). In addition to them, Lazar lists other types of information for facilitating “literature as content” approach (Lazar, 1993, p. 38):

- Historical or mythological events or characters to which a text refers
- Philosophical, religious or political ideas debated or discussed in a text
- Places, objects or other texts referred to in a text- either directly or indirectly

- Relationship of the text to the literary movements of its time
- Distinct features of the author's style

Lazar explains that “stylistics” or “language-based approach” as the study of literature itself has two main goals, the first aim is facilitating students to interpret the text in a meaningful way and the second aim is developing students' understanding and consciousness of the language as a whole (Lazar, 1993, p. 31). Stylistics is also defined as a connection between linguistics and literary criticism (Widdowson, 1975, p. 4) and Lazar describes it as “a link between the two in that it uses linguistic analysis to understand how messages are conveyed” (Lazar, 1993, p. 32). Language-based approach provides comprehension and appreciation of literary texts, comparison between variety of texts and it demonstrates the function of linguistic forms for conveying particular messages (Lazar, 1993, p. 32). The last approach “literature for personal enrichment” involves students both emotionally and intellectually. Being inspired by the text, the students have the opportunity to explore and verbalize their thoughts, personal life experiences, and emotions. For achieving this, language teachers should select materials consistent with students' interests, their language proficiency level, and cultural/social background (Lazar, 1993, pp. 41, 42). As a language teacher, guiding students with specific questions, brainstorming activities, outline of the situation in the text, questionnaires, and discussions are also recommended by Lazar (Lazar, 1993, p. 42).

Integrating reader-response applications in the classroom makes students motivated in being productive about the literary texts. Thus, the following part of the paper investigates the impact of reader-response theory in analysing Graham Greene's *The Destructors*. Although the students are exposed to a series of modern short stories as classroom application, this paper is limited with *The Destructors*. It is rewarding to see that students' response papers have similarities as well as differences. As Carter suggests “there is no single ‘correct’ way of analysing and interpreting the text, nor any single correct approach” (Carter, 2007, p. 10). After the brief theoretical clarification, the next section sets an example on how to use the theory.

### *The Destructors: Text and context*

H. Graham Greene (1904-1991) is an English novelist, playwright, short-story writer, and journalist who is renowned for his novels *Brighton Rock* (1938), *The Power and the Glory* (1940), *The Heart of the Matter* (1948), *The End of the Affair* (1951) and short stories *The Destructors* (1954), *The End of Party* (1929), *A visit to Morin* (1959), *Under the Garden*, *May We Borrow Your Husband?* Greene received the Companion of Honor award by Queen Elizabeth in 1966, and the Order of Merit in 1986. In his literary works, he discusses moral ambiguities related to contemporary political settings. These political and social settings in his works provide a significant background for moral and spiritual challenges within individuals. Since he experienced Second World War (1939-1945), topics such as war, fascism, political upheavals, revolutions, and post-war atmosphere, betrayal, pursuit, and death are focal points in his novels and short stories. Greene's *The Destructors* is a valuable and suitable practice for the students to apply Reader-response theory in which they have the opportunity to encounter Beach's "textual," "experiential," "psychological," "social," and "cultural" perspectives.

*The Destructors* is an emotionally and intellectually engaging short story written in 1954 which was first published in *Picture Post* and afterwards it was collected in *Twenty-One Stories* in 1955. In Karl's observation "Greene believes that from impurity will come purity, from demonism saintliness, from unbelief belief, from vice virtue, his "heroes" often seem to closer to demons than to saints" (Karl, 1962, p. 87). This perspective is a governing tone in *The Destructors* with its scenes that portray teenage children who are liberated from the limits and constraints of adults and society. Defying the rationality, order and control of the adult world, children's world is ruled by disorder, chaos, uncertainty, danger, creativity, and destruction. Kolin describes *The Destructors* as "a world in transition" and a society in disorder (Kolin, 2000, p. 158). Gale (2016) defines *The Destructors* as the most anthologized short story of Greene despite its disturbing effect on the readers. Set in a derelict car-park in Blitzed London after World War II, the story is about the Wormsley Common Gang, a group of twelve boys ranging from nine to fifteen years of age, who live in one of the poorer regions of London and spend their summer

holiday planning mischievous actions such as pinching free rides. Led by Trevor, the gang deliberately dismantles a stylish house in its owner's absence over a bank holiday weekend. Ironically, Trevor's father is an architect.

The house is important as it was built by the famous seventeenth century English mathematician and architect Christopher Wren. Dvořák underlines Greene's depiction of children's innocence as "virgin soul" and conversely as "pure evil" (2007, p. 52). The children break into a precious old house and destroy it only for pleasure – a subject matter through which Greene devastates the myth of childhood purity (2007, p. 54). Greene's view of the evil aspect of children is also mentioned by Sherry (2016) "Evil is not necessarily something which comes with age and experience. It exists, it is there at any age" and this statement justifies the teenager boys' acts, intentions, and opinions. Ower construes Greene's short story with an existentialist view point and he asserts three reasons for spiritual collapse: "the historical breakdown of absolute values", "a sense of the alienation", and "indifference of universe" (Ower, 1975, p. 69).

An alternative perspective is also suggested by Ower as he mentions the resemblance between the protagonist Trevor and Hitler and his gang with the Nazis (Ower, 1975, p. 69). This resemblance is confirmed with the historical setting of the short story, post-World War II England. The Wormsley Common gang dwell in a severely damaged area in London and their attempt to destroy the old house displays their "psychological shock" and "social disintegration" after the war; this action is a reply with outburst of violence (Ower, 1975, p. 69). Poole defines *The Destroyers* as "a fiction with subliminal political meaning" (Poole, 2009, p. 434). Although there is no explicit mentioning of political issues in the plot, the writer provides connections between a gang of boys, leadership, authority, organization and rivalry. The goal of destruction is perceived as a work of art by the leader Trevor, no financial benefit is considered but desire of perfection is present in the story; this goal conveys a deviant idealism and it demonstrates vast devastations of the twentieth century (Poole, 2009, p. 434). In his article, Feldmann (1982) presents the idea of history in *The Destroyers*, he affirms that for any interpretation the destruction of the house ought to be comprehended as a symbolic act. This symbolism is elucidated differently by different scholars: McCartney (Feldmann 1982) interprets the short story with a



political perspective, he views Churchill's defeat by Atlee's Labour Government in 1945 as the origin of the story and he construes the house as the symbol of "the continuity of human race" and the destruction of it symbolizes disconnection between The Wormsley Common gang and "the consecutive and humanistic value of the past". Stinson (Feldmann 1982) adopts a religious attitude towards the story and he remarks the destruction of the house as a spiritual and moral commentary on human's innate corruption and dominance of evil in the world. Ower (1975, cited in Feldmann 1982), too, observes a religious interpretation about the destruction, as the house represents "refinement and order" of Christian religion/culture and its destruction implies that without Church and its morality function of the civilization would collapse.

## **Method**

### ***Procedure and data collection***

In this paper, we share our experiences of using Graham Greene's short story, *The Destroyers*, in "Literature and Language Teaching 1" course as a sample in which the third year students are actually exposed to different short stories each week. The course covers twelve modern short stories. However, this paper is limited to one story only in order to discuss that the students gradually improve themselves, and eventually they become better at producing interpretations that are evident in their response papers. To elicit personal response, we asked the students to read the short story as an out-of-class assignment and write personal responses focusing mainly on the three approaches as "literature as content", "language-based" and "literature for personal enrichment" elaborated and categorized by Lazar (1993).

As for the data analysis, the data are analysed qualitatively and thematically by using the tools suggested in reader-response theory.

### ***Participants***

The participants consist of fifty pre-service English Language Teaching third-year students. They are already familiar with canonical works of English Literature and the necessary literary terms.

## Findings

Students' responses suggested that they treated the short story as transaction, and that they produced aesthetic readings rather than efferent. Producing response papers regularly during term-time contributed to the students' critical and creative reading and writing skills. It is observed that eventually the students become mature and confident readers and learn how to go beyond the written text by adding their individual aesthetic judgements. In students' papers, some common points were observed and these points were examined under three subtitles "Literature as Content", "Language-based", and "Literature for Personal Enrichment" as defined by Lazar (1993). As stated above, according to reader-response theory readers hold an active role and participation in the reading and meaning making process; in students' papers this active participation was evident since students engaged themselves with the text individually and commented on it according to their personal, emotional, and intellectual thoughts and opinions. As Iser (1978) suggests, reading is fulfilled as a "transaction" between the text and the reader, this fulfilment is achieved by the involvement of readers and text. For succeeding this transaction students are asked for personal interpretation and judgement considering Lazar's (1993) approaches. The following table displays certain common topics and expression thematically elicited from the students' personal responses:

**Table 1.** Common Points in Students' Response Papers

Literature as Content Approach	Language-based Approach	Literature for Personal Enrichment Approach
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● War</li> <li>● Destruction &amp; Creation</li> <li>● Social conditions and how they affect people's behaviors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Simple, plain, and clear language</li> <li>● Detailed narration</li> <li>● Learning new vocabulary</li> <li>● Visual clues, imagery</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● War and its effects on people</li> <li>● The conflict between Old and new generation</li> <li>● The relation between creation and destruction</li> </ul>

Especially in the Personal Enrichment part, valuable samples can be detected:

**Student A:** "... In this story I see how the war can affect the life and psychology of people and characters represent old and new generation and their conflict."

**Student B:** "In my life, I occasionally want to remove some stuff such as some memories, objects, people etc. which have bad impression on me so that I can get rid

of those trivial things and I will be more likely to have transparent and critical thinking for my upcoming life...”

**Student C:** “... Thanks to this story I realized how important the education and morality rules are because children in the story destroyed a man’s house in order to be popular among the adult gangs...”

**Student D:** “I have learned many words from the story and a new philosophy that “Creation comes from destruction...”

As observed in students’ paper samples, the responses are mostly at the literal level. They try to deduce lessons and clear messages from the story. They make connections between the text and their own lives; therefore, with the mutual contribution of text and reader, the written words trigger consciousness (Rosenblatt, 1982) and readers associate the text with themselves. The students tend to make generalizations about generational conflicts and how war is influential on people’s lives. In some of the papers, in Personal Enrichment part, some of the students share their displeasure of the text and they explain this displeasure due to not being able to rationalize boys’ mischievous behaviours and ending of the story is also a factor for disliking. These commentaries confirm Lazar’s opinions about the significance of text’s consistency with students’ interests, their language proficiency level, and cultural/social background (Lazar, 1993, pp. 41, 42). While Student C is disappointed at the children’s mischievous and irresponsible behaviours and underlines importance of education and moral way of life, Student A is more empathetic in trying to understand the children’s motivations in destroying the house and underlines the negative effects of war on the children’s psychology. It is observed that more competent students were able to welcome gap-fills in the writer’s style by using higher order thinking skills and achieved to appreciate the story as a whole with its ambiguities. Less competent students, on the other hand, could only understand the plot of the story and were mystified by any indefinite narration in the story. Student D observes his vocabulary development while Student B identifies himself with the children in the story and suggests an alternative solution about the human condition by emphasizing the importance of ignoring the harmful effects of experiences. Interestingly, the students’ responses are all unique, complementary and creative.

## Conclusion

Especially in English Language Teaching Departments, pre-service teachers have prejudice against literary texts. They find them difficult to comprehend, they do not know how to approach or interpret a literary text. What is more, most of the ELT preservice teachers do not feel comfortable when challenged by literary texts. For diminishing these barriers, reader-response theory proves fruitful. One can trigger students' productive skills by employing reader-response and framing the written product in terms of three approaches: Literature as Content, Language-based, Literature for Personal Enrichment.

By utilizing these approaches we can at least encourage, motivate, and guide students so that they can experience that they are actually active in the reading and meaning making process. In this scope, Lazar's (1993) model is an example and with its aid students become more productive. With this approach, reading goes beyond a receptive skill and it also becomes a productive skill. Our aim in this study is to apply reader-response theory to pre-service ELT teachers to make them producers not consumers, become more active, brave, and innovative in meaning production. It is observed that by writing reader-response papers, students are expected to understand that there is no fixed or restricted meaning for a literary text but there are numerous interpretations of it.

## Notes on the contributors

**Dilek Inan** has been teaching English Literature as a professor at ELT Department of Balikesir University since 2001. She obtained her MA and Ph.D. from the English Literature Department of Warwick University, UK and her BA from the English Language and Literature Department of Hacettepe University. She has published widely on dramatic and post-dramatic theatre especially on the works of Harold Pinter, David Hare, David Greig, Martin Crimp, Conor McPherson, Moira Buffini and Colm Toibin in national and international journals. She has published a monograph entitled *The Sense of Place and Identity in David Greig's Plays* (2010), and *İngiliz Tiyatrosu 1995-2015: Yazarlar ve Eserlerinden Seçkiler* (2017).

**Merve Boldan** is an English Instructor at National Defense University, Balikesir, Turkey. She researches on English language teaching, using literature in language teaching, and speaking anxiety in foreign language learning.

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