

I Felt a Funeral in my Brain in the milieu of Reader-Response Theory

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to trace out the significance of “uncontrolled response” of readers in production of interpretative knowledge. The ‘identity theme’ of reader response theory of Norman Holland is applied to identify the instances of ‘uncontrolled experiences’ in the interpretation of the readers of Emily Dickenson’s I Felt A Funeral in My brain. Qualitative research paradigm is taken up as a prime research methodology that has guided data analysis. The data consists of interpretations of three readers of Emily Dickenson’s I Felt A Funeral in My brain that provide evidences of ‘identity theme’ in the construction of interpretative knowledge. Conclusions are thereby drawn, the uncontrolled response of the reader brings coherent conclusion in interpretative knowledge thus reconstructs the text with new meaning replicated from reader’s ‘identity theme’.

Introduction

The reader response theory highlights the role of reader and his emotional experience of the text. Reader response approach focuses the role of reader as a life-giving force to the text. The readers impart life to the text and bestow an ‘existence’ to the text by the art of interpretation. The main focus of this approach are the readers who ‘evoke’ meaning in the text thus play the same role as the author of the text does. Reader response approach delineates the role of the reader as the re-creator of the text who constructs new meaning in the milieu of his own worldly experiences.

This paper is going to analyze the interpretations of Emily Dickenson’s poem *I Felt a Funeral in My Brain* by three different readers. I will analyze the data through the lens of Norman Holland’s theory of “identity theme”. Emily Dickenson’s poem deals with the theme of death and destruction. The researcher’s main focus will be the ‘identity theme’ of the readers of Emily Dickenson and their interpretation. The interpretative knowledge according to Norman Holland is neither deduced nor inferred by the controlled experience and the data will be analyzed how the controlled and uncontrolled experiences of reader’s influence the interpretative knowledge. Reader-response theory denies the ‘authorial Intent’ and focuses reader’s interpretation as the primary object in reading process (Quoted in Lang,2). Stanley Fish a main critic of reader –response approach rejects the authorial intent completely and believes in readers who derive meaning from the text. Fishes argues “to consult dictionaries ,grammars and histories is to assume that meaning can be specified independently of the activity of reading”(quoted in Lang, 2).It basically is the act of reading which is the central object in creation of the meanings thus the world of the interpreter is entirely different from the world of the author. The reader conceives meaning from the stored data of mind hence meanings reside in reader’s mind, not in the texts. Each text can be interpreted differently by different readers as the readers have their own ‘identity theme’ which reflects their own mind into the text. Norman Holland posits that the reader projects unconsciously his own ‘identity theme’ on the text so the interpretation of the reader shows his own patterns of psyche and conflicts (quoted in Bracher, 343).Norman Holland argues that “the overwhelming principle of reading is :identity recreates itself...that is, all of us, as we read, use the literary work to symbolize and finally to replicate ourselves”(Quoted in Bracher,342) Reader’s interpretation is unpredictable as each reader comes with a different backdrop of experience hence a text doesn’t exist independently rather is re-constructed by the readers.

Literature Review

This article adds to the range of research which is related to the reader response theories by different researchers and theorists. Reader-response theory is the transactional process of reader's mind when encounters text. This approach is probed by so many researchers. The significant researchers are David Bleaich (*Reading and Feelings and Subjective Criticism*), Louis Rosenblatt(*The Reader,the text,the Poem*), Wolfgang Iser(*The Implied reader and the Act of Reading*),Stanley Fish(*Surprised by Sin: The reader in Paradise Lost and Is there a text in this class?*)and Norman Holland's *Five Readings ,literature and Brain and Poems in Person* .I will mainly focus Stanley Fish and Norman Holland for this research article. Norman Holland discusses the reader-response approach with a psychoanalytical perspective and highlights the issue of "identity theme" in readers. In mid 1970 Holland investigated the reading process with the lens of ego-psychology to elucidate how readers read through the 'identity theme' which provides "a constancy that colors every phase of individual's life" (Quoted in Harkin, 412).Each Reader's interpretation can differ from the other one as their response depends on emotional experiences and individual feelings. Each word and device in a literary text serves to stimulate a variety of feelings and ideas in the readers. Each reader's response corresponds with the denominator of his personality according to Holland's dictum of 'identity theme' hence reader finds in literature what he seeks for as Holland says "each reader tries to compose from the elements of the work a match to his own characteristic style" (Quoted in Jayne,2).Each literary text is a subsystem of human psyche provided to the readers by the author to project their own emotional experience of life. Holland's book *Poems and Persons* discusses this projection of reader's identity and elaborates the interpretation of Hilda Doolittle's poem by two different students Saul and Sandra as investigators of identity theme. Another prominent critic of Reader Response theory Stanley Fish believes in the 'interpretative communities' which elaborates how group of readers develop similar interpretations. According to Fish knowledge is socially conditioned as what an individual thinks and knows is influenced by culture and society.

Transactional interpretation

Meanings of a text are based on the transaction between the reader and text. The reader's mind gets stimulated by the words of the text hence transacts interpretations. These interpretations can vary individual to individual. According to Iser Wolfgang the literary text "pre-structures" reader's meanings. The interpretation of the relation of text and reader is termed as "aesthetic response" by Iser Wolfgang as he says:

"Aesthetic response is...to be analyzed in terms of a dialectic relationship between text, reader, and their interaction. It is called aesthetic response because, although it is brought about by the text, it brings into play the imaginative and perceptive faculties of the reader, in order to make him adjust and even differentiate his own focus"(Quoted in Ward,9)

Iser Wolfgang highlights the reader's uncontrolled experience as reader's imagination fills in the "Gaps" of the text. According to Iser when the Reader fills the gaps of a text by interpretation begins the communication between the reader and the text. The gaps play the role of nucleus around which the relationship of the reader and text revolves. Iser Wolfgang argues that "The reader's enjoyment begins when he himself becomes productive, i.e., when the text allows him to bring his own faculties into play" (Wolfgang, 108).The reader's uncontrolled interpretation is transaction of the communication between the text and reader which brings in both the reader's imagination as well as the cultural and social influences on the reader thus re-constructs a text.

Reader's interpretation/a cognitive criticism

Reader's interpretation of the text involves cognition that's why each individual response of the same text varies so much because each reader infuses his own meanings in the text. Norman Holland's book *Literature and Brain* observes the issue of reader's cognition and concludes that each and every reader responds to a text according to his own mind and cognition. The main thing which forces a mind to read literature is the search for pleasure. Norman Holland elucidates the issue of reader's interpretation as a cognitive criticism by dividing reader's experience with the text in three parts.

- a) Reduced Awareness of surroundings or own body
- b) The suspension of disbelief
- c) Development of emotions towards fictional characters.(Quoted in Bock,1)

Holland highlights these three aspects about the interpretation of a 'common reader' whose interpretation is not controlled by the professional purpose such as reading for literary criticism or seminars. The decreased attention of the surrounding, the belief in the unreal thing and finally the reader's developed feelings with the characters trigger reader's emotions hence the reader reconstructs a text with his uncontrolled response.

Reader Response/Subjective Interpretation

Reader's interpretations of a literary text are the symbolization or re-symbolization of their own self. Readers discover their own mind by interpretation of a text thus reader response is a subjective interpretation of a literary text. David Bleich focuses the subjective aspect of reader's interpretation and says:

“When interpretation is conceived as motivated resymbolization, the idea of response is a peremptory perceptual act that translates a sensory experience in to consciousness. The sensory experience has become part of the sense of self, and in this way, we have identified it” (Bleich, 134).

The reader's uncontrolled interpretation is not 'text oriented' but 'Reader oriented' according to David Bleich as the readers get aggravated by the deep-rooted psychological desires. A reader reads a text symbolizes with his own life and emotional experiences thus replicates himself in the uncontrolled interpretation. Norman Holland calls it 'identity theme' of the reader which makes the uncontrolled interpretation subjective. To David Bleich reader's uncontrolled interpretations involve associations (Quoted in Rash,15).Bleich divides the reader's interpretation into three phases:

- a) Perception
- b) Affective Response
- c) Associative Response

The first phase is of the perception that what does the reader thinks and perceives of the text and in the second phase reader explains his experience of actual and real feelings .The third phase is the most complex phase as the reader associate with the person and people when reflecting on the text.

Readers construct meaning/Reading for Pleasure

Meanings reside in the reader not in the text hence the readers construct meanings. Stanley Fish posits that the reader always reads his pre-understanding back into the text. The text is like a blank slate of words on which reader infuses meaning hence gives life to the text (Quoted in Harkin, 413).The uncontrolled response of the reader to the literary text is a complete pleasure source as it is the purgation of emotions which is not corrupted by any controlled force. The feelings and emotions are triggered in the readers and the reflection he produces is a pure kind of uncontrolled interpretation. Norman Holland's book *Literature and Brain* discusses the same issue of reading for pleasure. A common reader's response is the outcome of the pleasure he derived from the text and on the other hand a professional reader focuses on an intellectual responses and interpretation. The reader with his uncontrolled interpretation seeks pleasure out of a literary text thus constructs meaning.

Analysis and Interpretation

This article is going to analyze the interpretations of Emily Dickenson's poem *I Felt a Funeral in My Brain* by three different readers. The data will be analyzed through the lens of Norman Holland's theory of "identity theme". Norman Holland describes the identity theme by three main influences of feelings, association and persons on the interpreter and says:

“Interpretative knowledge is neither deduced nor inferred from a controlled experience .rather, it is constructed from the uncontrolled experience of the interpreter, and the rules of construction are only vaguely known by any one observing the interpreter”(Holland,4)

Each reader's interpretation differs from the other because of the cultural, societal values and individual assumption and beliefs. The best interpretative knowledge is uncontrolled experience of the reader which comes with the 'common reader'. Norman Holland's book *Literature and Brain* discusses the common reader and the professional reader. The best interpretative knowledge according to Norman Holland is the one which is not controlled by any intellectual barrier and provides aesthetic pleasure to the reader by the process of catharsis.(Quoted in Bock,2).

Literature mirrors life and serves as the source of catharsis for the purification of emotions. The uncontrolled response of the readers serve this purpose as uncontrolled interpretation is not bound by any rule or regulation. The feelings directly flow from the core of the reader's heart thus re-constructs best interpretations. Emily Dickenson's poem *I Felt a Funeral in My Brain* is chosen for the interpretation by three readers of the poem to examine the 'interpretative knowledge' in the light of controlled and uncontrolled experiences .The poem of Emily Dickenson is basically about the metaphorical funeral in the brain. The readers have interpreted the poem according to their own 'identity theme' and reconstruct meaning according to their own emotional experiences. The poem shows the function of human mind works under depression and the metaphorical death of a mind. The writer has shown the common ritual of the funeral to depict her agony and pain but she concludes that no words can articulate the destruction of mind. The readers create meaning in their own way and deny the 'authorial intent' thus they construct the new knowledge with their uncontrolled interpretation. One reader of the text derives the theme of death, destruction and depression from the poem, as she says that the poem highlights the inability of mind to cope with the societal pressure imposed on it from the outer world. The words of the poem "and I drop down and down"(Dickenson,18) shows the soreness of life which makes her fall down .The poem according to the first reader shows the stages of the collapse of mind because of 'fret and weariness' of life .she shows the destruction of her peace of mind through the abstract images .This reader's interpretation is an uncontrolled one and strongly intertwined with her own 'identity theme' through which she derives the meanings which shows her own mental agony and depression. The 'identity theme' deals with the feelings ,association and people which trigger feeling in the mind of the reader thus he re-constructs interpretations through his uncontrolled experience of the reading and infer the real meaning of the piece of literature.

Another reader of the poem has an optimistic approach and takes the poem as a ceremony of celebration towards eternity. According to this reader the writer is celebrating the funeral so that to achieve eternity that's why each word is referring to a happy tone of music. The words "A Service, like a Drum-Kept beating-beating" (*I Felt a Funeral in My Brain*, 7) shows a kind of happiness in the writer's mind and she symbolizes it with the word of drums as drums are mostly associated with happy music. The sophistication of the funeral according to this reader is again something which symbolizes the theme of merriment in the mind of the writer such as the lines 'And when they all were seated' show the peace in the attendants of the ceremony. The interpretation of this reader is again very much interlaced with his own 'identity theme' through which the ceremony of funeral seems something more of celebration for eternity to him. Each reader gets influence by the "interpretative communities" as well which is very much obvious in the uncontrolled interpretation of these readers as they infer meaning in the text. The controlled experiences of the readers restrain the logical conclusions and also play the role of a barrier in the way of catharsis. Readers who dissect the poem with structuralistic or formalistic point of view cannot get the feelings of serenity and purgation of emotions.

Both the readers of uncontrolled response of this text produce subjective interpretation which is uncontrolled response of the reader with the influence of 'identity theme' and 'interpretative communities'. The readers read for pleasure and reproduce their own meanings in the text by denying the 'authorial intent' which is very much visible in the interpretation of the both the subjective interpreters of this selected text. The associative response is very much visible in the interpretation of the first reader who finds life full of fret and agony and the second reader's associative response is quite different as he finds the poem a celebrating ceremony and not tragic at all, which is associated for him with the 'quest of eternity'. The way writer celebrates the funeral according to him is out of happiness to achieve the sublimity by being eternal. The concept of 'sublime eternity' comes in this reader from the interpretative community which is related to his religious background. The third reader of the text reads the text with the lens of Formalism and delves deep into the structure of the poem as its very much visible from his interpretation. The third reader's interpretation is with a controlled experience of the text thus lacks the 'identity theme' so doesn't go through any emotional purgation which is very much reflected in his interpretation.

The 'Formalist' reader of the poem doesn't look into the emotional side of the poem rather counts the poetic devices such as metaphors, similes, alliteration and the paradoxes. Such kind of interpretative knowledge doesn't have association with the pure feelings and emotions. Literature is said to be the reflection of life and a tool for emotional pleasures which is impossible to achieve with controlled experiences as it restrains and imprisons the reader to get aesthetic pleasure out of it. The reader with uncontrolled experience is free like a bird to explore the world of literature without any rules and regulations with his own way on the other hand the controlled experience reader cannot get aesthetic pleasures and is bound to the rules and regulations.

Conclusion

Reader response approach focuses the role of reader as a life-giving force to the text. The readers impart life to the text and bestow an 'existence' to the text by the art of interpretation. The uncontrolled response of the reader brings sound conclusion in interpretative knowledge thus reconstructs the text with new meaning replicated from reader's 'identity theme'. The controlled experience on the other hand plays the role of intellectual barrier in the constructional process of meanings thus the reader doesn't have any emotional purification of the feelings. The data which is analyzed in the backdrop of reader-response theory shows that the uncontrolled experience of the reader is the best for the production of interpretative knowledge.

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