

IN THE NAME OF GOD

**CONTRIBUTIONS OF READER-RESPONSE THEORY TO
TEACHING LITERATURE: BEYOND DOMINATION,
DIALOGUE, DEMOCRACY, AND DEVELOPMENT**

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Dedicated to our past and present humanists, who have believed in and defended the dignity and worth of all human beings, who have devoted themselves to bringing about democratization in schools and the community, and in honour of the late Dr. M. H. Kamyabi, a great teacher and a hero of Shiraz University.

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ABSTRACT

Contributions of Reader-Response Theory to Teaching Literature: Beyond Domination, Dialogue, Democracy, and Development

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Feeling dissatisfied with traditional methodology of teaching literature and finding its effects damaging to an overall aesthetic education of young people concerning the needs and challenges of the twenty-first century, the writer of this thesis has constantly looked for alternatives and possible contributions which might come from various fields. These may, of course, include disciplines such as linguistics, English language teaching, stylistics, psychology and so forth. However, the most appropriate one has ultimately been decided to be contemporary literary theory itself _ because of an already closer and inner link to literature _ particularly reader-response theory.

In addition to a lingering 'Old Criticism', the dominant criticism which has so far directed our (English) literature courses has been formalistic New Criticism. Comparing and contrasting New Criticism with reader-response theory in terms of their theoretical and ideological tenets, the core of this study will be the educational ramifications of the two critical approaches. New Criticism gained popularity in academic arena for serving some social and political causes of the period in question, namely, the first half of the twentieth century, and reader-response theory emerged mostly as a reaction against New Criticism after 1968.

Showing that these conditions no longer exist, and above all, that the twenty-first century has totally different educational needs and problems to deal with, this thesis has attempted to elaborate on the serious deficiencies of New Critical pedagogy. Moreover, among the various benefits of a 'transactional' perspective of reader-response theories, some broad implications as to the possibility of democratizing and vitalizing literary education for a wider audience, than exclusively literature students in higher education, have been presented.

In order to be fair, the initial results of comparing New Criticism / reader-response pedagogy have been finally tested against Humanistic Education, which is held to come closer to our ideal of a democratic and effective education.

CONTENTS

| | |
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| Chapter I: Introduction | 1 |
| Chapter II: New Criticism versus Reader-Response Theory | |
| A. New Criticism | 21 |
| B. Reader-Response Theory | 52 |
| Chapter III: Literary Education in New Criticism and Reader-Response Theory | 92 |
| Chapter IV: Humanistic Education and Other Views | 150 |
| Conclusion | 215 |
| <i>Notes</i> | 222 |
| <i>Works Cited</i> | 227 |

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The more the modern world changes, for better or worse, from day to day the significance of education becomes more and more prominent. The last decades of the twentieth century brought so much change to modern life and so rapidly that citizens and institutions all over the world could not help facing its many blessings and predicaments for their efficiency and even survival in this turn of the century and the new millennium. The most striking blessings and difficulties for the modern times are , to mention but a few, the phenomenon of globalization; the technological and electronic revolutions; overpopulation and consequently the rapid growth in the school population (with their diverse cultures, values, individual needs and differences usually within a single institution); serious social or family difficulties and a “crisis of human values”; substantial, urgent demands of self-determination, social equity, human rights and

freedoms; and finally, by far the most urgent need for greater understanding and tolerance within national and international communities (Delors, et al. 1996; *Education for Affective Development*, 1992; Roy Singh, 1991).

In order to better utilize the positive potentialities of the modern era and to cope with its great ordeals and surprises, our educational system should also be prepared for the twenty-first century by adopting “future-oriented” rather than “re-active” attitudes:

Re-active education [means] education policy and practices which only attempt to respond to changes or crises as they occur, or more often, after they have occurred. ... On the other hand the future-oriented education is actively promotive of innovation and dynamically evolving social goals. (Roy Singh 7)

Therefore, it is quite natural to expect an active role from Iran's higher education in bringing about more visionary plans, plans which, if appropriate, could be extended further into other levels of the national education.

Alongside the increasing importance of education in general, the essential role of literature _ in fact, all social sciences and the

humanities as well _ in overall personal and social development is constantly emphasized by many educationists today (Aubrey, 1959, 27; Hongladarom, 2000?; Steiner, 1967, 6-7). If literary works could no longer belong exclusively to a few elites of academics or critical coteries ("literature is the birthright of all children," Chenfeld, 1978, 212), if literature is duly considered as a more beneficial means in preparing young people for life in the modern times than merely scientific or technological education (Hongladarom, 2000?), and if literature, like all other kinds of human knowledge today, should be available for all people and be read for life, then, more reasonable, modernized, pragmatic approaches to the study and teaching of literature should be sought out. It seems that the prevalent more conventional approaches to teaching literature are not efficient enough, and thus could not fulfil the pressing demands of an ideal and effective education for the twenty-first century.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

On effective education for the modern times:

Harold M. Schroder, Martin Karlins, and Jacqueline O. Phares in *Education for Freedom* (1973) assert that children should be prepared to deal with freedom in the rapidly changing modern times.

“Children are not born free. They learn freedom, and the lessons are not easy_ particularly in today’s world. Yet,we believe that freedom as *a way of thought* must precede freedom as a way of life. The way that one goes about attaining this freedom is the main topic of this book” (vii-viii). They offer as a solution having more emphasis on process learning rather than exclusively content learning, which is usually the only goal of traditional education.

L. Diemert in “Democratic Learning and Schooling Rationale” (2000) also acknowledges that to have viable democracies, “our young people must learn democratic ways. To enable students to experience democracy, they need to live democracy.”

This study believes that practice of living and learning democracy, respect for and tolerance of different views and cultures _ in a sense, different *interpretations* of life and the world _ have no better place to be rekindled than the humanities departments.

Regarding the reasons for their set-backs so far, Soraj Hongladarom writes in “Humanistic Education in Today’s and Tomorrow’s World” (2000?) that

The study of literature as a means toward better understanding of the world is much neglected by the belief that literature

should be confined to the purely *aesthetic* realm with no relation to the serious issues of the world. This belief is totally false. Serious literature addresses itself to issues such as politics and the meaning of being human.

Edwin E. Aubrey in *Humanistic Teaching and the Place of Ethical and Religious Values in Higher Education* (1959) elaborates on the fact that humanistic education “finds special promise in the humanities, but only if they are humanistically taught” (38)

On the significance of reading literature in the modern times:

Again Hongladarom suggests that in order to survive and prosper in the modern world today, all people “need to be equipped with a new set of capabilities ... _ communication skills, critical thinking, visualization skill, and adaptability skill.” Or, in the words of again, Aubrey, we need wisdom, rather than knowledge, and sensitivity.

Thought is not possible without sensitivity. It is therefore a function of education to cultivate sensitivity _ sensitivity which is broadened and deepened by entering sympathetically into the experience of all kinds of men. Hence the enormous opportunities in teaching literature. (27)

On the significance of literary theory and criticism in general:

In "Humane Literacy" in *Language and Silence* (1967) George Steiner makes a distinction between "high literacy" and "humane literacy." Advocating the latter and deploring the former, he writes,

Because the community of traditional values is splintered, because words themselves have been twisted and cheapened, because the classic forms of statement and metaphor are yielding to complex, transitional modes, the art of reading, of true literacy, must be re-constituted. It is the task of literary criticism to help us read as total human beings, by example of precision, fear, and delight. (11)

Admittedly, all teachers of literature are necessarily involved in literary theory and criticism of one kind or another. As Gerald Graff in "The Future of Theory in the Teaching of Literature" (1989) observes,

any teacher of literature is unavoidably a literary theorist. Whatever a teacher says about a literary work, or leaves unsaid, presupposes a theory... . Even the most seemingly intuitive encounter with a literary text (or any other text) is, as we have learned to say, already theory-laden. (250)

Therefore, it is of crucial importance for teachers of literature to be, first, on the watch for their own intuitive theories and taken-for-granted assumptions concerning literature, and, secondly, to be familiar with more valid contemporary literary theory. Fortunately, modern literary theory has achieved such a level of sophistication today that it can no longer be ignored even by other disciplines. For instance, Ralph Cohen in *The Future of Literary Theory* (1989) believes that “literary theory or its components, have affected and altered conceptions of disciplines from psychoanalysis to history, sociology, anthropology and art history” (xiv).

On reader-response theory:

One of the now-classics in this theory is *Literature as Exploration* (1938 / 1970) by Louise M. Rosenblatt. As a modern “Defence of Literature,” it has exercised a profound influence among teachers and educationists. She writes in the preface that her aim is “to demonstrate that the study of literature can have a very real, and even central, relation to the points of growth in the social and cultural life of a democracy” (vii).

What turns reader-response theory into a powerful and valid methodology in bringing about changes toward the ultimate goal of

achieving humanistic education is its underlying democratic ideology. Roger Webster in *Studying Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1990), referring to the rise of the reader in literary and critical theories and, consequently, “an ideological move away from author- and text-power to reader-power” (28), realizes that reader-response theory, and the related area of reception theory “can help to dispel the sometimes authoritarian and intimidating attitudes that can arise in the teaching and study of literature” (29).

Daniel Sheridan in “Changing Business as Usual: Reader Response in the Classroom” (1991) observes the more adaptability of reader-response theory to the classroom in comparison with other kinds of modern literary theory. Among its favourable features, he mentions that it is “almost automatically student-centered. Moreover, some of its main proponents _ Fish, Bleich, Holland, and Rosenblatt herself _ have all written from the standpoint of classroom teachers” (805). Noticing the discrepancy between ideas and habits of teachers, he writes,

Reader response is part of our *talk* perhaps, but what I want to argue here is that it has only with difficulty become part of our behavior. For there are forces that militate against a reading-

centered classroom. In Marjorie Roemer's view, the problem is political, and the main issue is one of authority — who holds power in the classroom, whose response matters. ... As Roemer herself suggests, reader-response theory is, as yet, merely a gesture in the direction of a democratized classroom. (805)

He suggests that as a first step for the time being, classroom routines should be examined critically and those inhibiting ones which are against the spirit of reader-response theory should be changed.

It seems that there has been less attention to reader-response theory in conjunction with the broader field of humanistic education, or its potential contributions to the educational needs of the twenty-first century regarding the developing countries.

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

“Each generation,” writes Steiner, “makes its choice. There is permanent poetry but hardly any permanent criticism. ... Time, both historically and on the scale of personal life, alters our view of a work or body of art. ... the work of art stands in a complex, provisional relation to time” (8).

Admittedly, there is a gulf now between pretensions of the conventional / New Critical approaches and their actual effects on

literature students _ effects which will be shown to be detrimental to learners' love of literature, creativity, further motivation, independence of judgement (as noticed by Graff, 1989, 252). And yet, there exists an ever-widening gulf between needs, interests, and expectations of the past and present generations of students. For the young generation, in and out of classrooms, reading literature, far from being an academic plaything, should provide capabilities to survive and prosper in the modern times.

This study assumes that limiting the potential gains which could be achieved from reading literature to merely textual analyses, restricting wider and diverse humane functions of literature, are gross instances of "mis-education" constantly exercised by practitioners of conventional / New Critical pedagogy.

Regarding the causes of constant emergence of new literary theories from time to time, Cohen, paraphrasing Hans Robert Jauss, points out that "changes in literary theory can result from lacunae in previous theories, from proposing new perspectives for current theories, from asking new questions" (vii). All these reasons could justly be termed as the very rationale for emergence of reader-response theory _ and choosing it for this thesis _ in order to replace