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## **Review of Karolides, Nicholas (Ed.) (2000). *Reader Response in Secondary and College Classrooms* (2nd Edition).**

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Given society's continuing faith in standardized assessment and the growing production of curricular aids and lesson plans, it is important to re/establish an alternative vision for what reading and literature instruction can be. *Reader Response in Secondary and College Classrooms*, edited by Nicholas Karolides, provides such a vision. It represents a welcome return to the teachings Louise Rosenblatt first shared in her seminal work *Literature as Exploration* (1938) and later in *The Reader, the Text, the Poem* (1978). Its compilation of twenty chapters divided into four parts promotes renewed confidence in Rosenblatt's transactional model and the ideals of reader response by showing its implications and by providing practical means for classroom implementation. Combining theory with practice, it stands as an important book for all teachers interested in reclaiming the classroom as a place of curiosity, possibility, and genuine critical engagement with literature. Furthermore, the language used to frame Rosenblatt's work and the work of other reader response theorists is neither too complex for preservice teachers, nor too introductory for experienced teachers and researchers of literature instruction, making it a wholly accessible contribution to the field of language and literacy education.

Borrowing from Rosenblatt, part one establishes the legitimacy of reader response theory through its discussion of the reader-text relationship. This relationship is defined as a transaction in which readers draw upon their experiences and social context to actively construct meaning. Karolides confirms the important role the reader plays in making meaning in chapter 1: "The words, in effect, have no symbolic meaning "are only marks on the page" until the reading event occurs, until the literary work has been lived through by the reader" (p. 12). A reader response approach to literature thus affords students a wide variety of ways and means to personally connect and interact with literature.

Parts two and three expand this discussion and outline multiple ways teachers can develop reader response curricula. Many forms of response are introduced, with the majority of attention resting on dramatic, written, and oral modes. And although response through art and music are not developed in detail, the possibilities showcased through other response forms provide a framework by which art and music can be introduced. Part

four presents additional ways teachers can incorporate reader response into practice, yet focuses specific attention on how reader response to literature can be used to present multicultural and gender issues prevalent within schools and in society abroad. Issues related to social justice, the ideals of democratic education, and the role reader response can play in transforming student perspectives and society itself, are given due attention.

One major criticism of a reader response approach is the assumption that it serves students' personal needs at the expense of the text and its author. Close inspection of Rosenblatt's work, plus Robert Small's comparison of a reader response classroom to a more traditional classroom in chapter two, debunks this misconception and refutes the claim that reader response intends anything of the sort. Several chapter authors, including Patricia Kelly and Deborah Appleman, argue that a genuine reader response approach reflects the transaction that emerges from readers' interactions with a text, allows for unavoidable differences of opinion, and encourages students to make personal connections, all the while holding their responses accountable to the text.

Although the book's objective is not strictly to provide ready made lesson plans so much as it is designed to provide a firm understanding of reader response theory and the possibilities that can be created from it, many of its strategies can be extracted for immediate use. Teachers serving learners at different grade and ability levels will appreciate the variety of strategies discussed and the ease with which each strategy can be transferred from one learning environment and genre to another. For example, the comparative and intertextual study of the western film *Shane* by Joy Gould Boyum in chapter five, though taken from her work in a New York University literature class, is not only applicable to other levels of instruction, but can be used with other genres of film. Another example is Elizabeth Poe's treatment of World War II literature in a grade 9 classroom in chapter twelve, which informs ways teachers can prepare units of study around a particular theme or era in literary history.

A positive feature that sets the book apart from other discussions of student-centred learning approaches is its conception of the teacher's role in a reader response classroom. Some progressive educators find fault with a teacher centred, top-down instruction model of literature instruction that seeks right answers and forfeits personal response. These critics claim that such an approach minimizes curiosity, decreases affection for reading, and makes open discussion all but impossible (e.g., Dias, 1992). Yet the student-centred approach that fails to recognize the importance of the teacher, and experiences a teacher can bring to the classroom, and which threaten to relegate the teacher to that of a silent (and passive) observer, is perhaps as drastic a circumstance as the one it aims to replace. Conversely, reader response as conceived by Karolides and other authors, transcends typical notions of student centred instruction and settles on an approach that incorporates all members of the classroom environment. In each chapter, teachers are shown providing leadership in whole class discussion, initiating student to student conversations, facilitating knowledge acquisition with challenging assignments,

modeling critical response, and as Mary Jo Schaars shows in chapter eleven, extending learning beyond a test or final project. Teachers, like students, are also asked to bring their own literary and personal experiences and questions to bear in the meaning-making process. For instance, in chapter ten Linda Varvel weaves her own unsolved questions into a class study of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* as a way of working through areas of the play that pose problems to both her and her students.

One minor drawback to this otherwise exemplary book is its lack of attention to social context. Although authors discuss the importance of developing a positive atmosphere "one characterized by mutual respect" no explicit discussion suggests ways student and student as well as student and teacher relations can be managed and maintained. Neither do any of the chapters discuss the problems and conflicts that such an environment can inadvertently encourage. Research showing how response centred classrooms can privilege dominant members over others and how this can subvert the objectives of reader response (Lewis, 1997) suggest that a more critical discussion of context is needed. While lack of discussion concerning this issue does not call into question the overarching theme of the book, it does reflect a deficiency teachers need to consider when weighing how to implement its strategies.

The enduring strength of *Reader Response in Secondary and College Classrooms* is that it does not suffer from Romantic idealism. Couched in the hope and promise of reader response is a constant reminder that it is a difficult and challenging process to adopt and sustain. It is a process characterized by ambiguity and uncertainty; a process that many of the book's authors freely admit requires trust in oneself and one's students. It requires a leap of faith necessary in all good teaching. As Ron Luce asserts, a reader response approach also requires nothing less than a "long-term commitment" (p. 109). Yet throughout its honest portraits of reader response classrooms, the book captures the very essence of why it is we teach literature. Linda Varvel writes: "A wild, and sometimes chaotic, interaction of ideas between students and students, and students and teachers is the kind of intellectual training that deepens our respect for each other and enhances the learning experience" (p. 177). Still, we are confronted by an educational climate that not only threatens to set literature instruction back even as we enter the 21st century (McCracken & McCracken, 2001), but also jeopardizes the spirit and potential of this work. The contributing authors of *Reader Response in Secondary and College Classrooms* are to be commended for attempting to re/ignite in teachers a motivation to meet the ideals of reader response even in the midst of such opposition.

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