

READING AND ENGAGEMENT: IDENTITY-MAKING IN FIGURED WORLDS

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Abstract: Literary texts create imaginary or figured worlds which might engage readers. Readers engaging in imaginary or figured worlds may develop new identities. Even though readers engage in the literary texts directly, they also have indirect relationship with authors in this process. This paper draws on some influential theories such as reader response, figured worlds, and identity theories. The interaction between reader and text is dialogic; the meaning of a text depends on the transaction between readers and the text they read. On the readers' part, they always bring their history-in-person. This influences the meaning of the text. In the end, the act of reading is an act of identity making or remaking in figured worlds. Readers shape and reshape their identity in both real and imaginary worlds.

Keywords: Literary Text, Imaginary Worlds, Figured Worlds, Reader Response, Identity Theories.

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Citation: Margono-Slamet, Y. B. (2020). Reading and engagement: Identity-making in figured worlds. *Social Sciences, Humanities and Education Journal (SHE Journal)*, 1(2), 52 – 60. DOI: 10.25273/she.v1i2.6629



INTRODUCTION

The goal of this paper is to discuss how readers might create new identities from literary texts they are reading. Under certain circumstances, reading may become a way of identity making in figured worlds or “a socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation ...” (Holland et al., 2003, p. 52). These worlds are imaginary and they are constructed based on our vision of society and culture. When we are reading, we may enter figured worlds in the text and take up new identities. At the same time, we construct a world based on the world created in the text we are reading. Thus, figured or imaginary worlds offer rich possibilities to readers. In imaginary worlds, readers may learn new topics and be enriched by having new experiences and new knowledge. When this happens, imaginary worlds may function to engage readers to read and promote learning because readers learn many new and different things from readings.

The rationale for focusing on literary texts

As I discuss “readers” in this paper, I have in mind teenagers (youth and young adults). Reading trends suggest that teenagers prefer literary texts to informational ones. This phenomenon of readers’ choice is not new but has been lasting for decades. This trend seems to be stable, except the changes in the types of fiction preferred by teenagers. Parkin (2016), a contributor to Huffington Post, states that 5 young adult book trends for 2017 include the themes of diversity, insta-famous, retold stories, kingdoms in chaos, and short story revival. A decade before, Hopper (2005), also says that “the patterns of what adolescents select for their private reading over recent decades have remained relatively stable” (p. 113).

Drawing from Parkin and Hopper, I suggest that fiction engages adolescents more than nonfiction and, therefore, schools use more fiction than nonfiction as the source of materials for teaching

reading. Brozo et al. (2007) find out that “... based on school reports, the use of fiction was much more widespread than nonfiction as the source of material for teaching reading in nearly every country” (p. 308). In terms of voluntary reading, fiction is still the number one choice. Voluntary reading is personal and readers read because they want to and there is no accountability whatsoever (Krashen, 2016). However, literary texts can be a means of learning for their readers. Sumara (2002, p. xiii) asserts that “... reading literature can be a focal practice that creates the possibility for deep insight.” Drawing on Sumara’s notion, I discuss how reading literary texts can be an act of identity-making in figured worlds.

The relationship between reality and imaginary worlds

The relationship between reality and imaginary worlds has attracted theorists such as Bakhtin (in Morris, ed., 1994), Caughey (1984), and Holland et al. (2003). For Bakhtin, a novel can “become a mirror of the entire surrounding world, a picture of its age” (Bruhn & Lundquist, 2001, p. 15). Holland et al. state that “A figured world is formed and re-formed in relation to the everyday activities and events that ordain happening within it” (2003, p. 53).

For Caughey (1984), imaginary worlds have tremendous influence on actual worlds. He even considers that imaginary worlds are similar to actual worlds; that people have imaginary social relationships in imaginary social worlds, in which people have virtual interactions to each other. Television, books, and magazine, according to him, are examples of media that allow people to “shift mentally into a world of vicarious social experience” (p. 22). There are many kinds of imaginary social relationships and these are important in understanding society. In today’s world, it is difficult to differentiate whether people’s relationship on social media is actual or imaginary. I will return to Caughey’s notion of social relationships

with media figure—particularly with figures in books—in discussing how readers enter imaginary worlds and create new identities because the imaginary social relationships people have with media figures may be important in terms of constructing identities, even in their real lives.

Bakhtin (in Morris, ed., 1994) discusses the relationship between real worlds and imaginary worlds by studying novels. In particular, Bakhtin studies Dostoevsky's novels because for Bakhtin only the novel can become a mirror of its age. According to him, Dostoevsky presents new perspectives in his novels. Different from other authors, Dostoevsky creates what the so-called the polyphonic novel or the novel with "a great dialogue of interacting voices" in which "A character's word about himself and his world is just as fully weighted as the author's word ..." (Morris, ed., 1994, p. 89). If a character's word stands alongside the words of the author, it suggests that fiction and reality have a relationship. Thus for Bakhtin, fiction is not merely a story without meaning but tends to be a reflection of reality. Drawing on Bakhtin's ideas, every literary text has a meaning or meanings. It is in this context that McCallum asserts that "[T]he concept of dialogism is central to Bakhtinian theory" (1999, p. 12). The dialogue happens as the result of the relation between two positions. In dialogism, the relation is not oppositional, nor dialectical, nor monological. In Bakhtin's dialogism, nothing stands alone without any relationship with something else. Our reality is in relation with the worlds that we socially and culturally construct. Dialogism means that everything is always in dialogue or relation with something or some other things.

The principles of Bakhtinian dialogism are applicable for describing the relationship between readers and the text. In a way, the readers and the text speak to each other. It is at this point that Bakhtin is different from Rosenblatt

(1995). Rosenblatt considers a text as an 'inkspot' when it is not read. Even though she suggests that there is a transaction between a reader and a text to create meaning, Rosenblatt implies that the meaning of a text depends mostly on how the reader understands it. Meanwhile, for Bakhtin, both a reader and a text seem to have the same share to create meaning. To put it simply, for Bakhtin, a text is not merely an 'inkspot,' but it is written as the result of the dialogues between the author and many other people and/or things so that it has a certain meaning. Later in this paper I will return to Bakhtin's concept of dialogism to discuss the relationship between the readers and the text they read.

Within the theoretical framework of worlds that are socially and culturally constructed, I discuss the relationship between a text and its readers. I am interested in exploring theories that address how readers see and think of themselves in relation with the text they read and how they identify themselves in the imaginary worlds of the texts they read.

Figured worlds

Holland et al. (2003) introduce the concept of figured worlds in which people can develop their knowledge by learning more about it, or even they can build their dreams. One of the positive implications of the figured word is that people can be motivated to learn more about something they like to do because figured world offers possibilities. As Caughey (1984) mentions, people will never be alone in figured worlds because there will always be other people there. People can therefore have an imaginary social relationship with imaginary people. At this point, figured worlds are part of Holland et al. "... larger theory of self and identity" (Urrieta, 2007a, p. 107). The discussion of identity, therefore, cannot be separated from figured worlds.

When readers are reading, they also construct an imaginary world based on the text they read. The construction of

this figured world is based on his vision of society and culture. Engaged readers will likely follow their reading by doing research to learn more about something interesting in the text, for instance; or, they will read related books. I need to emphasize here that figured worlds can be an important tool for learning. Based on the purpose of their reading, readers may be able to create a constructed world where they can develop their potential and, in turn, take up new identities in the textual engagement.

To summarize, figured worlds are a broad concept; there is a room for interpreting and applying this concept and different researchers may have different interpretations and applications. Rubin (2007), for example, considers figured worlds as a place or space for people to create identities. Urrieta (2007a) also considers figured worlds as a place or space, "figured worlds are peopled by characters from collective imaginings, people's identity and agency is formed dialectically and dialogically in them" (p. 109). In another article, Urrieta (2007b) emphasizes the impact of figured worlds "on people and how they participate in these worlds on a daily basis" (p. 120). If figured worlds are "as if" worlds, then these are imaginary places where, according to Caughey (1984), imaginary social relations happen or figured worlds could be idealized places in which we may adopt or take up different identities. In this line, the worlds in literary texts are imaginary places in which we can take up our new identities as readers, thinkers, and learners.

Identity

For McCarthy and Moje (2002), identity is fragmentary. We will never be able to identify somebody comprehensively but just partially. As an individual, somebody has a past and present and is always in connection with the others within a certain situation. Therefore, Lewis, Enciso & Moje's (2007, p. 4) state that identity is "... a fluid socially and linguistically mediated construct." Lewis

& del Valle's (2008) concept of identity is similar when they say that identity is "social, cultural, historical, institutional, and political ..." (p. 2). This very broad concept indicates that identity could embody "everything about" a person. McCarthy & Moje (2002, p. 230) state that "identity is multiple, fragmentary, and contradictory." A good way to understand this notion is perhaps through an example: an individual can be a hero and a criminal at the same time, depending on the point of views of those who think about that individual. In this case, the individual has contradictory identities and these contradictory identities are examples of the multiple identities I describe.

Based on the above notions, an individual always has many identities and those identities can shift or change at the same time. However, an individual cannot have completely new identities because the new identities still carry his or her history. What I mean by identity-making in this paper, therefore, does not suggest that when people take up or develop new identities, they develop completely new identities but their new identities represent shifts or changes. According to Holland et al. "... identities constitute an enduring and significant aspect of history-in-person, a history that is brought to current situations" (2003, p. 65). Upbringing, past experiences, education, society and culture all contribute to aspects of identities. Looking at people as different individuals is a useful approach for defining identities for the purpose of this paper. Identity is determined by what people do, think, and feel in relation to other people. This is what Holland et al. call positional or relational identities. People's positions and relations with other people shape identities and reinforce identity as not fixed nor stable; rather they always change or shift, depending on what people do or with whom they interact at certain times. For example, at home I am a husband and a father; in front of my students I am a

teacher, and in front of my colleagues, I am their colleague and dean. These different identities of mine are determined by what I do, the way I speak, etc. and at the same time determine what I do, the way I speak, etc. These concepts about identity are applicable to discuss how readers take up or develop new identities when they read literary texts.

Reading literary texts: Identity-making in figured worlds

I present a model (Model 1) that explains the relationship between reader, narrative text, and author. The model has three components, i.e. reader, narrative text, and author. On the reader's part, an act of reading is complex. As shown in the model, readers have many characteristics, such as make available literacy histories, access knowledge to shape meaning and attitudes, and are influenced by purposes. In acts of reading, readers have resources at their disposal or bring the whole of their identities which, according to Rosenblatt (1995), include "personality traits, memories of past events, present needs and preoccupations, particular mood of the moment and particular physical condition" (p. 30). With all these characteristics, readers are able to understand or make meaning of the texts they are reading and construct their figured worlds based on the figured worlds created in the text.

Meanwhile, the narrative texts have the potential to offer figured worlds, make available new learning, enrich readers' lives, and make available new identities. During the act of reading, the text changes from merely 'inkspots' (Rosenblatt, 1995) into figured worlds based on all that readers bring to the act of reading. When readers participate and are engaged, their identities shift in imaginary or figured worlds. When they are engaged and motivated, they "figure out how new information fits with what they already know; they discriminate important information from unimportant; they regulate effort,

planning, and goal setting and actively monitor their comprehension" (Guthrie et al., 1997, p. 439). This is to say that engaged readers are self-motivated. Moje and Lewis (2007) state that engaged readers will make personal as well as societal connections to the text they are reading. Wilhelm (1997) and Tovani (2000) mention that engaged readers always make connections to the texts they read, whether those connections are text-to-self, text-to-text, or text-to-world. In essence, Moje and Lewis, Wilhelm, and Tovani highlight similar ideas.

The third component of the model is the authors. Authors have an imagined audience, construct imaginary worlds for readers to enter, expect appreciation from readers, intend to draw readers in, and send out messages/values to readers. In creating a narrative or literary text, authors imagine a certain audience and are in constant dialogues with reality as their reference. In this way, even though the narrative texts they create are imaginary, they are—referring to the meaning of novel according to Bakhtin—the reflection of reality or the mirror of its age. From the author's point of view, a narrative text is not merely what Rosenblatt calls "inkspots," but already has a meaning or meanings. Whether readers know what the authors mean, it depends on what the readers bring in reading the text because it will determine the dialog between them to create meaning. These characteristics of authors indicate that authors not only have dialogues with their surrounding worlds but also with their imagined audience.

The model indicates that during an act of reading, dialogues or transactions occur between the reader, the text, and the author. Sumara (2002) contends that even though readers do not know the author and they do not actually speak to each other, in a way readers communicate with the author through the characters in the text. If readers are really engaged with the text and find the texts are meaningful to them, they then

may also learn about authors. Readers do not only communicate with authors through the characters in the text but also through their values and what is important for them. Many great authors change the lives of many people. This is the result of the dialogues between readers with narrative texts and authors. Without the texts, there will be no communications between readers and authors. But at some points, it is not sufficient for readers to learn about the authors from the texts so that they need more information to learn about the authors.

The dialogue between the reader and the text can also be conceived as how readers respond to the text. In conceptualizing how readers construct meaning with a text, Rosenblatt (1995) argues that "... much of this (meaning making—*addition is mine*) may go on subconsciously, but ... meaning is not 'in' the text or 'in' the reader. Both reader and text are essential to the transactional process of meaning making" (pp. 26-27). The meaning of the text may be different for one reader to another because they have their own

"identities"—what they bring to the text. How a text "speaks" to a reader also depends on what the reader brings to the text. The meaning of a text, then, occurs in the transaction between the reader and the text. In line with this thinking, Probst, supporting Rosenblatt's theory, says that "Meaning lies in that shared ground where the reader and text meet.... the meaning is created by readers as they bring the text to bear upon their own experience, and their own histories to bear upon the text" (1994, p. 38).

From the Bakhtinian perspective, the relation between reader and text is dialogic. It is in this dialogue that meaning emerges. The dialogue between the readers and the text is not fixed or stable, depending on the readers' "identities" at the time they read the text. For Sumara "literary engagements can only exist alongside the reader's remembered and imagined experiences" (2002, p. 30). Rereading the same text is always important because a reader is always in different situations and may create new meanings.

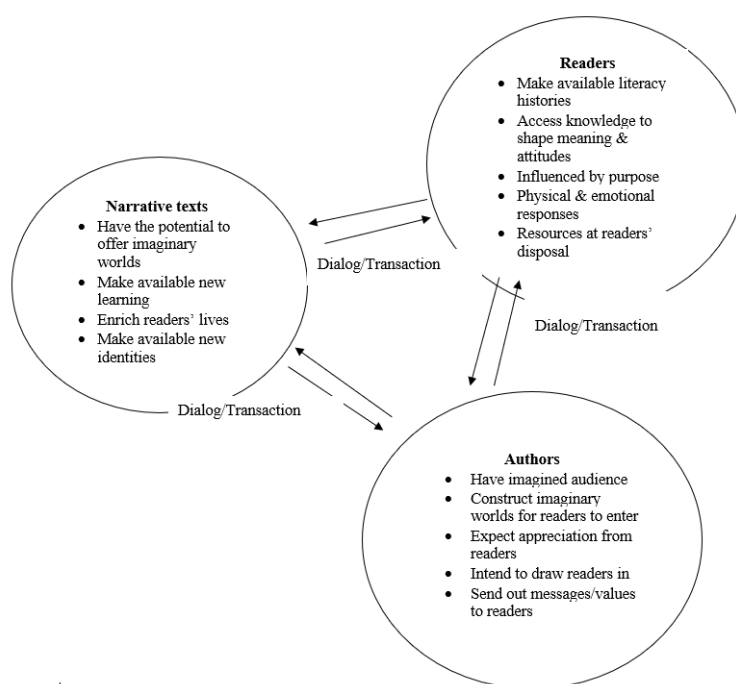


Figure 1. The relationship between reader, text, and author

Probst's "shared ground where the reader and text meet" is not only where the readers create meaning but also it serves as the entrance where they enter imaginary worlds. At the time they are making meaning, they are able to enter imaginary worlds. According to Sumara (2002, p. 5), "To imagine... is to create interpreted bridges between what is held in memory, what currently exists, and what is predicted about the future." For this to occur, readers must call on many resources to make meaning with the text.

In addition, the model indicates that what a text offers to readers depends on their past and current situation. This is to say that reading is always situated in a certain way and not every situation is the same. Likewise, a text positions readers. How they are engaged with a text (or how deeply they get lost in a text or enter imaginary worlds) also depends on their attitude toward the text, their purpose of reading the text, and even their physical and emotional conditions. A text may also motivate readers to learn more and to take action.

The model also shows that for readers, a text may develop new identities. The role of literary texts in the development of identities of their readers is emphasized by Sumara (2002, p. 9) who asserts that "Identity is not some essential quality of the individual human subject. Identity emerges from relationships, including relationship people have with books and other communicative technologies based on language." This happens because literary texts have the power to make us examine the thoughts, beliefs, and actions of other people without making us take direct actions (Beach & Marshall, 1991).

When we are reading a literary text, we enter imaginary worlds, as if we were really there. We may do something or go somewhere in our mind. Or, we may inhabit the minds of characters. In other words, reading fiction is an activity that can transport us from reality to fictitious or imaginary worlds. Nell (1998) is of opinion that at one point, reading is like

dreaming because both have the potential to carry us to other worlds.

The fictitious worlds in a piece of literature are likely to be part of what Holland et al. (2003) call 'figured worlds.' If reading fiction transports us to figured worlds, then it also may mean that in the figured worlds we are able to adopt new identities, ones that may be different from our identities in the real world or in real life. Therefore, I argue that reading allows for certain identities to emerge in figured worlds.

Reading to identify with the main character

One dimension of identity-making that readers create when reading a literary text is identifying themselves with the main characters. According to Appleyard, teenagers' reactions to particular stories and one of their responses "... explicitly mention the experience of *involvement* with the book and the *identification* with the character" (1990, p. 100). Many literary works describe heroes and heroines who are not available in real worlds. When readers are really engaged with the stories, they take sides and almost always they are on the side of the main characters or the protagonists. The main characters are their heroes and heroines. They want to be like them, do what they are doing and in the end they fantasize of becoming the main characters.

Igartua and Frutos (2017) suggest that identification with characters shows a mechanism where people experience and interpret a narrative text from the inside. In other words, people feel as if the events being narrated were happening to them. This is to say that engaged or avid readers are creating a new identity during their act of reading. Identifying with the main characters is a way for readers to get involved in the story they are reading.

Getting lost in a book

Reading means getting lost in a book (Nell, 1988). When readers are lost in a book, they are fully in imaginary worlds. For a certain amount of time they might

not want to be themselves and it means that they want to be different people. From this perspective, their reading fiction is an example of identity making or remaking. At least for a certain amount of time, they want to be and can be somebody else. A reader in Nell's research, regretting the reality of his own life, gets lost in the "trash" he is reading because it is different from his reality. A literary text offers different worlds, different kinds of life situations, including different kinds of people—perhaps people we imagine we want to be. As readers, we have a certain goal and expectation in choosing the kind of book(s) to read. This indicates that reading literary texts is an act of identity-making.

Consciously or unconsciously, readers enter imaginary worlds of the book when they are reading it or the book carries them off to other worlds (Appleyard, 1990; Caughey 1984; Nell, 1988; Rosenblatt, 1995). If the book is interesting, readers will get lost in it and they will read as long as they can. One of Appleyard's (1990, p. 100) research participants says "it was just like I was there," "you can sort of lose yourself in it," and also "it could have been written about me". Wilhelm (1997) even says "You gotta be the book" to mean "you have to live the story" which indicates that readers really engaged in a story they are reading.

What readers do is what Caughey (1984) describes when people connect to media figures. Many people just want to be somebody else because they see that the figures in the media, including in literary texts, are, for instance, better than themselves. At this point, what readers do is to escape to imaginary worlds and for a certain amount of time they identify themselves with the characters and connect to them. From this vantage point, their reading fiction is an act of identity-making. However, reading literary text is not only an escape. We can always learn something about life; we can reflect upon our lives,

or, according to Sumara (2002), our reading literary texts can help us sharpen our insights.

CONCLUSION

To return to Model 1 above, from Bakhtinian perspective or from Rosenblatt's point of view, the interaction between reader and text is dialogic; the meaning of a text depends on the transaction between readers and the text they read. On the readers' part, they always bring their history-in-person. This influences the meaning of the text. In addition, the act of reading is an act of identity making or remaking in figured worlds. We shape and reshape our identity in both real and imaginary worlds. For all of us who like reading literature, stories are not only imaginary, escaping worlds, but parts of our identities.

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