

Response

To get you thinking

■ Here are three reactions to the popular *Harry Potter* novels by J.K. Rowling. Read each one and consider how the three pieces differ.

1. I just love them. I've read every single one and I read them over again all the time. I love all the characters and the magic. I think they are great. I like the movies too but I prefer the books because I like to imagine things myself. I think they are really creative, with things like Quidditch and all the secrets and enemies.
2. These successful novels excite and engage readers by combining the everyday experiences of childhood and school with the extraordinary world of magic and mystery. Readers can identify with the central character because he is in many ways an ordinary person like themselves; but they can also enjoy the danger and heroism that comes with a fantasy adventure in which their *alter ego* is the protagonist.
3. Although not entirely original in concept, the Potter books deserve to be recognised as worthy contributions to modern children's fiction. More than most entertainments for the young, they teach moral lessons that include concepts of duty and loyalty rather than selfish fulfilment. And they make better use of the resources of the English language than most popular books.

■ Which commentary:

- tries to explain how the books appeal to readers?
- seems to offer a personal statement?
- tries to judge the social value of the books?

■ Which commentary would most likely be found:

- in a personal diary?
- on a *Harry Potter* fan forum?
- in a school English essay?
- in a guide for parents of teenage children?

■ Can you give reasons for your answers?

Theory

A literary response is a statement or action that results from a reader's engagement with a text. Readers can react to works of literature in many different ways. Some reactions are brief and informal, such as giving an opinion in a casual conversation with friends. Others are carefully thought out and formalised, such as writing a review to be published in a school magazine or website. These reactions are all forms of response – statements or actions that result from engagement with a text. Different kinds of response are valued in different contexts.

Professional readers and critics commonly distinguish between four kinds of response: personal, analytical, critical and creative. A *personal response* is a subjective expression of feeling or opinion. Saying how you feel about a book, what it made you think about, and whether or not you liked it is typical of a personal response. Such responses may be heartfelt and true, but they often say more about the reader than about the book itself. They carry little weight unless the reader is considered an expert judge of literature. *Analytical responses* examine specific elements of the text and try to explain how it achieves its effects. This kind of response requires close study of the text and the use of specialised knowledge – for example, knowledge of literary conventions and concepts such as style and structure. *Critical responses* are judgments of quality or value. This kind of response considers the artistry and social value of the text. Criticism requires a knowledge of rules for judging literature, including a wide knowledge of other texts.

In formal study, and in professional contexts such as book reviews, it is the analytical and critical responses that count. That is because these responses make use of publicly shared knowledge and rules rather than individual feelings. Analytical and critical responses treat the text as a serious object of study regardless of the critic's personal likes and dislikes. They aim to show how the text and other social forces shape what appear to be 'private' responses.

Creative responses involve the writing of new literary works inspired by an original text. This can range from retelling the story with a new twist, to borrowing characters or settings, or to exploring a theme or idea in an original work. John Gardner's novel *Grendel* (1971), is a creative response to the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf* (before c.1000 AD) retelling the story from the monster Grendel's point of view. *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), by Jean Rhys, borrows characters and story ideas from Charlotte Brontë's earlier book *Jane Eyre* (1847). Writers are often inspired to create in this way. Borrowing characters and ideas is considered legitimate if the result is an original new work and not merely a case of copying or theft.

Practice

'Ozymandias' (1818) by Percy Bysshe Shelley was inspired by the broken statue of Egyptian pharaoh Ramses II. Its theme is the impermanence of power and the arrogance of rulers.

Ozymandias

I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed:
And on the pedestal these words appear:
'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!'
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

1. Sort these observations about the poem into the boxes below, according to whether the observation is personal, analytical, or critical. You should find three of each.
 - a. The poem reminds me of museums and hieroglyphics and Egyptian artefacts.
 - b. The poem is designed as a sonnet of fourteen lines, but the rhymes do not follow the standard a-b-a-b pattern, making it unique in terms of structure.
 - c. I like the description of the ‘lone and level sands’ suggesting that a whole empire has been lost.
 - d. The brutal observation ‘Nothing beside remains’ gains its power from the arrogant declaration that comes before it. This contrast is the core of the poem.
 - e. The narrator has not seen the statue himself but hears of it from a traveller. This has the effect of distancing the reader further, adding a timeless quality to the tale.
 - f. Not just a poem but a great poem, ‘Ozymandias’ survives because its message remains current and it conveys its theme in a single, dazzling cinematic scene.
 - g. The poem makes me think of politicians who think they are powerful but who will soon be forgotten when their time is over.
 - h. The contrast of the ruler’s boasting statue and the barren sands around it are the work of a gifted observer. Horace Smith’s (1799–1849) poem on the same theme pales in comparison.
 - i. The poem should not only be read and enjoyed but preserved as a terrific example of didactic literature: it is superbly designed to teach a moral lesson.

Personal Expressing likes, dislikes, and personal associations.	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
Analytical Examining features of the poem and commenting on their effects.	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
Critical Judging the quality and the value of the poem.	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>

2. Which kinds of response require the greatest knowledge of literature?
3. Which seem most useful in helping others to better understand the text?

Summary

Response

A response is a statement or action arising from a reader’s engagement with a text. Common types of response include personal statement, analytical study, critical judgment and creative production of new texts. In formal contexts such as literary studies and book reviewing, analytical and critical responses are most highly valued, as they reveal and explain the reactions that individual and groups of reader have to a text.

See also: *criticism*
readings
reading practices