



The Round Tower (c. 1640). Copenhagen, Denmark

This article was first published in Ibsch, Elrud & Dick Schramm & Gerard Steen (eds.). 1991. *Empirical Studies in Literature. Proceedings of the Second IGEL-Conference, Amsterdam 1989*. Amsterdam: Rodopi. 57-66.

ASSOCIATIONS IN THE READING PROCESS

Cay Dollerup

This paper discusses the associations of readers in the course of reading two works of literature: the short story ‘The Ring’ by Karen Blixen (pseudonym Isaak Dinesen); and the Turkish folktale ‘The Golden Apple’.

The readers

The readers of ‘The Ring’ were 42 Danes who participated in 1968-69 (abbreviated:/68); and 10 Danes and 11 native speakers of English who read the story in 1988-89 (abb.:/88). The readers of ‘The Golden Apple’ were 7 Danes, 3 Greenlanders, and 10 native speakers of English in 1985-86 (abb.:/85).² They were instructed to report their response and tell about what they found of interest in their reading.³

The texts

‘The Ring’ was first published in English in the *Ladies’ Home Journal* in 1950 and later in the Danish and English collection *Anecdotes of Destiny* (1958). In the story, a newly-wed couple go for a walk to the sheep pen on their estate. The young wife, Lise, who has made a secret vow never to keep any secrets from her husband, is happy beyond her wildest dreams. However, at the sheep pen, a minor difference of opinion occurs, which results in the wife’s setting off for home alone. On her way back, she wanders into a grove where she comes face to face with a potentially violent sheep thief. In order to get rid of him she offers him her most precious possession - her wedding ring. It falls to the ground and the man vanishes. With her illusions shattered, she meets her husband again; she tells him she has lost her wedding ring, but she does not know where.

‘The Golden Apple’ was collected in Turkey in 1939 by Mr. Kemal Qig. In this story, the father of six girls is insulted by his neighbor, the father of six sons. Both men send their youngest child on a quest to obtain the apple of Beyoglu; the young man fails in his attempt to cross a bridge and there-

fore has to abandon his quest and return home. The girl is helped by an old woman who gives her a speaking dog and some yeast, with which she is able to cause waters to divide. Eventually the girl reaches Beyoglu's country. Beyoglu falls in love with the girl (who was disguised as a boy throughout) and attempts to establish her sex by means of tricks, such as placing rose petals in her bed at night. In the end, however, the girl succeeds in stealing the apple; she returns home in triumph. After some time, Beyoglu sends a sorceress to the girl's home. The sorceress identifies the girl and presents her with two pigeons. The birds remain with her for forty days and nights and then abduct her; she and Beyoglu are married; their wedding feast lasts forty days.

Definition of associations

My definition of associations is operative: anything reported by readers which does not have the character of visual or auditive re-creation and which is not clearly based on the text counts as an association.

Personal associations

The immediate, spontaneous responses to these two stories include few personal associations, if any at all.⁴

Literary and cultural associations

There are some literary and cultural associations. Although there is a certain amount of overlap, we may cautiously distinguish between associations with other works of literature; with other authors; with genres and cultural heavyweights (such as the *Bible* or the *Arabian Nights*); and to cultural phenomena (films, mythology etc.).

Literary associations

There is an example of the association with other literary texts at the beginning of 'The Ring', which soon fuses with a genre association:⁵

“‘One summer morning..’ ‘Mogens’ [a classic Danish short story by J.C. Jacobsen]. This does not happen often in my reading, but here I get a stylistic association” - ‘the two young people had loved one another’: So now we are tuned in on a fairytale atmosphere.” (8MDk/68)

Another reader responded to the description of the sheep thief when he is on the point of vanishing:

“‘[his face] glowed almost like phosphorus’. This term. It is unusual; I remember the hound of the Baskervilles with its phosphorescent eyes.” (12MDk/68)

Two other readers had less favorable associations with other literature in 'The Ring':

“‘[The newly-weds are walking through the park] At this stage I feel that this is straight out of an American novel set in the Deep South. Sheer romantic twaddle.” (25MDk/68)

“‘During the last few months the thief they were talking about had many times forced an entry’ The suspense mounts up as it does in subliterate genres.” (15MDk/68)

'The Golden Apple' evoked more associations with other literary texts, even to the same books, although not necessarily in connection with the same passages in the stimulus text. At the words 'the

waters (will) divide' or the figure of forty (days), some readers had biblical associations. One reader (105MUS/86) noted associations to the *Bible* when the old woman tells the girl about the magic properties of the yeast:

"['You must throw half of this yeast into the water, and] the water will part.' That is symbolism as in the parting of the waters by Moses if you are going to the given land; she is trying to go to Beyoglu's land." (104FUS/85; also 105MUS/85; 109MUS/85; 10MGr/85)

The number of 'forty' also evoked associations to the *Bible*:

"['forty days'] Forty days is kind of a significant number because that's the number of days Jesus spent in the desert. This seems religiously significant, but I am not sure." (109MUS/85)

The test whereby rose petals are placed in the girl's bed gave four readers associations to Hans Andersen's story of 'The Princess and the Pea':

"This reminds me vaguely of one Hans Andersen tale about the princess and the pea where they put something under the mattress to find out whether she is a girl or not." (10MGr/85; also 4FDk/85; SFDk/85; 103FCnd/85)⁶

At the end of the story, where a sorceress has to identify the girl by means of a smile which will reveal that she has lost a tooth, some readers are reminded of the Cinderella story:

'Now it happened ...' This starts to remind me of Cinderella, with the prince, and the shoe, and the sisters." (107FUS/87; also 7FDk/85).

Cultural associations

Associations to cultural phenomena occurred more frequently with the readers from the last two rounds ('85 and '88). In the '68 group there were few; when the young wife's hiding place is mentioned for the first time in 'The Ring', 39FDk/68 commented:

"... she herself had been tired and had not wanted to go with him. Accompanied by [her dog] Bijou she had then gone out, with nothing special in mind ...' This strikes me as a fairly feeble echo of noblewomen of the Romantic period; the sort you mostly see in paintings."

Similarly only one reader produced an association in the course of his reading of 'The Ring' in '85:

"[The story about the sheep thief's plunderings] had reminded Lise of the wolf in the tale of Little Red Riding Hood, this thought causing pleasant little shivers to run down her spine'. I was taking this German course and the professor was doing this Freudian analysis of Little Red Riding Hood: Menstruation." (7MCnd/85)

Conversely, in 1985, 'The Golden Apple' evoked more associations, ranging from cartoons:

"[The opening lines:] 'Once upon a time.' It reminds me of Snoopy when he is writing. He always starts off "It was a dark and stormy night - like these stories: 'Once upon a time.'" (111MAus/85);

via the comment:

”[The] father went to the coffee-house.’ That makes me think of Paris or something. Paris intellectuals cooped up in their coffee houses. Or maybe Vienna.” (109MUS/85).

to the following association aroused at the point where the old woman gives the girl the speaking dog:

”This is beginning to remind me of a computer game ... where you have to collect things that will help you on the way ... like ‘Keep this dog: it will jump out and bite the dragon!’” (103FCnd/85)

Associations and interpretations

What is particularly interesting is the fact that associations link up with interpretations. One notable exception is the reader who was reminded of his German Professor who had paved the way for this association in his earlier response to ‘The Ring’: ”Twice her thoughts made her blush slowly and happily, like a rose ..’ Oh no! What is she [Lise] thinking of? Sex, sex, sex; that is all you ever think about!” But after the comment cited above on menstruation, 7MCnd abandoned this line of potential interpretation. Instead he concluded at the end of the story that ”This part about the ring is obviously the central part of the story. So she has changed ...” ...// 63 ...

Associations and the reading process

The best examples of how associations lead to interpretations were found in those few cases where readers do not only use them as a component of their response, but even as a strategy in the process of decoding the text. There are two obvious examples, one with ‘The Golden Apple’, and the other with ‘The Ring’; the readers in question used associations throughout their reading of the stories:

{[One day the man] went to the coffee-house: That makes me think of Paris or something. Paris intellectuals cooped up in their coffee-houses, or maybe Vienna.” - - -

”[There is a bridge spanning a river]. Rivers are often symbolic, but a bridge over a river means connecting something that has been separated. I don’t know - rivers have often their own symbolism, like the river Styx or whatever.” - -

{[the waters part] Parting the waters does bring to mind when Moses parts the Red Sea and, you know, goes through into the Promised Land. That doesn’t really seem to apply here, maybe:’

”[in order to avoid one of Beyoglu’s tricks] The girl sat up all night smoking.’ It is just curious. Whenever I sit up all night smoking, when I’m working on a paper or something, I just look and feel like shit the next day. How come she doesn’t?” - -

‘there were a number of pigeons and turtledoves in Beyoglu’s garden.’ I don’t know about pigeons, but in my mind, turtledoves have always been associated with lovers .. Especially two turtledoves, because they tend to cuddle and coo together a lot.” - -

“[The girl fed first one dove, and then the other one for forty days]. Forty days is a significant number, because that’s the number of days Jesus spent in the desert. This seems religiously significant, but I’m not sure.”

The deeper meaning as this reader sees it, however, is not concerned with religion at all, but perhaps with “stick to your guns and things will turn out for the best.” (109MUS/85)

It is noteworthy that this particular reader did not use associations in his reading of two other sto-

ries where we used the same think aloud procedure.

The other reader who employed the sustained use of associations in the course of the reading was a highly literate reader of 'The Ring'. Here we cite only a small selection of his statements:

"'they had loved one another from childhood and had been faithful in their love.' This introduces a classic turn of phrase. One associates to Shakespeare." -

"'[The young wife's background is described]' This description is intense in its own right. This detailed portrayal of a place she has just left is at a special place, something along the lines of Baby Doll, Tennessee Williams .. I could imagine Nabokov's *Lolita* would be doing the same thing." --

"'[the sheep thief had climbed a high fence] with a lamb on his back.' This is a vivid picture, an excellent description of him like a Greek god:' - - -

"'Yes, she thought immediately after, it would be even more wonderful to leave the path, go into the wood and disappear .: To me it seems as if the story becomes part of a classic theme: Tristan and Isolde, the platonic love."

"'Bijou [Lise's dog] had run on ahead and, sniffing everywhere, it had yapped and turned towards her and made her follow it into this very grove.' Here I get the impression that she is guided by her instinct. The point that her dog shows the way shows something which contrasts her bourgeois milieu. This corresponds to the description of Marie Grubbe by [the Danish novelist] J. P. Jacobsen, where Marie Grubbe is dancing, waving her hands. There is something masochistic about this."

This reader informed us that his use of literary associations was a normal strategy for him while reading, and there is nothing surprising about his conclusion on *The Ring*: "It is written in a classical style ... dealing with everyday things and psychological as well as mystical phenomena." (4MDk/68) ⁷.

Comments on related fields

At the end of this discussion, I think it is useful to relate our findings to current discussions of associations as they occur in various fields.

The first is psychology: readers' associations are not entirely free, they have some link to the text read, and the texts do yield themselves to associations in specific passages. Texts differ in respect to the associations they produce in readings.

The second is reading research. Here readers' associations can easily be considered, at least in some cases, as part of the readers' own schemas, or general background knowledge. Yet to insist that the associations are only part of the readers' background knowledge is wrong; it is not exclusively the readers who create the reading experience.

The third is recent reader response research, which has introduced the concept of 'the situation' or 'the context' as a convenient label for the third component in the triangle of reader, texts, and other things (e.g. Vipond and Hunt 1989; Bloome and Green 1982). The associations seem to cover all three components: they do not belong to any one of the three components more than others.

Conclusion

Given the fairly few associations in our material, we must once again stress that within the compass of the immediate reading of a specific work of literature, associations are part of the process. Yet they are not random in their relation to the text. Perhaps our instruction and the texts are poor for triggering associations; but if they are not, it appears that in the course of the reading, it is more of-

ten than not the actual text that seems to be the strongest directive force in evoking associations, and, in relation to this, then, comes the readers' background knowledge, especially of literature. The most striking feature about associations is that they often contribute substantially to readers' interpretations of a text.

References

- Bloome, D. and J. Green, 1982. "The social contexts of reading: A multidisciplinary perspective. *Advances in Reading/Language Research* 1, 309-338.
- Dollerup, C., I. Reventlow et al., 1988. A listing of edited statements made by readers during the reading of the three tales used for the 'Folktale-project.' *Folktale*: paper 7. ERIC= Educational Resources Information Center, Bloomington 1989 = ED 295144.
- Dollerup, C., I. Reventlow et al., 1989. An introductory survey of the Danish investigations in experimental reader response research. 5th ed.
- Vipond, D. and RA. Hunt, 1989. 'Literary responses and response as transaction: Evidence for the contribution of readers, texts, and situations'. In: D. Meutsch and R. Viehoff (eds.), *Comprehension of literary discourse: Results and problems of interdisciplinary approaches*, 155-174. New York and Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.

Notes

1. The present article is a result of the work done at the Research Unit for Experimental Studies in Reader Response, Center for Translation Studies and the Department of English, University of Copenhagen. I wish to acknowledge the financial and practical assistance from these institutions, as well as The Nordic Cultural Fund, UNESCO, and Professor Ludvig Wimmer og Hustrus Legat. I am particularly indebted to Iven Reventlow and Carsten Rosenberg Hansen for incisive comments on the paper and for their co-operation; and to members of the Igel-conference for useful criticism.
 2. The readers participated in three different studies. The first group of readers participated in 'Tension: an attempt to objectively determine the 'tension' present in short stories', 1968-69. The second group of readers participated in the introspection studies of 'Folktale' in 1985-86 (see Dollerup, Reventlow et al. 1988) [on the present homepage # 112]. The third group of readers was approached to supplement the 1968-69 readings with 'modern readings'; this took place in 1988-89. For a more detailed discussion of the Danish studies in reader response research, see Dollerup, Reventlow et al. (1989).
 3. The instruction was of one typewritten page.
 4. 109MUS/88's reference to his own state when he had smoked all through a night might have been classified as a personal association, if he had had fewer associations. The short story 'The Basement', about a cripple, evoked personal associations with winos and vagabonds or beggars. Personal associations are therefore not unknown in our studies.
 5. The indications used are as follows: "...": response, or reader's speeches. '...': quotations from the texts (in some cases, readers gave only the line numbers). [...]: insertion. ...: something deleted. .. : hesitation. - : New speech by same reader. - - : There are intervening speeches. F=Female reader, M=Male reader. Dk = Dane; Gr=Greenlander, US=American; Aus = Australian; Cnd=Canadian.
 6. In Hans Christian Andersen's story the pea is placed under the mattress to test whether a girl is a princess or not - her gender is known all through.
 7. Because of planning problems, 4MDK never got down to readings of the two other short stories, so we do not know if he really did have many associations in all his reading.
- If I had discussed the other stories used in the studies mentioned in footnote 2, I would have cited other readers to illustrate the sustained use of associations. The conclusion is, however, that associations depend on the interplay between specific readers and specific texts.



A cable ride in the Fragrant Hills, Beijing, China