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RESPONDING TO BRILLANTES  
AN EVALUATION OF STUDENT RESPONSES TO  
'FAITH, LOVE, TIME, AND DR. LAZARO'

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This paper draws on reader-response theories to bridge the gap between the reader and the text, a serious concern in literature classrooms. Taking a look at this connection, the study evaluates reflection papers written by students from four different Philippine literature classes on Gregorio Brillantes' short story "Faith, Love, Time, and Dr. Lazaro." It peruses the effects of the interaction of reader and text— how the reader interprets the text, to what extent does s/he use the cues in the text, how does s/he relate her personal experience to get meaning out of the text, and in the process of reading, what have the reader realized. It is the hope of this paper to prove that reflective reading—an intellectual as well as personal experience for students— anchored in the text, will help them create meaning of literature and the reading experience and reate such meaning to their lived experiences.

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**KEYWORDS:** text, reader, response, transaction, reflection

## INTRODUCTION

LATELY, THE READING of literature has become an ordeal for students in the undergraduate courses. It does not help to know that the formal study of literature is confined to a number of college students that is getting smaller and smaller every year. The task of the literature teacher then becomes equally arduous. We want our students to read works that we consider of value; we want them to learn how to discover this value/learning; and we want our students to discover this value or learning, thus, appreciating literature.

Except for a few, this is a difficult task for most students. Often, they are inhibited in formulating genuine interpretations because they fear that their interpretation is "incorrect." Students often feel that only those who possess superior abilities can understand the "deep words" of a poem or the "profound meaning" of a story.

If we must free our students from the inhibitions of reading literature and cultivate a profound sense of involvement in reading and learning, then we must touch-base with their responses. In this way, we do not only foster trust in our students we also acknowledge that they are in their own way legitimate readers.

### Related Literature and Studies

Readers are essential because as George Poulet, in his *Phenomenology of Reading* (1969) would say "[b]ooks are objects.... [that] wait for [the reader] to come and deliver them from their materiality, from their immobility." Both reader and text bring the work into existence. Iser (1974) believed that the literary work is a product of reader and text; meaning resides neither in the text nor in the reader alone. Rosenblatt (1988) proposing to use the term 'transaction' to label the convergence of reader and text, posited that in the two stances that one takes in reading—*effere*nt stance (one wants to carry away something) and *aesthetic* (one is involved in the literary experience)—the reading of literature must fall in the middle of the continuum. Rosenblatt

(1993) further stressed that these two, stances, both aspects of meaning, must be involved for they are "always present in our transactions with the world."

In the application of reader response theories to the teaching of literature, Galda and Beach (2001) traced the relevant studies done on students' responses to literature and their implications to classroom practice. Galda and Beach noted that early research on text focused on the textual content as well as the author, and how the structure of the text influenced students' responses; but later research would include how ideology and societal norms reflected in the text influenced readers' responses to it. What the studies implied was that research in the future would probe the implications of how contextualizing literary responses affect the teaching of literature.

Probst, Purves and Yancey discuss how reader-response theories are lived in their literature classrooms. For Probst (1981), the literature classroom that anchors on reader-response theories starts with the students' initial response to the text. Probst cited an example where the poem "View of a Pig" by Ted Hughes was discussed. When "personal significance" of the text was established and "personal associations" were made, Probst observed that the more students explained their responses the more they were drawn to the text. Some students related a personal experience similar to the poem that somehow the poem made them understand that particular experience better. For Probst, it is important to take note that although there are interpretations that are unacceptable, "...meaning is made, not borrowed, and the making of meaning is a difficult and personal undertaking." Probst reiterated that the reader-response based teaching of literature does not intend to make the classroom discussion "anti-intellectual" or "emotional," however it takes into consideration that through the text, the students can understand themselves and the world and that meaning-making is, in fact, a rigorous process.

Purves (1996) focused on the intellectual activity involved in reading a literary text. He emphasized that what is involved is careful reading. The author in discussing his approach in the classroom starts with a textual analysis of the text, moves on to the text's context, and then on the students' own context. He also encouraged textual comparisons. Through these steps, an interpretation of the text was arrived at by students who had to go through a process of "reflection and refraction." And when this

happened, the work and the reader could become each other's mirror, reflecting but at the same time changing each other. Through reflection, students are engaged in "a more thoughtful and disciplined way of talking with others about a piece of literature and by extension about [their] daily lives." Although literature does not provide exact answers, this exploration into literature or this habit of reflection and refraction is the foundation in which students deal with information in other contexts (e.g. law, business, etc.).

Reflection is also a central concept for Kathleen Yancey (1998). In her book, the author noted the gap between the learning and the meaning making process happening in the classroom to that of the real world. To bridge this gap, she saw the need to make the reading and writing relevant to the students' lives. She suggested that the teacher could make use of other resources such as the hypertext (texts from the Internet) and encourage students to reflect on the learning process (by compiling a portfolio) so that students actively participate in the learning experience. For Yancey students become active in the learning process when they talk about what they have learned. Yancey saw reflection as an avenue through which "...we understand ourselves through explaining ourselves to others."

In our context, authors who write about teaching literature, though emphasizing primarily the need for textual validity, are not altogether dismissive of the idea of personal responses to a text. De Ungria (2002) acknowledged that in teaching a poem, several responses were drawn out by it— intellectual or affective, or it could be both. He pointed out that the main point "[was] to encourage students to connect with the texts and to form opinions about these..." but that students must also realize that the different opinions must be validated by textual reference. J. Neil Garcia (2002) in writing about how to teach a poem would begin by taking the students through the auditory experience (that is, listening to the poem read aloud) and proceed to the formal analysis of it. While Garcia was "ministerial" about teaching the students how to analyze a poem through looking at its formal elements, he also welcomed the idea of "alternative" or varying interpretations in "the level of theme." In Jose Dalisay, Jr.'s essay "One Story at a Time" (2002), he acknowledged the concerns regarding the teaching of literature: teachers, preoccupied with "meaning and relevance" reduced a complex story into a "moral

or social parable”; and that the author knew everything about the story—a misconception. Dalisay clarified that our role, as literature teachers, was to help students formulate their readings and encourage them to share these readings and in the process “negotiate meaning” with others.

Studies by Squire (as cited in Billiard, 1967) and Garrison and Hynds (1991) are relevant because they examine student responses, with the former focusing on the effect of text to reader and the latter examining in detail the reading process.

Squire’s study (as cited in Billiard, 1967) on responses of students to selected short stories yielded one important result. Students who were more personally attached to the text came up with richer literary responses; this result has therefore relevant implications as to what texts should be included in the curriculum and in the classroom. Garrison and Hynds (1993) focused on how readers interact with the text. In their research on how proficient and less proficient readers use evocation and reflection in reading, it was revealed that in responding to the stories, less proficient readers relied on their personal narratives and moved completely away from the text. Proficient readers however wove their personal experiences into their analysis of the story.

## METHODOLOGY

This study did a content analysis on students’ written responses to Faith, Love, Time, and Dr. Lazaro, a short story by Gregorio Brillantes. Initially there were fourteen reflection papers (from four different Philippine literature sections—C, D, E, and K—in Silliman University) that were evaluated. Later, however there were only twelve papers included as the two others were completely text-bound, absent of apparent personal responses. Students in these classes were predominantly in their second year in college (usually 18 years old) and were Medtech (66 out of the 162, section C having the most number of Medtech students, 36 out of the 41) and Physical Therapy students (38 out of 162, roughly about 23%). Other courses (58 out of the 162) of these students include Arts (Creative Writing, Biology, Math, Political Science, Psychology), Business (Entrepreneurship, Management, Accountancy), Music, Mass Communication, and IT. Nine (9) out of the twelve (12) papers were written by second year Medtech

students. One was written by a Physical Therapy student, another by an Accountancy major, and the last one by an Information Technology student.

In writing the reflection paper, the students must simply present at least three reasons why they chose the text. The basis for the choice was quite simple; they had to choose a text—from the several discussed in class—that struck them most (they either liked it or hated it). This would explain why out of the one hundred sixty two students in all four sections, less than 10% of the total number was evaluated. Other students chose other texts in the reading list (both of us the researchers share the same course outline and reading list) that included poems (among others were “Bonsai” by E. Tiempo, “It was” by J.G. Villa, “Landscape II” by C. Angeles, “Breaking Through” by M. Pena-Reyes, “X Sight” by C. Aquino, “Alms in Noon Traffic” by E. Torres, “Letter to Pedro, U.S. Citizen, Also Named Pete” by E. Amper) and short stories (among them “Dead Stars” by P. Marquez-Benitez, “The Mats” by F. Arcellana, “The Summer Solstice” by N. Joaquin, “Magnificence” by E. Alfon, “The Virgin” by K. Polotan, “Flip Gothic” by C. Manguerra-Brainard, “Geyluv” by H. de Dios,). There were a total of 25 texts that students chose from in writing their reflection papers.

A final requirement in class, the reflection paper (many thanks to Prof. Kelso for the idea) is aimed at encouraging students to “talk back.” Since the task required personal reflection and judgment, a simple “like/hate equals 3 reasons” criterion was used. In discussing the reasons why they chose the text, the students needed to revert back to the story to present a justifiable stance. In short, while students evaluated their feelings toward the text and examined it against their socio-cultural background, values, and biases, they were at the same time required to ground their responses to the story. The reflection papers also aimed at involving students and making them personally accountable to their own readings. Another requirement, say a critical reading of a literary text, would have intimidated students and would only, as we often experienced, merely encourage repetition of “borrowed meanings,” those that students download from the internet. This would defeat the whole purpose of involving students and making them think for themselves. Writing the reflection paper would hopefully provide an alternative route for them.

As to the choice of the short story, literary value and relevance

were the essential considerations in choosing it. Brillantes' works have been highly anthologized in Philippine literature textbooks and similar publications. Content-wise, the story touched on a universal concern about how people, young and old, deal with the existential question of God's existence.

In analyzing the responses of the students, the following research questions are used: [a] How do readers use what they see in the text to formulate their interpretations? How do they use their personal experiences to reflect on the text? [b] How do they see the character(s)? Through this image of the character, how do they see themselves? Through their own beliefs and views, how do they see the character(s)? [c] What are the implications of these responses toward the reading process and the teaching of literature?

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

"Faith, Love, Time and Dr. Lazaro" is about an old country doctor who, seeing death always and losing his son, lost his faith in God. There is the wife who spends all her time in the service of the church and there is Ben, his other son who wants to be a priest. The story heightens as Dr. Lazaro journeys with his son Ben to treat a week-old baby with a terminal case of tetanus. He goes about his job with casual efficiency but the baby dies and Ben baptizes it. On their way home, Dr. Lazaro feels connected, albeit tentatively, to his son Ben but "...the glimmer was lost instantly, buried in the mist of indifference and sleep rising now in his brain."

In evaluating the responses based on the research questions, two strands of interpretive inclination reveal themselves: refusal to accept the character's loss of faith and refusal to confront the issues that explain character behavior.

Refusal to accept character's loss of faith. Student-readers in this category begin with textual references with the text but almost always get involved with their own moral and religious views that they completely separate themselves from the story.

One reader (student 6) begins to see the journey of father and son as something that "challenged [Dr. Lazaro] to change and bring back his faith." For this student, religious background figured predominantly in the reading and the choice of the text.



"As a newly baptized Christian, the story...[is] the one that [lights] up my mind ....Faith, Love and Time are the elements that contribute to the change of the aging medical doctor. When I became a Christian, I realized that it was not by good deeds that man [could] experience eternal life but it is through faith alone. ... Jesus Christ also emphasizes love which is the main reason why He died for us. Love heals every minute pain that we are feeling and it is also through love that we forgive someone..... At most times we ask something from Him, and we as ...imperfect individual[s], we desire to have instant answers from Him. Jesus gives something at perfect time. ... It could also be noted in the story in the old years of Dr. Lazaro, [that] God gave enlightenment through the nature of his job at the most unexpected time. Jesus tells us to wait for everything that He planned for it is flawless...

Great understanding was the thing that I [gained] after reading the story."

Reader 6 has completely lost track of the text. In fact the mention of the character's name seems to have lost relevance and connection to what she has lengthily discussed. There initially seems to be a promise of a discussion on character motivation and behavior when student 6 says *Love and Time are the elements that contribute to the change of the aging medical doctor*. However, she abandons this thought and moves on to relate her own personal journey of faith. Later, she goes back to Dr. Lazaro, *It could also be noted in the story in the old years of Dr. Lazaro, God gave enlightenment through the nature of his job at the most unexpected time*. Like what happened earlier, she refuses to elaborate to this claim but instead talks about what she thinks Jesus wants us to do. By implication, she might have referred to Dr. Lazaro as not "waiting." The "great understanding" that Reader 6 claims, seems to have stemmed from her refusal to accept the character and thus, retaining her religious views unquestioned.

Interestingly, the student also refuses to discuss the reasons of the character's loss of faith:

"In the first sentence of the first paragraph, when the author says that *Dr. Lazaro had a view of stars, the country*



*darkness, the lights on the distant highway at the edge of town, provides evidence that Dr. Lazaro feels a kind of distance like stars, emptiness and loss. It is clear that he had lost something...."*

There is a brief description of Dr. Lazaro but nowhere do we find the reason for the conclusion that student 6 presented, but instead we see a mere implication of such loss. It is clear that Dr. Lazaro has lost something; as to what that is, we do not know. Perhaps had student 6 discussed how Dr. Lazaro lost his faith she would have been more sympathetic to the character. Instead the student segues her imposition of religious beliefs by insisting that the character needs something:

*"Like Lazarus, he needs to have a new life, a new beginning and redemption. With his son Ben in the picture, it was [as] though God brought Ben as an instrument [of] change for his father."*

Instead of probing into Dr. Lazaro's character even further, the student cites Ben as the 'instrument [of] change and new life' for his father. Likewise, we can find this resistance of the reader to the text in three different modes in the next three papers: *identifying with the character that suits the reader's context, evading the questions/issues posed in the text, and moralizing about the story.*

Reading about the problems and challenges encountered by Dr. Lazaro, Reader 2 identifies instead with the wife as she justifies that trials happen to strengthen faith.

*"This is what happened to the wife of Dr. Lazaro when their other son died, she became more dedicated to serve God unlike Dr. Lazaro [who] drifted from his faith and was poisoned by his profession."*

As she identifies herself with the wife of Dr. Lazaro, she relates her own personal context:

*"Personally, there are times when I feel like God is punishing me too much more than I deserve but I thank Him for the existence of prayers and bibles where in I can reflect ... and ... always think that God is just testing*

my faith ... More often... human beings can never comprehend the works of the Lord especially when pain and suffering are being inflicted—that's where faith comes in.... Faith is believing without fully-understanding."

In an attempt to ground her reading on the text, reader 2 presents evidence to support her stand as to how challenges and trials make faith stronger. She filters the text through her lenses as she tries to make sense of everything that happened in the story, even the death of the infant, as something that will yield positive results.

"...all things will work together for good... In the story, this was conveyed by Ben when he baptized the dying child. Even though death is sorrowful, he looked on the bright side of the picture wherein he baptized the child, believing that it [would] be saved.... In the story, this was portrayed by Dr. Lazaro in the end when he was willing to regain his faith yet he still has struggling issues with himself. "

This reader sees the tragedy of the infant's death as something that will eventually "[work] together for good" including Dr. Lazaro's loss of faith. She uses this tragic incident as a way for Dr. Lazaro to regain his faith, explaining that despite his "issues," he still has the willingness to change even when at the last part of the story the main character clearly was still indifferent. Again like reader 6, reader 2 does not probe into the main character's behavior and motivation. Instead she focuses on the character of the son and the wife—characters who she can identify with—to give basis and support to her religious views.

For readers 2 and 6, we see the interaction of reader and the text, specifically as to how the students mediate between their own religious views and the religious issues presented in the text. When confronted with an indifferent, unbelieving character, they instead evaded the task of understanding Dr. Lazaro and shifted to characters who they could understand. With these strong religious beliefs as basis, the two readers went back to the text and saw that Dr. Lazaro has been brought back to light, to faith, and life because of his son, Ben.

One student/reader (12), however, attempts to understand

the character's loss of faith and even becomes sympathetic to Dr. Lazaro:

"This is why I understand the pain that Dr. Lazaro has in his heart; it is hard for the doctor seeing random deaths such as a patient with cancer, whose racking pain even morphine can't assuage anymore; the baby of Esteban who is now dying from tetanus; but most of all, his eldest son who committed suicide. All of these summed up to what Dr. Lazaro felt about God."

Student 12 then proceeds to examine herself through the character of Dr. Lazaro.

"Because of these questions that Dr. Lazaro raised up (*sic*), it made me wonder if I would have the same questions soon if [I would] become a doctor. I don't want to consider these thoughts since I don't want to break my relationship with God but I guess I can't blame Dr. Lazaro also for having these thoughts because sometimes we will come to a point that when we have experienced all ...the pain in the world, we would questions (*sic*) the existence of God and why he's doing these things."

Although the student understands why people like Dr. Lazaro ask such questions, she still maintains that she does not want to contemplate these thoughts because "[she] doesn't want to break her relationship with God." Because student 12 needs to connect her beliefs to her sympathy towards Dr. Lazaro, she then acknowledges that the character needs something.

"...his soul was dead. He needs to [be] brought up to life and that journey he had with his son was a question of redemption, he [needs] to save himself from this emptiness and darkness he is feeling."

This acknowledgment paves way to the reading student 12 is inevitably bound to assert:

"At that moment, Dr. Lazaro finally ceases [*sic*] his darkness and saw his son's saving light."

As she finds peace in this conclusion, student 12 affirms her own faith.

"From that story, I learned a lot especially about spirituality. I can't blame people for losing their faith in God due to circumstances but it is never too late to be redeemed and saved from this darkness and emptiness. God may give us a lot of sufferings and pain but never stop trusting Him...He will let us understand His reasons and in turn we will love Him even more."

Although the student begins by showing sympathy towards Dr. Lazaro, she instead settles with the conclusion that through Ben, Dr. Lazaro regains his faith.

Reader 9 points out something positive in the story she can relate to but instead of contrasting this further with Dr. Lazaro, she refuses to accept the main character's behavior. In fact nowhere in the paper, do we find an analysis of the main character. Instead, this reader chooses to focus on another character who she likes:

"One part of the story that presents heart-warming scene is the scene where Pedro Esteban and his family really showed their love to their week-old baby."

When reading about Dr. Lazaro's situation, she also tries to empathize with Dr. Lazaro by putting herself in his place. She explains that when placed under the same circumstances that Dr. Lazaro has experienced, she will not lose faith and insists that Dr. Lazaro do the same.

"I should face it with much strength and courage and forget about the past in order for me to go on to the future with God's enlightenment and guidance just like Dr. Lazaro's realization in the end part of the story where he already decided to gain back his faith in God and forget whatever happened to his life in the past and have a bright new beginning."

Ultimately, student 9 dismisses the issues in the text and refuses to immerse herself further in a literary encounter that will

make her confront questions of faith; instead, she chooses to linger on the benefit that a reader can get from the text and proceeds to discuss her own beliefs:

“The point of this story, for me, is that, we really need to appreciate our life and not to be carried away by the problems that we have because these problems are part and parcel of [life] that’s why they are inevitable...He is the only who can fill the emptiness that we feel and our God is the only one who can satisfy the deepest longings of our souls.”

While readers 2, 6, 9, 12 almost always talk about personal beliefs that float away from textual references and evidence, Student 13 uses text-based comments but sifts through them to shape her own reading.

“Gregorio Brillantes did such a good job in using symbolism in the story. The way he used his words in emphasizing details on light and darkness in the story gave us an idea of good in (sic) and evil. It was clearly shown in this excerpt of the story: *He hurried down the curving stairs, under the motive lamps of the Sacred Heart.*

Student 13 sees the images in the story to signify what seems to be consensually the predominant theme of light and darkness, loss of faith and redemption, and how this translates to the immediate relationship the character has with his family.

When Dr. Lazaro hurried down the stairs it was like he was avoiding the light that the lamp was illuminating. It showed that the light was associated with Dr. Lazaro’s faith in God, wherein his faith in Him was lost. Other than this, it was also associated to those people he loves but are distant from him—just like his son, Ben. Due to his lost in [sic] faith in God, his relationship with his son wasn’t clear. It was as if there was a brick wall between the two.

Despite this close attention to details and a potential start to explore Dr. Lazaro’s relationship with his family, student 13 sees the character’s redemption at the end of the story without

reverting back to the text to explain how, firstly, Dr. Lazaro regained his faith and secondly, how he achieved closeness with his son. Apparently, student 13 has already interpreted that the father-son relationship is intimate even before Dr. Lazaro's loss of faith and now that the character regains his faith, the relationship will grow stronger.

"As he regains his faith in God, his relationship with Ben strengthened and they became close to each other more than ever."

In a final attempt at grounding her reading on the text, student 13 discusses the allusion of Dr. Lazaro to the biblical figure Lazarus.

"Also, the use of the name Lazaro in the story was actually patterned to the story in the Bible. Lazaro was likened itself [sic] to that [person in] the parable of Lazarus in John 11, wherein the death of Lazarus paved way to strengthen the faith of Mary and Martha. Lazarus was then revived by God as their [faith] in Him [became] greater...."

She notes this allusion but is unable to explain the contrast between Dr. Lazaro in the story and the Lazarus in the bible. Discussing her realizations, student 13 seems to have veered away from the text as she sees redemption in the end:

"From the start, I didn't really understand why Gregorio Brillantes chose to have the week's (sic) old child to die.... Eventually, as I read through the story I realized it was necessary, since it was here when Ben Lazaro baptized the child that passed away. Dr. Lazaro witnessing the baptism was definitely the turning point wherein, he regain[ed] his faith in God."

Like the students in the previous papers, when confronted with a tragic incident in the text, reader 13 interprets such event as ushering something positive: when Ben baptized the child, Dr. Lazaro "regains his faith in God." Despite making textual analysis, mentioning the symbols and the allusion, she reverts back to her own beliefs and sees something unsettling such as the death of the

baby as a catalyst that will change Dr. Lazaro.

If the previous students speak so certainly about their religious and moral beliefs, Student 8 prefers to talk about religion in general. He starts off by saying that he likes the text because it is personally relevant and reminiscent of his past experience:

“This is why I was [struck] by this text..., because I ...once [lost]... faith [in] God.”

But instead of using his own past experience to understand Dr. Lazaro’s character, he launches on a detached commentary on the state of religion and moral disintegration of society as a whole.

“All I can say about religion today is [it is] already tainted with people’s ambition. ... [T]hey will only notice God when there’s a problem, when they need something. I’m not being a religious man, but this is what I observed [in] my surroundings and made me curious if I’m going to believe God or not. We keep on praying rosary but I can’t feel the presence of seriousness [in] praying.... Too many people praying to God, but when they are not in front of the altar or the Church, they talk about nonsense which can hurt others. Some are involved in violence.... As human [beings] we always tend to blame God [for] the things that happen in our lives especially the negative and it usually leads to [loss] of faith....”

Reader 8 could have used his personal narrative to shed light about Dr. Lazaro’s descent to disbelief, and would have opened a richer reading. Because, the character in the story is not well understood and demystified, the student does not immerse himself in the text rather takes the flight out of the text.

By showing a doctor who has lost faith, who has experienced terrible events in his life, the story indeed challenges the reader’s faith and religious beliefs. However in the previous papers (6, 2, 9, 12, 13, and 8—all Medtech students except 8, an IT student), they show that these readers resist these questions and rather identify with characters who share their beliefs, such as Dr. Lazaro’s wife and his son Ben. Garrison and Hynds (1993) found out in their research that less proficient readers who are confronted with confusion would spin off from the text and discuss their personal



and emotional experiences. In this paper, though, we do not classify the readers; we simply analyze their responses. And in these responses we see how these readers come to the text with their own strong religious beliefs, and when confronted with questions that would force them to their own faiths, refuse to dwell on Dr. Lazaro's emptiness but focus on how he would be changed and transformed by his journey with Ben.

Since meaning-making is a 'personal process', according to Probst (1981), the text for these students (papers 6, 2, 12, and 13) is a story of "redemption." This is not entirely negative; in fact this is something gladdening in the sense that these students possess certainty in creating meanings for themselves from the experience of reading literature. Their responses, however, *can* be enriched and become more informed. Both Iser (1974) and Rosenblatt (1988) propose that for genuine 'virtual convergence' to exist, there must be reader-text transaction that lies in-between the text and the reader's realizations. As for these students, they refuse the aesthetic experience of moving in and out of the text and rather focus on what is more comfortable for them, a discussion of their own faith.

Confrontation of the issues in the text. Reader-responses in this category ground all explanation on character behavior and motivation on the text and at the same time weave in their personal experiences and moral-religious views. In confronting the existential question about the existence and nature of God, these students get involved in the text, moving back and forth the efferent-aesthetic continuum and successfully present a reflective reading by pondering about the immediate relevance of the text, contrasting themselves to Dr. Lazaro and affirming their faith while anchoring their views on the story.

As students who have chosen a career path that would lead them to hospitals, they have reflected *on the immediate relevance of the text to their lives* by looking at Dr. Lazaro as primarily a doctor.

Reader 1, for instance, considers the effect of the medical profession to Dr. Lazaro by saying that being a physician has affected his "spiritual life...and made him emotionally detached [from] his family." For her, she sees that "Dr. Lazaro gave his life away." And the reader takes off from this point to relate the story to her life as a future medical practitioner:

“As a Physical Therapy student, the story also made me realize that being a health care provider means sharing a part of [my]self with strangers.”

Being aware of the struggles of doctors and other care givers, she also recognizes that

“[It] is not the patients alone that suffer within the hospital walls. These realizations helped me to prepare myself for my life as a future health care provider.”

At this point, looking at the image of a disillusioned doctor, the reader also sees her ‘future self’ as a care giver and somehow prepares herself for the difficult life ahead.

Similarly, reader 7 also sympathizes with the suffering and death that Dr. Lazaro sees in hospitals every day, and Dr. Lazaro’s inability to save his own son’s life (Ben’s brother who had committed suicide). The reader understands that these tragedies have taken their toll on Dr. Lazaro. Reader 7 further contemplates on how the text has affected him as a reader and extends his insights from the text and connects them to his situation. He says that he “...was enlightened on the future career that [he is] going to pursue.” He admits, however, that it is not easy to deal with various circumstances such as the “responsibility” and “effort” that go with being a doctor but he affirms that “...the satisfaction that you can acquire from treating [a] sick patient is worth the effort.” Although the reader understands Dr. Lazaro’s problems and challenges, he sees himself different from the character because for him treating the sick is a meaningful task while for the character it is merely duty.

In the same vein, Reader 14 sees how the tragic event of the death of Dr. Lazaro’s son has ultimately dulled his outlook towards life. “[Dr. Lazaro] pondered about certain questions such as ‘What kind of God would let people suffer for a long time?’ or ‘What kind of God would take away a child?’ and so, that actually made him who he was.” Whereas other readers would evade these soul-stirring questions, Reader 14 faces these queries and expresses that the story “challenges [her] faith as a medical student.” The reader then addresses this challenge by contrasting herself with Dr. Lazaro:

"For me death in the family should not be a barrier for my faith in the Lord, and as we've thoroughly discussed that it is always easier said than done, and as I have mentioned earlier it will be a challenge for me once I venture into the real world after medical school since I plan to become a missionary doctor in the near future. Nevertheless, I will do my best to stand strong in my faith ...unlike Dr. Lazaro, [who lost] the faith that was once there, no matter how painful things will be...I know I will be [strong]."

This seems to be a commonality among reader responses in this category. *Addressing these challenges of faith takes the form of self contrast to Dr. Lazaro and later as we see in the subsequent papers an affirmation of faith.* Since their own faiths are challenged by Dr. Lazaro's own loss of faith, student readers take refuge in the affirmation of their own faith. The affirmation is devoid of any didactic tendencies in that this does not appear in the form of moralizing or general discussions of religion. In contrast to the previous readers who withdraw from the text and focus on their discussions of their personal beliefs, this reader (student 4) attempts to understand the main character:

"With all the pain and suffering around him, he grew more in hatred than in love. He hated God...(how can someone with limitless power allow such things to happen...?)\_for taking away his treasure, his son,... which is the main reason why he lost his faith. It's as if he [had] lost the power to ever live again..."

However, when this reader sees Dr. Lazaro up close in the literary transaction she sees it as a personal choice to hold fast to her own faith.

Instead of refusing to entertain these doubts, the student faces these questions that are brought up in the text and explains that "there are things we cannot control and that we have to accept." Although she is very pragmatic and realistic, she affirms her faith because she knows that asking questions would strengthen her spirituality.

"This text made me see a different side of things, exposed, and opened my eyes to different angles or facets, but

because of this, it has also allowed me to reaffirm my faith and my beliefs. After reading, it made my faith, not only to God but myself as well, stronger.... Some people would say that we should not question the things that God does because everything He does happens for a reason. But for me, maybe it's good that we question, not only God but ourselves as well. We question so that we would know the depth of the reason why this or that happen[s]...."

Clearly, this reader has woven the textual experience with her realizations. In fact, confronted with Dr. Lazaro's image, she reaffirms her own faith. And as she sees the practical connection of God and the individual, "His doubts in God lead [sic] him to doubt his own abilities," she affirms that questioning is not tantamount to disbelief. She realizes that questioning God, indeed, is a good exercise for her faith.

Reader 10 begins with her own paraphrases of the text by explaining the character's condition and then follows it with a rhetorical question:

"...He loses his faith towards God because of being in a tragic experienced [sic]. He loses his Love and time to his family... The question is, 'Why would God allow such terrible things to happen [to] the innocent child and the family?'

She then attempts to make sense of this question by discussing her own personal religious-moral stance:

"Basing [on] my own perspective..., God allows terrible things to happen possibly because in order for us to differentiate and learn what is right and wrong, knowing that living in this imperfect world would make you realized (*sic*) that no one's perfect except God himself."

Reader 10, contrary to the previous papers in the first category who do not see these questions in the text, raises these points and from these make sense of the "terrible things" that are happening. The explanation, admittedly, may not be agreeable to some, and apparently needs improvement but this reader acknowledges a question that the previous readers have not.

Reader 11 sees these affirmations of faith as a matter of choice. Indeed, she proposes that Dr. Lazaro has the choice even if it is a difficult one. She realizes through the character's meaningless life the choice to make life meaningful.

"While reading that part in the story, it dawned on me that in truth and in fact, life is too short. That's why every time we wake up, we have to make a personal decision to view the day as an opportunity to make every moment count—to make a difference—to be happy despite pain—to be fulfilled despite every limitations (sic) and discontent."

This is the same reader who sees the character, numbed and "calloused" and someone who exercises his profession out of duty and futility. The reader arrives at this conclusion by quoting directly from the text.

*"[Dr. Lazaro] had no choice left now but action; it was the only certitude—he sometimes reminded himself—even if it would prove futile, before, the descent into nothingness."*

The reader understands Dr. Lazaro's struggles, but she sees something in the story that can be beneficial and instructive: faith, after all, is a matter of choice.

"But ultimately, it's [our] decision that matters at the end of the day—it's up to [us] to hold on to God or let go. In the story, Dr. Lazaro chose to be that way and live that way."

While this reader acknowledges that in the story "something so tragic happened in the life of Dr. Lazaro; he lost his son and he wasn't even there to save him," she also realizes that "...our past confines us when we dwell on it." She sees that Dr. Lazaro has lost his faith because he dwells in the bitter past. She cites these lines from the story:

*"Now if your brother—He closed his eyes, erasing the slashed wrists, part of the future dead in the boarding-house room, the landlady whimpering, 'He was such a nice boy, doctor, your son...' Sorrow lays ambush among the years."*

According to this reader, we are “scarring our hearts all over again” when we refused to let go. Thus in this realization the reader affirms her own views about the importance of keeping faith as she reflects on what she discovers from the text:

“But while reading the story, I realized that even if it hurts, even if there’s pain and sorrow and grief, the world will still move, and the dead people are still dead. Nobody said it’s going to be easy, but there’s so much joy and fulfillment when we learn to just suck everything up, grow up and move on.”

Lastly, she goes back to the story:

*Dr. Lazaro watched the young face intent on the road...his own face before he left to study in another country, a young student full of illusions, a lifetime ago; long before the loss of faith, God turning abstract, unknowable, and everywhere it seemed to him, those senseless accidents of pain...*

Through this, she observes that “there was just so much bitterness and emptiness in him. It was as if he was a living dead. It was as if he has tetanus of the soul.” When the student goes back to the baptism scene, she notices that there is a realization—not the all-too-sudden realization about how Dr. Lazaro regains his faith—but the character notices that he was “missing out” on something.

“But when he was inside Esteban’s house looking at his son baptizing the baby, he sort-of saw his darkness. While being with his son he realized a lot of things –that somehow he was already missing out— .... *he was aware of an obscure disappointment, a subtle pressure around his heart, as though he had been deprived of a certain joy...* In the story, I got reminded of how important faith is. Faith, for me, will keep us moving on. There are a lot of things in this world that would trigger us to throw in the towel and live a miserable life but I believe that faith will help us overlook every form of despair, every form of guilt, every form of pain, and sorrow, and every form of offense.”

Upon reflecting about Dr. Lazaro, understanding his reasons for his emptiness, this reader again sees the value of having faith, as something which “[keeps her] moving on.” It is rather noteworthy that this realization that comes in the form of an affirmation of her faith is a product of her own transaction with the text. In fact, as she goes back again and again to the text, going to the very core of the story, there are new realizations she discovers. Her own views transform the text just as much as the text transforms her.

With reference to Rosenblatt’s reading continuum and Iser’s text-reader convergence, these second set of student-readers are able to fully get involved in the aesthetic experience by making realizations based on the text. By constructing the image of Dr. Lazaro as someone who has lost his faith, they do not evade these issues that challenge their beliefs; instead, they make textual references to understand Dr. Lazaro’s disillusionment. They (readers 1, 2, 7, 10, 11, 14) also respond to this image by reflecting on the relevance of the story to their lives as future medical practitioners. As they place themselves in the character’s shoes, they see themselves choosing to be faithful rather than falling into faithlessness. Evaluating this through Iser’s (1974) aesthetic (the text) and the esthetic (reader’s realization) poles and Rosenblatt’s (1988) efferent-aesthetic continuum, this is an example of a reading that falls in between the stances. Here, readers negotiate their personal beliefs with what they see in the text. What happens therefore, is what Purves (1991) claims as “reflection” and “refraction,” when the reader and text become mirrors to each other. In talking about their reading experience and trying to make sense of the questions that challenge their faith, these students realize that faith is a matter of choice and they reaffirm their personal beliefs without compromising their full reception of the text.

Initially, responses in the second category appear to us naïvely positive and awfully didactic, which could only have sprung from youth. Later on, we realized that all along these students were making sense of the story that might have threatened them. Indeed as Probst wisely pointed out, making meaning is a personal undertaking and this is how our students, no matter how inadequately put things together, make meaning. Although for purposes of assessment, we have to determine students’ performance based on what they have written. In the analysis of



these papers, we see what Rosenblatt pointed out, that there are no “incorrect” readings only “superior” interpretations. After all, reading is a transaction.

For the responses that resisted the issues presented in the text, one common feature among them was the lack of discussion on character behavior and motivation. In fact, the students completely forgot about the text and spun off on lengthy discussion of religious and moral views. Because the character was dissimilar to them or their context, they identified with other characters in the story who were “similar” to them in terms of religious views or moral inclination. They focused on the character of the son or wife—characters that they could identify with. A couple of these respondents often forced onto the character traits that were textually absent in the character himself. Some used their personal values and gauges in reflecting on the character of Dr. Lazaro. Their own selves became lenses through which they examine Dr. Lazaro’s character and Dr. Lazaro in turn, became a foil to affirm their own faiths and justify their religious views.

Interestingly as well, student-readers in this category felt the need to save the character from his spiritual death but were unsympathetic about Dr. Lazaro’s situation. Thus they either moralized about the value of faith or of God in general. Their refusal to delve deeper into the character’s behavior and motivation actually pulled them away from the text thereby taking a detached, and we might add, a safer stance that of an authoritative voice discussing religion, moralizing, yet disengaging from the text altogether. Furthermore, students in this category of readers saw the text as a story of “redemption.” These responses revealed how much these students refuse the aesthetic experience of moving in and out of the text but instead focused on what is more comfortable for them, again, a discussion of their own faith.

On the other hand, those who immersed themselves in the literary experience confront Dr. Lazaro’s loss of faith and even sympathized with him. They understood the questions that he asked about the existence of God, and being future health-care providers they related to him. They saw themselves with reference to Dr. Lazaro, that while they may question their own faiths when faced with similar situations in and out of the hospital, unlike the main character, they would see the tragic events as ways to strengthen their faith. Since their own faiths were challenged by the character’s disbelief, they took refuge in the affirmation of

their own faiths. Unlike the first category of readers who gave a detached discussion on religion, their responses were more reflective and text-focused. They did not refuse the character his reasons for his choice. They granted him this as they understood his behavior based on what they had read in the story. Responding to the challenges the text presented, these students talked about the importance of choosing to be faithful.

Given the criterion (like/hate plus three reasons grounded on the text) students, as we see in the second category of responses, became inquisitive and reflective of their own thoughts toward the text. Here they used cues from the story to formulate tentative readings and related their religious views and moral judgment to clarify their interpretations and make meaning of the experience of reading the story. Ultimately, students who successfully went back and forth the efferent-aesthetic continuum took learning in their own hands.

Touching base with student responses in this research reveals several things. Firstly, we see how well students make use of textual cues or references in the story. They either use them well or completely disregard them. We see for instance how readers can abandon the text and opt to take the easy way out, which is to solely discuss their own views. And we have students who decide to immerse into the world of the text even though it meant looking into themselves and asking questions about their own faith. Secondly, encouraging responses to a literary text invites students to take the journey of making meaning. Whatever discussions or interpretations the students arrive at constitute a journey nonetheless. In this journey, they evaluate characters, issues, and themes in the story and relate them to their own personal lives. When they do this there follows an attendant evaluation of their own values and character, thereby making the reading of literature personal and relevant. Needless to say, this is very significant as this is the whole point of encouraging our students to read. Reading literature, thus, takes on a profound effect on students because as they grapple with making sense of the text, in the process, they make sense of their own selves.

Although this research evaluated written responses of students, the results reveal two things in the teaching of literature: the importance of (re)teaching students skills in reading textual clues and the need to listen to what students have to say. As their responses have shown, reader-response activities have the

potential to veer students away from the text especially that they appeal to the emotion. Hence, there is a need to fortify students' skills in text-based reading to let them fully understand their own responses. Although people feel that appealing to the emotions is not at all academic, personally involving oneself in the reading process is in fact an intellectual and rigorous undertaking, as shown from the reflection papers written by students who have decided to confront the main character in the story. Another point is reader-response based activities in the classroom foster a sense of involvement in students. According to Yancey (1996), students become active in the learning process when they talk about what they have learned. This is exactly what the students did in their reflection papers. Thus, a reader-response based instruction will enable students to take charge of their own learning by using reflection as a tool to understanding. Such reflection may be used not only in literature classrooms but also when they deal with various facets of information in their lives.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

There are four things that this study might encourage. Firstly, in explaining in-depth students' refusal to entertain questions of faith, future researchers might look into the influence of culture on student responses, especially the concern on spirituality among college students, specifically Filipino students. As shown in the analysis of the reflection papers, students' resistance to the text stems primarily from their strong religious views. Secondly, it might be interesting to take a look at the correlation of reading proficiency and interpretations students arrive at. Specifically in relation to this study, researchers might want to evaluate reading aptitude among students. Thirdly, researchers might conduct an observation and video-record the proceedings on how reader-response discussion on a literary text works in the classroom. In this way, non-verbal responses may be accounted for. Lastly, the study can be future basis for reader-response researches in the country to improve continually literary pedagogy, the crossroad where education and literature meet.

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