



FROM THE TEXT TO THE READER: AN APPLICATION OF READER-RESPONSE THEORY TO ROBERT BROWNING'S "MY LAST DUCHESS"

Metinden Okura: Okur-Tepki Teorisinin Robert Browning'in "My Last Duchess" Şiirine Uygulanması

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ABSTRACT

Reader-response criticism as a reaction against new criticism has changed the focus from the text to the reader. The reader is no longer deemed a passive agent, but active, participating in the meaning-making process, as reading is a process during which the reader also experiences what the characters experience and feels with him/her. In this respect, the text and the reader interact with each other. Meaning is accordingly created out of this interaction and transaction. A multiplicity of meanings, perspectives and interpretations becomes possible in the process of reading. Each reading of a literary text produces different interpretations. Social, religious, political, psychological and cultural contextual factors and background of the reader have a strong potential to influence the interpretation. Accordingly, the characteristics of the interpretive community are influential in meaning-making. This study will, therefore, discuss reader-response criticism with specific emphasis on Iser's theory (the implied reader and repertoire) and apply the reader-response theory to Robert Browning's poem, "My Last Duchess".

Keywords: Reader-response theory, Robert Browning, My Last Duchess, poetry, literary criticism.

ÖZET

Yeni eleştiri kuramına bir yanıt olarak ortaya çıkan okur-tepki teorisi, odak noktasını metinden okura taşıyarak yeni bir bakış açısı getirmiştir. Okuyucu edilgen taraftan olmaktan çıkarak etkin bir rol üstlenmiş ve anlam yaratma sürecine bizzat dâhil olmuştur çünkü okuma eylemi, karakterlerin deneyimlediklerini ve hissettiklerini okurun onlarla birlikte tecrübe ettiği bir süreçtir. Bu bağlamda metin ve okur bir etkileşim içine girmiştir. Anlam, bu duruma bağlı olarak böylesi bir etkileşimden üretilmektedir. Buna istinaden anlam, bakış açısı ve yorum çeşitliliği okuma sürecinde mümkün olmaktadır. Bir metnin her okuması farklı yorumları ortaya çıkarmaktadır. Toplumsal, dinî, siyasi, psikolojik ve kültürel faktörler ve bir okuyucunun

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This article was checked by Turnitin.

geçmiş olası bir yorumlamayı etkileme anlamında büyük bir potansiyele sahiptir. Yorumlayıcı bir topluluğun özellikleri böylesi bir anlam yaratma sürecinde bu noktada etkilidir. Bu çalışma bu bağlamda okur-tepki eleştiri kuramını Işer'in imalı okur ve repertuar kavramlarına spesifik göndermeler üzerinden tartışacak ve ilgili kuramı Robert Browning'in "My Last Duchess" şiiri üzerinde uygulamalı olarak gösterecektir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Okur-tepki teorisi, Robert Browning, My Last Duchess, şiir, eleştiri kuramı.

Introduction: Reader-Response Criticism: Theoretical Framework

Reader-response theory has developed against New Criticism, which regards the text as self-contained, self-sufficient and autonomous. It puts the primary focus on the reader and invites the reader to participate in the meaning-making process. This approach rejects the domination of the text and requires the active participation of the reader. It does not approve New Criticism's idea that one should not commit affective fallacy while reading or criticizing a poem. In this approach, the reader interacts with the text, and the meaning is produced out of this interaction. Influential figures such as Wolfgang Işer, Stanley Fish, Louise Rosenblatt, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Hans Robert Jauss, Norman Holland and David Bleich accordingly highlight the vital role of the reader. Moreover, certain terms such as the implied reader, the informed reader, the real reader, interpretive communities, repertoire, horizon of expectations, fusion of horizons, transactional reader-response theory, affective stylistics, and subjective reader-response theory gain importance in this respect. This study will, therefore, discuss reader-response criticism with specific emphasis on Işer's theory (the implied reader and repertoire) and apply the reader-response theory to Robert Browning's poem "My Last Duchess".

Reader-response criticism challenges the methods of New Criticism. New Criticism has a desire to reach one single best interpretation by doing close reading and focusing on the organic unity. In New Criticism, the text itself is the center of attention; however, reader-response criticism does not accept the self-sufficiency of the text. It argues that it is the reader that makes meaning-making possible. New Critical approach asserts that the reader should not incorporate his/her own background and prejudices into reading or analyzing a poem because it is an obstacle to an objective criticism. Reader-response criticism, on the contrary, welcomes the participation of the reader and puts the reader under the spotlight.

In this respect, transactional reader-response theory also reflects how the reader and the text interact. Reading is conceived as a transaction between the text and the reader. Louise Rosenblatt argues that the act of reading is a “transaction, a two-way process, involving a reader and a text” (1982: 268). The reader has the text at hand and draws on that source, which is the process of meaning-creation. Rosenblatt points out that the reader brings his/her past experiences, memories, and what s/he has in his/her consciousness into the act of reading. She also states that some texts give certain clues and offers various features (1982: 268-69). A play by Shakespeare and a play by Bertolt Brecht have different characteristics, and thus present the circumstances that are most probably not similar. However, it is the reader to grasp what is communicated in these two plays. The interpretation of each reader will most probably differ from each other.

Rosenblatt further touches on the efferent pole and the aesthetic pole. She differentiates between these two stances, and points out:

Any reading event falls somewhere on the continuum between the aesthetic and the efferent poles; between, for example, a lyric poem and a chemical formula. I speak of a predominantly efferent stance, because according to the text and the reader’s purpose, some attention to qualitative elements of consciousness may enter. Similarly, aesthetic reading involves or includes referential or cognitive elements. Hence, the importance of the reader’s selective attention in the reading process (1982: 269).

The efferent stance can be used to gather information, whereas the aesthetic stance can evoke certain personal experiences. In the aesthetic one, the reader makes use of his/her past experiences and interactions with the world, people, and the texts. In this regard, some cognitive and referential elements are brought in the act of reading.

The reader has an instrumental role in this transaction and his/her selective attention comes to the fore. Each reading produces a different interpretation. Dias accordingly comments on the uniqueness of each reading as follows: “Each reading of a literary work is a unique event; it is not an entity existing apart from a reader and the particular occasion of its reading,” and the individual associations of the reader are reflected and made use of in the act of reading (1994: 184). Thus, the text cannot be taken as a separate entity from the reader. Each time the reader reads a text, s/he does not reach the same interpretation. S/he projects his/her individual associations and becomes an inseparable part of the text. In

relation to the influential role of the reader, Many and Wiseman express that “[t]he reader savours the flavour of the autobiographical and inter-textual associations that are called to mind as the text is read, feels the emotions of the characters and reacts to events, visualizes the scenes and people described” (1992: 251). As can be seen, the reader is expected to be highly alert during the act of reading. If s/he is expected to pick up these subtleties, s/he should be sophisticated enough in order to grasp those intertextual and autobiographical associations. Moreover, s/he feels happiness, sadness, anger and joy with the characters, and reacts to what happens in the text as well as using his/her imagination. Therefore, it is possible to put forward that reader-response criticism emphasizes that the text needs the reader so that it can make sense.

In a similar vein, subjective reader-response criticism focuses on the subjective factors and subjective responses of the readers. David Bleich, the father of this approach, gives specific importance to the reader’s responses. These responses can explain the reason behind articulating the emotion that motivates him/her: “The act of articulating a perception creates a motive to articulate the motivating feeling” (1978: 148). Bleich regards the reader as the source of meaning. The responses of the reader might reveal some characteristics related to his/her identity and why s/he has uttered those responses in such a way. Çubukçu states that theorists “first characterize a reader’s identity by means of a personality test and then relate this test to the reader’s protocol of a poem to explain why *this* reader does it this way and that reader some other way” (2007: 70). Thus, each response and reading might bring valuable and crucial information about the reader to light.

In subjective reader-response criticism, Bleich differentiates between symbolic objects and real objects. He refers to both abstract and concrete notions. Similarly, Tyson expresses that real objects include physical objects such as chairs, tables, books, and cars. The pages of a literary text can be considered as real objects as well. However, the experience that is created during reading those pages is a symbolic object since it takes place in the conceptual world (2006: 178). The real objects refer to concrete things, whereas the symbolic objects refer to abstract notions. Bleich denotes that “[a] symbolic object is wholly dependent on a perceiver for its existence. An object becomes a symbol only by being rendered so by a perceiver” (1975: 750). Hence, the text needs the reader in order to be perceived and made sense of.

Psychological reader-response theory also gains significance in reader-response criticism. This approach makes use of psychoanalytic concepts. Specific emphasis is put on the psychological responses of the readers. Tyson states that Norman Holland, one of the influential figures, focuses on the readers' interpretations since they reveal some features of the reader. In this regard, the reader projects his/her psychological experience. His/her interpretation is a product of fears, desires and needs and the act of interpretation is in this respect a psychological process (2006: 183). The reader presents his/her identity in a response to a text and this response can give information about the reader's identity. Holland takes the text "as a relatively neutral phenomenon, a Rorschach blot to which the reader reacted according to the reader's ego-structure" (Purves, 1979: 802).

Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics is also significant in reader-response criticism. Hermeneutics is the science of interpretation, and Gadamer's concept, the fusion of horizons plays a vital role. Ryan and Natalie express that hermeneutics "has traditionally been described as a way to interpret biblical and legal texts" (2001: 77-78). Originally, it aims at explaining the religious and legal texts. The interpreter strives to understand a text by re-evaluating "pre-conceived meanings in the light of new ones gained in the process of trying to read to understand" (Ryan and Natalie, 2001: 78). Thus, the historical background of the reader comes into prominence, and the former meanings of the text are also taken into consideration fused with the present day meaning.

From another perspective, the readers' horizons change through time. They do not remain the same and are influenced by the periods. Gadamer touches on the concept of horizon and how these horizons fuse as follows:

Every finite present has its limitations. We define the concept of "situation" by saying that it represents a standpoint that limits the possibility of vision. Hence essential to the concept of situation is the concept of "horizon." The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point... A person who has no horizon does not see far enough and hence over-values what is nearest to him. On the other hand, "to have a horizon" means not being limited to what is nearby but being able to see beyond it (2000: 301).

He means that the situation restricts the possibility of a vision. The concept of horizon is emphasized strongly as it can turn into an advanta-

geous point if dealt with caution. A person without horizon does not realize what lies in the distance, whereas a person with horizon is aware of its importance. Thus, it is possible to argue that Gadamer's remarks might give hint at the significance of the reader. It therefore depends on the reader to pick up the subtle and hidden meanings in a text within the limits of horizon.

The present and the past horizons merge in this hermeneutical approach. Rees purports that the fusion in the fusion of horizons is "dynamic and self-transcendent," and it creates new rules and perspectives that are made use of in order to create a new horizon (2003: 3). It is based on "a multi-voiced discourse" and does not stop since it is open to new experiences (2003: 3). The reader's act of reading produces a new interpretation each time s/he reads. His /her emotions and opinions change over time as vision does not remain static. The reader brings new perspectives into the text through personal associations and historical background. The present experiences merge with the past ones, which is the fusion of horizons, and this fusion can put forward a new horizon.

Reception theory is also useful in explaining reader-response criticism. The focus is not on the formal analysis of a text, but on the reception of a text. In other words, how a text is received by a reader is considered important, and this theory reflects the effective role of the reader. Harkin sets forth that, "[r]eaders make meanings: readers—and not only authors—engage in an active process of production—in-use—in which texts of all kinds [...] are received by their audiences not as a repository of stable meaning but as an invitation to make it" (2005: 413). Thus, the meaning is not imposed upon the reader; on the contrary, the reader is invited to produce the meaning in the act of reading in reception theory.

Hans Robert Jauss, an influential name in reception theory, presents the importance of the reader as follows:

The relationship of work to work must now be brought into this interaction between work and mankind, and the historical coherence of works among themselves must be seen in the interrelations of production and reception. Put another way: literature and art only obtain a history that has the character of a process when the succession of works is mediated not only through the producing subject but also through the consuming subject—through the interaction of author and public (1982: 15).

Jauss stresses how the text and the reader interact with each other. Once a text is produced, its reception reflects the role of the reader. The reader should take part in the meaning-making process and sufficient care should be given to the reader since s/he is the main agent through which the text is clarified.

Wolfgang Iser is one of the most influential names in reader-response criticism, as he draws attention to the role of the reader in this meaning-making process. His concepts, the implied reader and repertoire are of great importance in this approach. Similar to Stanley Fish, who accentuates the role of the reader with his concepts, the informed reader and interpretive communities, Iser talks about how the reader becomes the center in the act of reading. The reading process is not passive; on the contrary, it is an active, on-going process during which the reader creates the meaning. Iser points out that, “the activity [of reading and interaction] stimulated in him will link him to the text and induce him to create the conditions necessary for the effectiveness of that text” (1978: 9). Creativity plays a role on the part of the reader since s/he joins the process. The reader and the text interact and “meaning is no longer an object to be defined, but is an effect to be experienced” (1978: 10).

Reading as an experience renders the meaning-making process possible. Once the text is created by the writer or the poet, it needs the reader to come to life. Iser accordingly comments on this point as follows: “In reading we are able to experience things that no longer exist and to understand things that are totally unfamiliar to us; and it is this astonishing process that now needs to be investigated” (Iser, 1978: 19). Through reading, the reader experiences and understands certain unfamiliar things, and this transaction or interaction between the reader and the text should be investigated.

Repertoire, an important concept in this investigation, is referred to as a “constellation” and its constituents are mainly historical and social norms, themes and literary patterns (Iser, 1978: 141; 200; 211). The reader is familiar with its constituents. The function of repertoire is to incorporate “a specific external reality into the text [in order] to offer the reader a definite frame of reference” (Iser, 1978: 212). The reader is aware of the social and cultural codes of his/her society. His/her familiarity with these norms leads him/her to interpret a text from a certain perspective. Repertoire involves the social, historical, and cultural norms. These might be specific to a culture or a society. Iser explicates repertoire as follows:

The act of recreation is not a smooth or continuous process, but one which, in its essence, relies on interruptions of the flow to render it efficacious. We look forward, we look back, we decide, we change our decisions, we form expectations, we are shocked by their nonfulfillment, we question, we muse, we accept, we reject; this is the dynamic process of recreation. This process is steered by two main structural components within the text: first, a repertoire of familiar literary patterns and recurrent literary themes, together with allusions to familiar social and historical contexts; second, techniques or strategies used to set the familiar against the unfamiliar (1974: 62-3).

There are historical and social contexts, literary themes and patterns that affect the process of recreation. The reader undergoes change over time since s/he looks forward, decides, changes his/her decisions, forms expectations, accepts and rejects. The repertoire of a literary work is “comprised of the extra-textual sociocultural and literary context to which the text itself refers” (D’haen, 1983: 5). Thus, repertoire reflects the social and cultural norms of an interpretive community, and it is extra-textual.

Moreover, in reader-response criticism, the reader is given various names and characteristics. There are different representations of the reader such as Christine Brooke-Rose’s “inscribed reader”, Umberto Eco’s “model reader”, Jonathan Cullet’s “ideal reader”, Stanley Fish’s “informed reader”, Iser’s “implied reader”, Jauss’s “actual reader”, Michael Riffaterre’s “super reader”, Rosenblatt’s “transactional reader”, Holland’s “literate” and Gerald Prince’s “narratee” (Çubukçu, 2007: 65). Within the scope of this study, Iser’s concept, “the implied reader” will be used in the following critical engagement with the primary source.

To give an insight into Iser’s concept, the implied reader is a textual construct. It is defined as “the reader whom the text creates for itself and amounts to a network of response-inviting structures, which predispose us to read in certain ways” (Selden et al, 2005: 53). The text has an implied reader beneath the surface. Some texts can be read in different ways by different readers depending on their backgrounds. Iser explains the implied reader as follows: “He [the implied reader] embodies all those predispositions necessary for a literary work to exercise its effect—predispositions laid down, not by an empirical outside reality, but by the text itself. Consequently, the implied reader as a concept has its roots firmly planted in the structure of the text; he is a construct and in no way to be identified with any real reader” (1978: 34). The implied reader is supposed to have the predispositions and linguistic competence. His/her

existence depends on the text itself and he should not be identified with a real reader. A certain text might be written for a specific group and the text has its implied reader in itself. That reader should be able to pick up what is desired to be conveyed in the text.

The role of the reader is projected in this concept of the implied reader. Holub describes the implied reader as “both a textual condition and a process of meaning production” (1984: 84). Although the text creates the implied reader and s/he is a textual construct, this reader participates actively in the meaning-making process. S/he is the agent that is aimed at in the text and takes part in the process of meaning-creation. The following part of this study will deal with the application of this theory to Robert Browning’s poem, “My Last Duchess”.

An Application of Reader-response Theory to Robert Browning’s “My Last Duchess”

A brief summary of the poem, “My Last Duchess” by Robert Browning will be useful prior to the application of the reader-response theory to the poem. The Duke, the speaker of the poem, addresses the envoy of his prospective wife. While showing the envoy the art works, the Duke draws the curtain and shows him the painting of the late Duchess designed by Fra Pandolf, the painter: “That piece of a wonder, now: Fra Pandolf’s hands, Worked busily a day, and there she stands. Will’t please you sit and look at her?” (Browning, Lines 3-5). As he begins to talk about her weaknesses such as flirting with everyone, and disregarding his family name, the secret is gradually revealed. Towards the end of the poem, it is found out that it is actually the Duke himself who has the late Duchess killed: “Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands; [t]hen all smile stopped together” (Browning: Line 45-46). These lines bring the truth to light. In the end, the Duke and the envoy turn to another painting in which Neptune tames a sea-horse.

Based on this brief summary of the poem, it can be argued that a dramatic speaker who seems to be inconsistent and complicated in his remarks is presented to the reader in the poem, an example of the dramatic monologue. The readers’ reactions will differ from each other in this respect. Some readers can identify themselves with the Duke, whereas others might feel anger towards him. Depending on the repertoire or the interpretive community, the reactions will be subject to change accordingly. The repertoire can affect the reaction to a great extent. For instance, the Duke’s act may or may not be empathized with depending on

the repertoire of the reader, which illustrates how interpretations and reactions can vary substantially.

To put it somewhat differently, reader-response criticism brings a multiplicity of meanings, perspectives and interpretations. While reading a text, the reader criticizes or comments on it by making use of his/her past memories, experiences and present-day feelings. Social, religious, political, psychological and cultural contextual factors might have an influence over the interpretation. The characteristics of the interpretive community are influential in meaning-making. Fish describes interpretive communities as follows: "Interpretive communities are made up of those who share interpretive strategies for not reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions" (1976: 483). They include certain shared set of knowledge, and it is possible to observe the effect of the repertoire or the interpretive community in this poem.

Furthermore, Browning draws on historical events in his poetry. This poem is related to a real historical event, which can give an idea of how interpretive communities function. Harold Bloom states that the poem's duke is probably modelled on Alfonso II d'Este, the last Duke of Ferrara, whose marriage to Lucrezia di Cosimo de' Medici ends catastrophically (2000: 16). Although Lucrezia comes with a substantial dowry, she cannot get the value she desires. Alfonso leaves her for two years, and she dies when she is 14 years old. People become doubtful of her death and they are suspicious about poisoning. Afterwards, the Duke marries Barbara, one of the daughters of the Holy Roman Emperor Ferdinand I. Nikolaus Madruz, a native of Innsbruck, becomes his courier as a silent agent.

So, the poem requires the reader to have partial background information about the Italian culture and the Medici family in order to be able to understand it. If the reader is of Italian background, s/he will most probably recognize the historical figures and certain personal associations will be brought into his/her mind because the interpretive community or the repertoire communicates this historical fact. However, the reader who is not familiar with the Italian history and culture will fail to recognize this detail immediately if s/he does not search for the hidden meaning as s/he belongs to another interpretive community.

When the reader applies a close reading to the poem, s/he will realize that the dramatic speaker is not consistent. The speaker does not express the murder clearly in the poem. His remarks contradict with each other. It is possible to observe some psychological problems like paranoia

and obsession in him. These psychological problems may influence some readers who might identify themselves with the speaker more intensely because these readers will interact with the text. In the process of reading, the reader's interpretations and reactions to this poem will reveal certain features according to the psychological reader-response criticism. The Duke does not openly express the fact that he has her killed, but a detail critical close reading gives the reader the opportunity to discern the reality.

While reading Browning's poem, the interpretations will show variance based on varied backgrounds of the readers from other interpretive communities. Even the reactions of two readers from the same interpretive community or the repertoire can show differences. Through the Duke, the reader will reflect his/her personality because what s/he does is to get into a transaction with the text. If the reader justifies the Duke's act just because the Duchess looks everywhere and she is easily impressed, it is possible to argue that the reader might have an obsessive attitude. His/her subconscious ideas can come to the surface in the act of reading. However, if s/he does not approve the Duke's act, s/he may feel anger and hatred at the Duke once s/he finds out that it is actually the Duke who has the Duchess killed. As can be seen, psychological and subjective reader response theories can shed light on certain points about the reader.

The implied reader and the informed reader have linguistic competence and a subtle mind. S/he can grasp what lies beneath that surface. In the poem, the Duke projects his own perspective and tries to justify his having the late Duchess killed by attributing certain negative traits to her. For him, she does not have a strong heart since her heart is easily fascinated by other hearts. Moreover, her looks go everywhere, which raises the Duke's anger and might cause him to take the decision. What strikes him is that she has not given enough care to his "gift of a nine-hundred-years-old-name", and this act of disregarding infuriates him even more. These details can be grasped by the implied reader.

Therefore, the actual reader of the poem should be sophisticated and subtle enough to detect the real story in the poem. On the surface, the Duke shows his paintings to the envoy; however, his ambiguous language reflects that he is actually not as innocent as he seems to be. His eloquent language cannot hide the truth; on the contrary, it is this eloquent language that gives him away. He tries to be sincere, but this reality does not change. Bloom states that "[s]hows of humility strengthen a sense of the

duke's sincerity and frank nature, helping him build a rapport with his audience" (2000: 17). His ostensible modesty seeks to hide the mask he is wearing; however, his secret is revealed by himself, which creates a contradiction. As opposed to the actual reader, the implied reader as a textual construct may be aware of these and fills the gaps in the poem.

The implied reader does not trust in the surface meaning and reality because s/he knows that there is another layer of the reality. In the poem, the Duke believes that the Duchess is not loyal to him: "A heart-how shall I say?---too soon made glad, Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er, She looked on, and her looks went everywhere" (Browning, Lines 22-24). Therefore, he suppresses the Duchess, which can be related to the patriarchy, and hinders access to the painting. It is seen only when he wants people to see, which he does to the envoy. After he shows the envoy the painting of the duchess, they pass to another one, in which Neptune tames a sea-horse.

In relation to the symbolic meaning of the sea-horse, Hawlin argues that "[t]he sea horse is a delicate, fantastic, and feminine creature; Neptune is - in traditional depictions - vast, muscular, and bearded" (2002: 68). This can draw a parallel with the work and the Duke and the Duchess. The Duke has domesticated the Duchess and she has now become an object of art. She has been reduced to an object, "from a live woman to a painting in his art collection" (Hawlin, 2002: 69). In this sense, the Duke has destroyed her identity and kept her as an everlasting figure that cannot betray or infuriate him, which might reflect his belief in the immortality of art. As can be seen, these are the subtleties and the implied reader is supposed to have these predispositions necessary for a literary work, which will enable him/her to internalize the poem.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Reader-response criticism as a reaction against New Criticism has shifted the focus from the text to the reader. In Reader-response criticism, the text and the reader interact with each other, which gives the reader an active role. Meaning is created out of this interaction and transaction. The reader's interpretations and responses are instrumental and functional since they can reveal certain characteristics of his/her identity with differing approaches, which has been discussed through the analysis of Robert Browning's poem, "My Last Duchess", especially through the critical engagement with the Duke's act and the relationship between the Duke and the Duchess in the poem.

Reader-response criticism does not accept New Criticism's concept of affective fallacy since the text needs the reader so that it can be perceived and made sense of. Each reading of a literary text produces different interpretations, and each reader from a specific interpretive community or repertoire gives a different response, as can be seen in the interpretation of Browning's "My Last Duchess". Reading is an experience during which the reader experiences what the characters experience and feels with him/her. Thus, the text loses its autonomous, self-sufficient and self-contained position in reader-response criticism, leaves its place to the reader who has the potential to produce multiple interpretations and interacts with the text.

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